

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an interview with

Chris McCormack

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA - ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2nd September 2020

INTERVIEWER: Rita Saggar

TRANSCRIBER:

DURATION: 1hr., 1 min., 4 sec.

REFERENCE NUMBER: **OH4612/8**

COPYRIGHT: State Library of Western Australia / Centre for Stories

NOTE TO READER

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, or for the views expressed therein.

Disclaimer - E&OE (Errors and Omissions Excepted) in the transcribing.

Bold type face indicates a difference between transcript and audio, as a result of corrections made to the transcript only, usually at the request of the person interviewed.

FULL CAPITALS in the text indicate a word or words emphasised by the person interviewed.

Chris McCormack

My name is Christine McCormack, usually called Chris. Just after the restrictions came in the lockdown in WA. I got an email from my son in England to say that he was terminally ill and it took me a day or so to get my head around that. But in the meantime I told some friends and they suggested I get in contact with my local member of parliament, who would point me in the right direction as to how to get out of the country. I did finally get onto Border Force and they sent me a request for more information and, pretty well, all I had was, fortunately, his birth certificate and his father's death certificate, both of which had his name on it. Of course, everything else of his had gone to his place in England. Any way the Border Force were very good. And by the end of that day or Sunday, they had given me permission to leave the country. So, the next, I had already put a tentative hold on a ticket to go to England, to fly to England. So I confirmed that and it went up about a thousand dollars in those couple of days. On the Tuesday I flew out, there was a bit of a problem at the airport because I didn't have a particular number, but they found that eventually.

I think it was the 28th and the Sunday was the 29th when I got permission and I flew out, I think the 2nd of April. The plane was full. I don't think there was an empty seat on it. Majority of people were either English retirees going home or backpackers from all over Europe who were heading to England and then trying to get back to their own country. The backpackers weren't taking any notice of any distance requirements, social distancing. Most of the older people were, but once we got on the plane, there was no real difference. The only thing different with the flight was there was no hot drinks, no alcohol and very limited food enough to keep you going and probably what you should eat on a plane. But yeah it wasn't too bad on that plane.

Rita Saggar

What was the atmosphere like on that plane?

Chris McCormack

Much the same as anything else, actually, that didn't seem very different at all. I mean, I was probably in a rather strange place myself, so it was a bit different for me I guess. They did ask us to not walk around the plane a great deal and not to congregate at the toilet, to only have one person waiting to go in. That was about the only difference really apart from the refreshments.

Yes, exactly. And then when we got off the plane in England, it was weird. It was all boarded up like a new build or something. Nothing was open. Those shops you could see were not open. And there was sort of a major path heading towards the exit. And we seem to be the only plane that had landed at that time. Somebody reminded me that I needed to go to the right, cause I didn't have a British passport. There was one other girl in front of me and about four people, customs people, very different to anything I've ever seen in London, well any airport really. That gentleman looked at my passport and said 'How long are you staying in England?' And I said, I don't know. 'Have You got a return ticket?' 'No.' 'Do you have relatives in England?' 'Yes.' 'Okay. Your visa can, you can stay for six months' and that was it. Absolutely nothing about COVID. The next problem was getting

from Heathrow to where I was going to be staying, which was a little village called Streatley out of Luton. The normal way I would have got there was either by my son coming down to pick me up or by a bus coach, the coach lines were not running. I had an Uber driver come over a few times and offer me a particular price, which I thought it was a bit high. Again, I had a bit of an issue with my phone, so I had it on roaming, but there's still a bit of an issue, but I managed to get messages to a young lady called Lisa, who was my son's oldest friend. They had been to two kindergartens together, virtually learned to walk hand in hand, school, socialising, everything. And she had been his best man when he married Liz. Yeah, Liz and Lisa does get confusing. Anyway, I contacted her and she arranged an Uber me. She had arranged an Airbnb for me to stay out in this little village, which was about five miles from where Jonathan lived. I had asked before I left Australia, if there was any possibility she could pick me up and she said, no, we're not allowed to go that far.

I think it's a bit like Victoria at the moment where they can only go for five kilometres. Uber drivers were exempt. Just got to the Airbnb and the gentlemen there was, well, he had said to just knock on—to press the buttons, which I did. And he came out and opened the gate, introduced himself and said that they were basically lockdown down because she was expecting a baby. But you know, I could come and go and if I needed anything just to message them. The Airbnb itself was fantastic. It was, it would sleep up to five people, would have been a bit crowded, but with me it was ideal. Two stories, huge, had everything I needed and they were really lovely.

Rita Saggar

You would have been anxious to see your son at that point?

Chris McCormack

I think by the time I finally got to the Airbnb, I think it was late on a Wednesday afternoon. And I was pretty well exhausted. Jet lagged and exhausted, but I did start emailing his mother-in-law and his wife. I never had any replies from his wife at all. His mother-in-law replied and said, 'You can't visit no one's allowed to visit outside their own home. And there are three of us here who are at risk from COVID.' And I didn't actually ask which three, because the two young ones should have been okay. They are four and 10, my granddaughters and his wife is in her mid-forties. The only one who should have been at risk was probably Pat herself, the mother-in-law. And I tried to sort of say I was probably more at risk from them than they were from me, but she wasn't going to have that. I tried, I asked to get in touch with the palliative nurse and apparently she did try to ring me, but international roaming cut out and she couldn't get hold of me. So there were emails going backwards and forwards between Pat and I. And me trying to get something sorted with the phone and also going through Lisa to see if I could get a SIM card for a borrowed phone. So this was what I was doing on the Wednesday and even on the Thursday.

Rita Saggar

Did you know how sick your son was?

Chris McCormack

I knew he was terminally ill. The day after he'd sent me that first email on the 28th, he sent me an email on the 29th, the next day to say it was termina and he had weeks. In actual fact, he had less than one week from the time he sent that email because he died on the Friday. He was at home, he had been in hospital, but he wanted to be at home. For me, it would have been much better had he been in palliative care because that was just down from the road from where I was staying, but he obviously wanted to spend as much time as he possibly could with his wife and his little granddaughters.

Rita Saggar

How did it feel to be so close and yet, so far?

Chris McCormack

It felt better than being in Australia, but very frustrating. And I think once I heard, I got an email from Pat on the following Saturday, so virtually exactly a week from the first I'd heard of his illness to say that he had died on the Friday afternoon. And I think a lot of the fight sort of went out of me at that stage, but I did continue to try and see if I could see my granddaughters. But again, the mother-in-law Pat was pretty adamant that no I couldn't. And I did receive an email from her saying that, because Easter was in the middle of all this, and she said—she actually sent this email to an old school friend of hers, but she'd CC'd it to me. And it said that they'd gone back to her house in Luton and the girls had had an Easter hunt and they'd been going for walks. And the neighbours had been very nice. I'm not quite sure whether she meant her own neighbours or the neighbours back at Sand Lane where my son was living. And I don't know how long they stayed there, but in this, I was under the impression I should have been in lockdown. Nobody told me, but I just, you know, we were in lockdown. So I assumed the whole world was. And I tended not to go out that first week, the first two weeks I thought I was supposed to be lockdown. But in the third week I did take a walk to the shops, which were not too far away. That was an experience. And I also went for a walk to try and find Pat's house in Luton. I had stayed there in the past, but I'd always gone by car. And I had tried to get information off the net and I had written up a mud map, which I promptly left back at the Airbnb. So I actually must've walked about 10 Ks that day. Cause I ended up back at the same place, being right around, carrying my supplies, including a bottle of red wine.

No, I didn't drink it till I got home, back to the Airbnb. So Lisa had stocked the fridge and the pantry in the Airbnb with the most essentials being beer, gin, and wine, Australian wine.

True Aussie. Yeah. She only lived 15 miles from Jonathan. And as she made in her speech during the wedding, it was such a strange thing to have grown up in the same street together and then found themselves halfway across the world, 15 miles apart. And when she wrote her a sympathy card for me, she actually said 'We didn't see a lot of each other, but I think it was a comfort to both of us to know that we were within arms reach' and she had been to see him when he was in hospital. I learned a bit more about this as time went home, she did come break the rules and come and visit me twice. But I could see she was uncomfortable about it. They were pretty strict. Although during my walk, when I was trying to find my granddaughters I kept seeing policemen driving past, but

none of them ever stopped, which was a shame because I would have asked them where I was and how I got to that particular street.

Rita Saggar

So you've flown halfway across the world in the middle of a global pandemic. Everything is on high alert. You've gone to see your son and you've not been able to see him. And you've effectively not really had any kind of communication with his wife. Your grandchildren or his wife's family must be in a very lonely experience?

Chris McCormack

With everything that did happen. It happened so quickly at the beginning with flying over there and what didn't happen with communication and the very limited communication. I think I was partly in shock and exhausted of course, from the flight across and everything else that had gone on. It was a weird, very weird time. It was a very weird time for everybody with COVID, but it was doubly, triply so for me. But I always felt that I was glad I was there and not in Australia. I looked across the field from where I was, and it was almost like their house was other side of those fields because looking out of the top story of their house, my son's house, where I often stayed--well on the few times I did visit, I could see fields and this was exactly the same. And I knew it was sort of not too far away. So it did feel like that. And I was getting a lot of emails from home and one of the ladies, there was a group, a walking group. We have a combined email group and people, one lady was providing all the information to them, but I could see their replies. And one lady had said, 'He knew she was near and let go.' And I sort of took comfort from that. I'm hoping that's true. I don't know. But I did, I still don't regret having gone except for the financial side of it. But yeah, I think I would have been worse if I'd have been at home, except for the fact that there is a certain amount of anger that I was so close and wasn't allowed to see them. I did contact the member of parliament again and they suggested I get in touch with the British high commission. And the only contact I had with them was by email. And when I typed in the email address, I must have got it wrong. And it wouldn't go. By that stage I felt the universe was against me.

Rita Saggar

When did you decide that staying in England, your visit, needed to come to an end and that you needed to return?

Chris McCormack

While I was listening to the BBC, which was interesting, it was quite different to reporting over here, but the number of deaths was going up between, I think it was about 248 a day when I arrived. And it was over 900, by the time I left and probably about halfway through the time I was there I had registered with a travel.com.gov or whatever it is, smart traveller. And they had sent an email to say that Qantas and the Australian Government had combined and they were going to be sending planes, four planes, back that month, April. And the next one was only a few days away. So I decided I was sort of under the impression that this, these four would be the last one for the foreseeable future. And so I took the next one after that and thought, yes, I might as well bite the bullet and do that. Again, I had issues with trying to book that one. But I was in contact a lot with relatives

and friends in Australia and my nephew was doing night duty, so where he's working, so he was in contact with me at different times of the day, which others weren't. And so I got in contact with him and he was able to book it and I said, 'Okay, I'll sought you out when I get back'. That was about half the price of the flight to England, but still about the price of a return ticket normally. When I finally got home, he said, 'No, you don't have to pay. You've had a secret benefactor, who's paid two thirds of it. And I don't want the other third.' I found out later it was my brother that paid.

Rita Saggar

And what was the date when were you flying back?

Chris McCormack

It was a twenty... I think it was the 23rd of April because I arrived back, it must have been the 22nd of April. I arrived back on the Thursday night, midnight almost, and got back the day before on the next day was Friday. And the day after that was ANZAC Day. Because my husband was a Vietnam veteran and ANZAC Day has always been pretty important. And so that was one of the things I was doing in England was making a, sort of a paper wreath with whatever I had. And the flight back was very, very different to the flight over. There was social distancing. We had our temperature taken and we had a little card to say that we'd been COVID checked, although we didn't have a full test, but we did at least have. And there was one girl who was refused because she had a temperature. She was in tears. There was quite a wait go through. But before we got to the Qantas desks, that's right, I'd got there quite early. I wasn't going to miss a plane and got myself coffee. There were, I think there was one place open and got talking to various people at the airport, well a few. At one stage I was talking to some Americans and I said, 'You must feel as if you're going out of the frying pan into the pot.' 'Oh, no.' Typical Americans, they thought everything was fine then. 'Okay. Fair enough.'

We are definitely in the best country in the world. While I was in England, Boris Johnson went around shaking hands with people who were ill, put himself in danger and he did catch it, but he could easily have given it to his wife or partner and the baby, the unborn baby. So yeah, I thought, no, Scott Morrison will do me fine.

Rita Saggar

So a very sombre, very different kind of atmosphere coming back on that plane.

Chris McCormack

It was, yeah, we had a seat between each of us. So it was three people on either side and four in the middle, unless you were traveling with family, you had space between you. We were handed a pile of masks and sanitizer. When we got on, we were told to wear the masks and change them every two hours. Yeah. Again, limited food, no hot drinks and only water, no alcohol, which was a shame.

Rita Saggar

And those people were coming, coming home to get out of. Yeah?

Chris McCormack

I think there was anyone that was coming for a holiday or anything like that, or, not that we talked a lot. I did talk to some people while we were waiting to board the plane, a couple, and there was one lady who was sitting behind me, but diagonally. So it was sort of impossible to talk. The odd time when we did say anything or she said was, she was gasping for a cup of tea, hot tea, when you're on 20-odd or 17-hour flight to Perth. And then we had nearly two hours in Perth while they refuelled to get to Melbourne. And then I had two weeks quarantine in Melbourne.

Rita Saggar

So you must've thought you got on that Qantas flight to get off at Perth and come home.

Chris McCormack

I was hoping so, I had been in contact. I kept in a lot of contact with my members of parliament. I found that that's the best way to get anything done. I must thank the person who recommended it in the first place. Yeah. And they said that they would look into it, but then replied that, 'No that plane was going to Melbourne. No one was to get off in Perth.' even though we had to refuel there. And so I had to do quarantine in Melbourne and then fly back to Perth and have lockdown in Perth. So people sort of said, I must've been the safest person in Australia by the time I got back.

Rita Saggar

So another two weeks when you're not, you're kind of in limbo, weren't you?

Chris McCormack

Yeah, Melbourne, I found the first week, I suppose again, I was jet lagged. But getting even more contact with people because people could ring me and I could talk to people we're on the time, same time zone. I have never had so many flowers in all my life. I had two deliveries in England, two in Melbourne complete with chocolates. And when I got home, I lost count. But yeah, Melbourne, I was in contact a lot with family and friends a lot more even than now. Cause everybody wanted to know how things going.

Rita Saggar

It must have felt surreal, though?

Chris McCormack

But it still does. Surreal is a word I use quite a lot because my life is often surreal, but Melbourne particularly I think. That first day in Melbourne, I sort of spent quite a bit of time arguing with the hotel because I wanted some rum for for ANZAC Day morning. And they said, 'No, we can't sell you a bottle because we've got to abide by a safe drinking'. I thought that's a bit odd for a hotel, but I could buy shots. So I bought four shots of rum, which is 160mls and it costs me \$40, while at home, I had a full bottle of rum that cost me \$38.

So that made me cross. Afterwards I got told by several people that they could have organised to have one delivered, hidden under other things.

Rita Saggar

What was the administration like? Once you got on and got off at Melbourne, was it very strict where you shepherded off somewhere?

Chris McCormack

Getting off at Melbourne was so very different to even getting on at Heathrow and certainly a long way from arriving in Heathrow. Yes, there was all sorts of administrative people that you had to go through: police in uniform I can't remember exactly who or what order it was, but we collected quite a bit of paperwork. Including one that sort of said when we would be released which said 12:00PM, which I took to be midnight, but it wasn't, it was midday, and that caused yet another problem later. There was quite a lot of rigmarole to go through at the airport. And then we were put on buses and bussed to the hotel. When we arrived at the hotel, our bus was the second bus to arrive. There was about six, I think. And fortunately it was at the airport, so we didn't have to go very far. But somebody who I think may have been in charge of police or something was late in arriving. So they didn't let us off the bus for about another half an hour, which, you know, having been on a plane for about 20 hours and everything else that happened before was sort of almost the last straw.

Yeah. Everything was very up in the air. We didn't know exactly what was happening. Found out that we were going to the hotel near the airport and were put on the buses and there was probably six buses and we were the second, but when we arrived we weren't allowed off because they were waiting for somebody who was in charge of something. We weren't actually told, it was just what we heard bus drivers saying to each other. Eventually they did let us off but social distancing and we had to get off the bus one at a time sort of, and same getting into the hotel. Then social distancing in the foyer. We went to the reception desk one at a time and we're given the information and the key to our room and were taken up one-by-one, one-on-one, with a security guard. We weren't allowed to even press buttons on the lift. All of that was done. It seems to have got a lot slacker since then, but this was fairly early and they were, you couldn't really fault the security guards in those times.

Rita Saggar

Then when were you allowed to travel back and get on a plane to Perth?

Chris McCormack

The first week in the quarantine hotel, wasn't too bad by the second week, I just about had enough. It was interesting listening to the radio and there were actually people in the same hotel. And that was the only way we could communicate was on talk back radio. But by the second week has said, I'd sort of had enough to even the menu was a repeat of the first week. So you knew what you were going to get and it wasn't bad food, but it was a bit carbohydrate rich. And also the timing was not perfect. The COVID nurses rang us every night. So we spoke to her COVID nurse every day. I got to go walking three times in the first week and not at all in the second week, which probably contributed to me not being so happy the second week. Then the government, Victorian health rang

about three times a week, I think it was. And I'm pretty sure it was them that sort of wanted to know. The first I'd sort of heard about planning to go home was 'Where are you going to stay on the night that you're released?' Which was, I think it was the 7th of May. And I said, 'What do you mean?' And she said, 'Well you come out of quarantine at midday on that day and you'd have to stay somewhere that night. Are you going to friends? Are you going to stay somewhere else?' And I said, 'well if I have to stay, I want to stay here.' She said, 'No, we have to clean it. So you have to move.' And I thought, that's a bit ridiculous. I'm here, opposite the airport, and they want me to go somewhere else for one night. So I actually ran—the government actually had employed a travel agent that we could go through. So I booked a ticket there and then they contact Vic Health, contacted me again and changed the date because of the confusion between AM and PM. Instead of saying noon or midnight, they said AM. So I was a bit confused about that too. Rang back to the travel agent, she was able to change it without charging because it was a government thing. Otherwise it would have been another \$60, which was not much really compared to everything else, but just principal.

So I, I flew out, I'm pretty sure it was the 7th of May that I left Melbourne and I was able to just walk out across the bridge to the airport, grab a coffee and, yeah, wait for the plane. Met the lady who'd been sitting behind me on the way out from England for the first time since that day. We sort of had coffee together before she went to Tamworth. I guess, I don't know what was going to happen to her, but I knew by then that I had to be in lockdown in WA. And that was another thing, I was having trouble, I'm not overly computer literate, I think there were six pages of forms to fill in mainly with one or two questions on each page, but had to be filled in and signed. And I couldn't do it on the tablet and I told my niece, she said, 'Send it over to me. I'll fill it in and send it back to you.' I said, 'I don't think we better do that.' So I actually asked if they would copy it for me downstairs. And apparently a lot of them, people had been doing that, but when I went to photograph them and send them back, I kept missing a sheet because it was six sheets. So that went backwards and forwards several times and then eventually I got it through, got the exemption back to WA. And then I got a phone call from the WA police asking another question. So obviously people in there weren't talking to one another either. And I think from what I hear that's still happening. But as somebody, somewhere along the line told me, a lot of people are being employed in jobs that they wouldn't do. They're using travel agents in a lot of government positions and they don't really know, nobody really knows, but they're even less familiar with the procedures.

Rita Saggar

You must have been absolutely physically and mentally exhausted by then.

Chris McCormack

I think I was exhausted by the end of it. I think I was exhausted right from getting into England, to be honest. Very, almost on a different planet to some extent, but I think a lot of people were feeling that way because of COVID. I just had a double whammy of it. I think with COVID, particularly at that time, because it was still we were still in lockdown here at that stage, too. When I arrived back in at home, eventually a friend came and picked me up. That was something getting, if I go back again getting off the plane in Perth

again, as soon as you went through, you had your temperature checked and there were tables set up with people behind them taking all the information, the paperwork and everything. I was having trouble getting the photographs back up of the forms I'd filled in. So he had to fill it in again, they didn't have computers sitting at these desks with paper and pencils which I thought was a bit unusual. But there were people everywhere that were checking on us and they asked how we were getting home and what address we would be in lockdown and who it belong to and everything. So that was pretty strict too. Went outside and was picked up, taken home. That was my first bunch of flowers and WA. Got home and I've lost track of which particular day it was, roundabout the 8th of May, I think by this date, which also happened to be my other son's 50th birthday. I don't know where he is or whether he knows about his brother's death, but we have been trying to contact him. But haven't had any success, or if we have, nobody's letting us know cause we've been going through government department. But anyway, back to the next day, I got a phone call from a friend who just lives around the corner. She said 'The walking group had said that they wanted to give you something'. And she said, 'It's a bit heavy. So I'll drive down.' She said, 'When I get to your driveway, can you put the garage door up?' So I did that and she was standing there reversed into the driveway with the boot open and there were two huge baskets, a flowering plant and two smaller boxes. There was one basket of consumables, one basket of pamper-products. And not that I'd checked them all completely at that stage, really, I barely sore it. When we got them out of the car and I put them in the garage and lined it up, there were six bottles of wine and a bottle of Arran Cream amongst it.

Rita Saggar

It must have been very emotional.

Chris McCormack

It was, it was yes, but even more emotional was I sort of had a quick look but put most of it on the dining room table. I'd barely unpacked my cases by then let alone those things. But I woke up in the middle of the night, hardly surprising because I was on a strange time zone by then. And I thought, Oh, I think I saw some camomile tea in one of those packets. So I went into the dining room, put the kettle on and fished out this camomile tea, which was pretty well on the top of the basket. While I was waiting for the kettle to boil. I went through it and there were books and chocolates of course and all sorts of pampering type things and a Scoopon voucher for \$50 from someone. And that just was the last, that really did set me off. I thought, you know, these people have just been so lovely, really, they're amazing. Apparently, there's a total of 30 people in our walking group, and everybody had done something and they were, it was amazing. It really was.

Rita Saggar

A lot of when people have been reflecting on that COVID experience, people really been talking about the good in human nature coming out and people going the extra mile to help each other. Now you, yours was, an experience on a completely different level. So I can imagine the outpouring of condolence and love and affection for you. But did you feel in that time that people did kind of come together, want to help each other and want to be strong for each other? Did that come across at all?

Chris McCormack

I've done a lot of reflection and thinking as I guess, most people have with COVID. The groups that I belong to, mainly veteran communities, widow's groups and things like that. They are very supportive to one another at the best of times. And this is certainly not being the best of times. There's been a lot of support between people. A lot of people belong to the same groups, they belong to two or three of the groups. So the communication goes between the groups as well as individuals. And yes, I did feel particularly when I was in Melbourne and in England, I was blown away by the amount of support I did get in England, especially when people from Australia are sending flowers to me, you know, that that really in England and in Melbourne, but particularly England, cause I know what it costs to send flowers to England. And Lisa, my son's best friend, she was a real hero and it was only after a couple of days after he died that I suddenly realized that she would be grieving too, because he was her oldest friend. They'd been mates forever and yeah, I was very cross cause I said to her about that time when I realized that I said, 'Have they actually told you that Jonathan died?' And she said, 'No, I think they've just assumed that you told me.' So that made me quite angry too. I am quite angry, but I think I internalize it probably too much, but that's the way, part of grief, I guess. But she was brilliant, and without her I would have had a heck of a lot more problems in England than what I did. She did a lot of organising for me.

Rita Saggar

I think that this was a time when people's individual experiences become a tiny microcosm of everything else that's going on. And just listening to your story, it feels very much like that you're going through so much with just personal stuff and yet you're having to deal with this global kind of crisis that's going on and trying to, you know, you almost have to put your own personal emotions to one side don't you, did you feel that at all?

Chris McCormack

Sometimes emotions just get away with you and you don't quite know where you're at. I think COVID made everything so much more difficult. I think there would've been no excuse for me to be able to see Jonathan had it not been for COVID and the same afterwards visiting my granddaughters. There would have been no excuse and I would have been able to see them. So I think the whole scenario could have been quite different without COVID, the things that were going on around me I think I just found interesting to some extent. Heartbreaking in England hearing people's stories, although to some extent on the radio in particular, they were being far more 'good story' orientated than what we were even here. And they would inject a lot of British humor into things. And one of the things that they were doing on talk back radio and people writing in, emailing in, was what they were doing and what the traffic were and the traffic reports were things like there's congestion on the stairway as several of us are trying to get upstairs at the same time. There's been a spill in the kitchen causing a bit of an issue when the milk dropped off, things like that that were very light-hearted. But it did sort of remind you rather a lot of the way the British reacted during World War Two. And when you got to things like Colonel Tom, I think he was Colonel at that stage or at some stage. But yes, I was there when that started and he was only going to walk for a little while and it just got further and

further. And his daughter spoke on the phone and said it had given him another lease of life because he felt he was doing something which was encouraging other people to do things. And I was amazed at the amount of money people were donating to keep the health system going. And I kept thinking, I can't see that happening in Australia. We would just complain at the government for not giving us enough money. But over there they were raising millions. He was raising millions on his own, but other people were too. And they were a lot more, we're starting to get some more sympathetic towards our medical staff now here in Australia. But over there, they were treating them as heroes, right from the start.

Rita Saggar

And now you've had time to reflect about what happened. And we live in probably the safest place on the planet right now. What thoughts do you have looking back at that period and what is something that you feel that you've learned having gone through?

Chris McCormack

I think everybody's had sort of different experiences of COVID. It's made me quite cross with people who say, 'Oh, it's so hard to stay home or not go to the movies' or whatever. Some people have had some really bad experiences and have obviously been upset by it and have vented. But some people have vented over very minor issues and I could kill Clive Palmer. Just entertaining himself by using lots and lots of libel action because he can afford to. And he says he feels for the people of Western Australia and promptly that causes us to worry about money. I don't think many people do worry about money, but with Clyde Palmer, but it is there in the background. I think different demographics have reacted differently. And I've seen that a with family and friends. My hairdresser lost her husband just a few days, a few weeks after Jonathan died, they were the same age. They both had two little girls. I've been to see her twice to have my haircut, 'cause she'll fit me in whenever. And we've had a little bit of a talk about it. Particularly how her girls are coping. And I have a niece in Queensland and she was, she put a photograph on at the beginning of home-schooling with a dining room table, three children or two girls at high school age with their computers a school age, primary school, age boy with his books and a two-year-old with colouring pencils. And what's more, she was working from home while hubby went to work and escaped all this. And I thought, 'She's brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.' But on the other hand, you read or listen to people that are complaining about the most mundane of things, really. Maybe those that have more to cope with show more resilience than those that have a little. I don't know what the cause is, whether it's the people themselves or whether it's hard times bring out the best in people.

Rita Saggar

Do you think older people have coped with this crisis better than younger people?

Chris McCormack I think older people do cope with the crisis better. We've had more life experiences and not all good, particularly the group that I belong to have been through the Vietnam era and the things that happened after Vietnam. So we're a pretty strong group anyway. But other people are my age and older. Some are, I've got a brother that's rather concerned about it COVID itself. But my sister she's eighty-three this year. She

seems to be coping quite well with it. The fact that we haven't had it as bad as Eastern States and definitely no where near what the other countries have had, it hasn't been as bad for us. But yes, the young people I think on the whole have found it very difficult to be isolated, even though they have got so much social media they're in contact with their friends around the corner with their phones and Twitter and all the rest of it. Whereas we went through Vietnam with letters, one phone call in twelve months. You know, it's not so hard for us. Us oldies. Particularly those that work in into this. We also, in my age group, went through a polio epidemic and I didn't go to kindergarten because of that because there was no kindergarten, but we all went to school with somebody in our class who had been affected by it. And now most of us know somebody who's suffering with post-polio syndrome and that is concerning to the older people who've seen that because they don't know what COVID is going to do in the future. A lot of people have had damage to various organs or just about any organ really. And they don't know how long that damage is going to last.

Rita Saggar

I'd just like to bring you back to the biggest thing that happened to you within that time, do you think you've been able to properly grieve for your son?

Chris McCormack

I don't think I have grieved properly. I'm in a stage of grieving with anger and yeah, I am now beginning to feel a little more sorrow than I did at the beginning. I think it's been made a little easier by the fact that I didn't see him every day. Like a lot of people do, it averaged about every two years from the time he went to England.

I also feel though that I have lost my granddaughters as well as losing him 'cause I've lost that connection and I can only hope that when they get older, they may do something to contact me. In the meantime, I will keep in contact with them as much as I can, but I can't even be sure that my letters and parcels do get delivered. I just don't know. Just have to hope.

Rita Saggar

It seems that the support of your local network and your community has been really, really important during this time. Would you say that?

Chris McCormack

I think without friends and family yes, I would may well have sunk, not quite sure where you'd sink too, but yeah, I was blown away particularly in the early days. And it certainly kept lockdown and quarantine bearable by having so much contact with people. It's in a way it's sort of dropping off a little bit now, but then we do actually have physical contact now. Well, not actual physical, but sitting in a room like this. I have two groups that do monthly lunches walking groups up and walking again, they were walking in a shopping centre today, 'cause it was a bit wet. I should have done that, but I came here instead. And the first of our little retreats happened last week with fourteen of us from one particular group going to Dwellingup. And that was lovely because it was so different, the nature down there is beautiful and walks in the forest and most beautiful garden I've ever

seen. It was absolutely marvellous. So yeah, it's changing. I think I'm having less contact by phone, email and messages and such, but I am, I suppose, getting more contact with seeing people, which is good. And I think I tend to get very tired and I think that might be all part and parcel of what I've been through. I get physically and emotionally tired. I came back from Dwellingup and was absolutely exhausted. And I'm still not sure whether that was because I may have been fighting a cold off or whether it was just the, the emotional sort of socialisation on you know, that was two whole days of socialising, not just a few hours. And I guess I, might've got a little bit used to having my own company rather than being with other people.

Rita Saggar

Many people have talked about this time and said that it was a time to kind of slow down and to appreciate the simpler things and that we were all able to do that in certain respect. What do you think about that? Do you think that we have been able to really kind of reconnect with, you know, the pleasure, simple pleasure of going for walk? For example?

Chris McCormack

I think a lot of people have had more time to reflect. Mine was not so different to usual. COVID was very different and created a different situation, but I did travel, which is one of the things I do a lot and I live at home alone anyway. And sort of that way, my life didn't change as much dramatically as what other people's did. So I suppose the COVID and lockdown didn't affect me as much as it would have done the average Joe or Joan in the street. Mine was, I don't know, I suppose grief and exhaustion, which most people found the other way around. They were finding it difficult to entertain themselves and such like, whereas, well actually I found that quite easy because in England I had Netflix and in Melbourne had they put all the movie channels on for nothing and I don't have any of that at home. I just have basic boring TV or whatever else I do. So lockdown as far as that was concerned wasn't as difficult for me. In fact, I think I needed to be alone particularly in England and even in Melbourne. It wasn't really, until I got to Melbourne that I really felt like talking to people on the phone, I was quite happy to email and message people, but I didn't really want to talk to people. I only really talked to people in England. A couple of other people sort of suggested ringing and one lady did, but I was quite happy not to talk to people.

And it was very where I stayed was very English, but it was sort of rural because three sides you looked out on open field or Woodland. The Woodland, well, all of it really. And as I stayed there more and more people were walking through the field and through, well, as my host said, 'We cut the trees down while you were down there. So now you can see the people walking in the field' before that, that happened while I was there. And they were heading into spring. So there was quite a bit of changing going on. What I was looking at was nature, but not the nature I'm used to, nature of England. Yeah. There was quite a bit that was different to what I was used to. Although, as I said similar, it felt very much like staying at their house, but without them, without a little girl climbing into bed with me.

Apparently Jonathan had said he didn't really want to have a service. He was thinking about his girls and his wife and probably not really thinking a lot anyway, because he was very ill by then. And he'd put it in his will that he wanted to be cremated, which is sort of a family thing anyway. But the funeral had been arranged by Pat the mother-in-law and she said because that's what he wanted. He was having no service, just a basic cremation. And I said, 'Well, because I hadn't been able to see him when he was alive. I wanted to see him there and then' and she said, 'No', repeated it. And I contacted the funeral directors and I think they were giving away a little more information than they were supposed to when I explained that I was the mother. And they just said that I couldn't see him because it wasn't a proper funeral. And that would be the only way was to have a service type of thing. And when I suggested to Pat that I do that, arrange that I said 'I'd be quite willing to pay for the extra or even the whole thing to just to get to see him.' And she just said, 'No, not going to do that.' In the three weeks I was there, I think I rang the funeral directors about four times and they just kept saying that they couldn't say when the cremation would take place, just that it hadn't at that stage. And I even rang them from, I sent them an email from Australia and that never got replied to, so I rang them. And again, it hadn't happened. And then eventually I got an email from Pat to say that it had, and apparently it had been partly COVID, but partly lack of communication and the paperwork. But I think that may have been Pat was blaming them and said she was going to ask for information about it then have an inquiry or whatever. I haven't heard anything more about that, but I did ask if she would tell me what was actually on the death certificate for cause of death. Cause that was a bit vague in Jonathan's email. And I just received that a few days ago and it was metastatic colon cancer and I had thought it was more liver cancer, but apparently it had metastasized to the liver and the lungs, the death certificate was pretty vague, but at least I do know exactly what it was now. I had the email from Pat to say that the cremation had taken place and it was nearly two months from the time he died to the time he was cremated. So there wasn't much point in me staying there anyway, was it? Except that I think, although it's now April, May, June, July, August, almost six months. I'm only now starting to think that I should have done more to try and get in touch with the British high commission to find out if I could have permission to visit at least the granddaughters and maybe pushed a bit harder to try and have the proper service just so I could see Jonathan. I'd even said to Pat in an email when Jonathan came out for his father's funeral, he did ask to see him because he hadn't seen him for two years and yeah, he asked to see him and it was only him and a couple of other family members who did go to the viewing. And there was no reason why the girls would have had to go anyway, but it didn't happen. But yeah, it's all, there's always things that could have been done differently in hindsight. But I just don't think I had that.

END