

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Max Lake**

1924–2009

Surgeon, Winegrower & Author

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 10 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Max Lake**

**Director/Producer** Rod Freedman

**Executive Producer** Mark Hamlyn

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 2005

Study guide prepared by Roger Stitson © NFSA

Also in Series 10: Tom Bass, Noeline Brown, Sir Zelman Cowen,

Anne Deveson, Joan Kirner, Noel Tovey

## A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009

T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101

E: [sales@nfsa.gov.au](mailto:sales@nfsa.gov.au) | [www.nfsa.gov.au](http://www.nfsa.gov.au)

## SYNOPSIS

Dr Max Lake has achieved success in three distinctly different fields—as a surgeon, winegrower and author—although he is probably best known as one of the pioneers of the Australian wine boom.

Born in the United States in 1924, he studied medicine at Sydney University and was the first Australian to specialise in hand surgery.

Then, in 1963 in the Hunter Valley of NSW, he established Lake's Folly, one of Australia's first and most prestigious boutique wineries. And in 1966, he made his name with a benchmark book, **Classic Wines of Australia**.

As his surgical career came to an end, he leapt wholeheartedly into the world of wine and food, as a member of the Food Standards Committee and a renowned international judge. Applying his medical background to the science of flavour and smell, he also became an obsessive student of the senses. His influential writing and research includes the books **Scents and Sensuality** and **Food on the Plate, Wine in the Glass**.

In this **Australian Biography** interview, Max talks with gusto about life's pleasures and his passionate pursuit of them.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Science, Geography, Technology, Business Studies, Society and Environment, English and Careers Education.

## AFTER WATCHING

What do you recall from viewing the program?

- What does Max Lake regard for himself as 'almost a religion'?
- When Max was about 11 or 12, what ingredients did he use to make aftershave lotion?
- Where in America was Max born? Why was he born there rather than in Australia?
- What film production companies did Max's parents work for?
- Describe Max's first lesson in trying to attain 'perfection' in everything he did.
- Describe Max's relationship with his mother when he was young.
- What disease did his little brother die of?
- Which university medical degree subject did Max excel at?
- Describe the sex education given to Max and Joy by their respective parents.
- After some years of practising in general surgery, why did Max decide to specialise in hand surgery?
- How did Max's career as an expert in Australian wine begin?
- What was 'Lake's Folly'?
- In what ways does Max compare winemaking to having a baby?
- Max says he was an 'achievement junkie'. What happened when his 'endorphin source dried up', and what events led to this situation?
- What 'stroke of good luck' saved Max from deep depression?
- What is important about aroma or smell?
- What major decision did Max's son, Stephen, make, and how has it affected the family ever since?
- What is the analogy Max uses to describe his marriage to Joy?
- What are Max's thoughts about the fact that Joy gave up her career in medicine to have children?
- In the program Max refers to the good and bad aspects of life in his eighties. In your own words, describe his thoughts.

## VOCABULARY

Discuss or write definitions for the following words, and use each one in a meaningful sentence: microsurgery, orthopaedic, pathology, endorphin, pheromone, oxytocin, vigneron, viticulture, connoisseur.

## PARENTS AND UPBRINGING

Before Max Lake was born in 1924, both his parents worked for American film companies in what may be called ancillary positions. When he was young, and growing up, his parents expected him to work hard at school, and to achieve success. From what he tells us in the program, this came at some emotional cost, and it's possible we could interpret this as a 'dark' phase in his formative years.

- In groups, research the early history (ie the 'silent' era) of film production companies Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and Famous Players Lasky Corporation, and present your findings, with photographs and other illustrations if possible, as a set of large display posters. Where were the studios of these companies? Who were the principal business people who founded the companies, and who were their most important and successful actors? Which popular or famous films did they produce? Why were these companies so successful, and what effect did they have on audiences around the world? Did the incursion of these filmmaking organisations into Australia affect Australia's own film production, distribution and exhibition in any way?
- Write a story about either a day in the life of a film company stenographer or a film company salesman—or combine the two into one. (A stenographer is a person who records information such as dictated letters, memoranda, notes of meetings and other documents in shorthand, perhaps using a specialised typing machine for this purpose; part of a film salesman's job was to arrange to book screenings of his company's film features with an exhibitor or theatre owner. As exhibitors were not centralised into large business chains covering entire countries until well into the 20th century, a salesman might have to travel from city to city. You may need to carry out some background research on the often fraught relationship between the film production companies and those who either distributed or exhibited films.)
- Examine what Max has to say about the expectations of 'success' placed upon him by his parents. Discuss in class whether young people growing up should have these pressures placed upon them. Should they be expected to learn from an early age the meaning of 'responsibility' and of knowing and carrying out their duties within the family unit? Should they be expected to achieve highly in their school education? Can these pressures be harmful? Do these pressures teach you to become good citizens later in life?
- Max appears to become very serious when speaking about the way he was regarded as 'the head of the family', being the first-born, having to cope with his mother's 'mood swings' and the devastating effects of this emotional turmoil. Write a short story dramatising these family issues or, alternatively, working in groups, prepare a short set of connected dramatic scenes that could be played out to an audience.

- Discuss in class whether the sex education Max and Joy received from their respective parents when teenagers in the late 1930s and early 1940s was adequate, informed, realistic and acceptable. What kind of sex education, if any, should parents give their children, and at what age should this begin? If your parents have given you any sex education lessons, what has been your reaction or response? Have you found the information valuable and worthwhile, or was the experience an intrusion into your personal space?
- Write a short story about a parent's sex education lesson to their son or daughter; it may be serious or humorous, and presented from any viewpoint.

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

As a medical doctor, Max Lake specialised in hand surgery. An internet search quickly reveals to us how varied and complex this is, as is the structure and function of the human hand.

- As a class, research, illustrate and label large display wall posters of the human hand, showing its various elements in separate posters—bone structure, tendons, muscles, blood vessels. Show, if you can, how all of these elements enable the hand to carry out its complex functions of movement, manoeuvrability and grip etc.
- Working in pairs, imagine that you are journalists who have been asked to research and prepare an illustrated article for a popular magazine about the importance of developments in hand surgery to the general community. This may apply to a wide variety of ailments and situations: deformities in newborn babies, arthritis suffered by older people, sports injuries, accidents in the workplace, burns, frostbite. You may include real or imagined interviews based on information you can find about surgeons, other medical staff, patients and their families. Your article may also highlight the relevance of microsurgery over older, more traditional methods of surgery, perhaps drawing comparisons between what may have been practised decades ago, and the potential for future advancements.
- Prepare an information pamphlet for school students about careers in medicine and the qualifications required to enter relevant tertiary study courses in your state. Include the type and extent of experience and qualifications needed to study for extended specialist training in various medical fields, such as surgery. You should also provide information as to whether all hospitals are equipped and staffed to act as training grounds for undergraduate and postgraduate medical students. As this is an instructive and informative guide for young readers, you should consider the pamphlet's layout and presentation, therefore you may wish to discuss these features in class first. Alternatively this activity may be presented by the class as web pages for your school's intranet site.
- The career transition process can be frightening because of the inherent uncertainty, risk, loss of security and the effects it may have on your family if you don't succeed. Using Max Lake's decision to leave his medical practice to set up a winemaking business as a starting point for ideas, write a series of personal diary extracts about someone embarking on a similar course of action. You may wish to present this as a fictional story made up entirely of diary extracts; the extracts may alternate between various members of a family (husband, wife, children), also other relatives, friends and former or present colleagues, in order to build up an overall picture and a range of feelings and reactions that may change over time.

## THE AUSTRALIAN WINE INDUSTRY

In the late 1950s, at the time Max Lake began to take a connoisseur interest in wine, and in the grape varieties required to produce different types of wine, both the industry and the appreciation of wine in Australia were very limited, certainly in comparison to the situation in other parts of the world and to Australia now.

- It is believed that grape cuttings for winemaking were brought to Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. As a class, research and prepare an illustrated website of the history of winegrowing and production in Australia. This may be accompanied by a description and explanation of how grapes are turned into various types of wine, and the specific conditions required such as soil, climate, rainfall, prevailing winds etc. Which Australian wines have been regarded as the best—the wines highly sought by dedicated collectors—and why? An alternative to this may be to present the research as a collection of display posters.
- Prepare maps showing the wine-producing regions of Australia, and the types of wines in which each region specialises.
- Write a short story about a wine connoisseur. It may be a comedy-satire, science fiction, fantasy, romance, action-adventure or even a horror tale. Edit your story and read it to the class. An alternative to this may be to write the story as a dramatised play script, and to record it using voice actors, sound effects and music.

## CAREER VERSUS HOMEMAKING

We are told that Max's wife, Joy, who was also a medical doctor, early in marriage gave up her professional career to raise a family.

- Discuss in class the accepted cultural conventions, assumptions and roles of women as 'housewives' and 'homemakers' in comparison to the roles and attitudes towards women in the paid workforce. Is personal choice or social and cultural convention a more powerful factor in defining a woman's role in her environment? When women give up paid work to raise children, should we express this as 'sacrificing' their career? Should employers hire and train young women, knowing that sooner or later they may resign or take maternity leave? Reverse this and apply the same questions towards males. What are the generally accepted conventions about men as homemakers compared to men in the paid workforce? Are these conventions acceptable today in all walks of life and in all socio-economic classes? When men become fathers should they be entitled to paternity leave from their employment?
- You may wish to dramatise some of the issues arising from the above discussion. Form into pairs and write two short play scenes that could later be enacted to the class. One scene may involve a woman who applies to her employer for maternity leave. The second scene may involve a discussion between friends about a man who remains home to look after his young children while his wife continues in her employed position.

## FOOD, DRINK, FLAVOUR, TASTE, SMELL

As we see in the program, Max Lake's view is that food around the table brings people together, reduces conflict and increases understanding and friendship. But behind this psychology there appears to be a more scientific, biochemical element in operation, and the question of what, technically, and in terms of qualifiable measurement, constitutes good food preparation.

- What is the Food Standards Committee? Research and write an article about its history and development, its importance and purpose, its funding, who it reports to, its publications, its regulatory functions and the range of roles it performs. Is such a body relevant to us? Is it carrying out its activities effectively? Should its role be altered, modified or expanded? How does it compare to similar organisations elsewhere in the world?
- Write a story about a government food-standards inspector who enters either the premises of a food-production business or a restaurant, and strikes trouble. As preparation for this, you may like to view Episode 4, 'The Hotel Inspectors', of the **Fawlty Towers** TV comedy, about Basil Fawlty's fear of an impending visit to his hotel by a government inspector.
- Write a list of all the food and drink you have consumed in the previous 24 hours—you should not leave anything out, including food from the school canteen, takeaway meals, sweets and chocolate, even glasses of tap water. Review this list and write a report on the types and range of food and drink consumed. You should look at aspects of diet, health, when and where food/drink was consumed, and in what circumstances, and the possibilities of peer pressure on what is eaten and drunk at certain times of the day or night. Was quality control (ie the standard of the food and drink) a consideration, or taken for granted? Other considerations may be the role of parents in the choice and preparation of meals at home. If you bought food away from home, did you choose carefully? Do you think you spent the money wisely? Overall, was what you ate and drank healthy? Should you make changes to your diet? The results of this 24-hour survey could also be compiled anonymously as a class, perhaps as a poster or on a whiteboard, and discussed.
- Draw a large coloured diagram, with labels, of the inner workings of the human nose. Write an accompanying description of how the various parts of the nose function. (This activity can easily be linked and/or extended to other body parts, elements and systems involved in taste/smell functions.)
- The class may wish to carry out a range of experiments in flavour, taste and smell, such as being blindfolded and asked to identify a particular item through sensory perception of mouth, tongue and nose. In the References and Further Resources section, there are some websites with suggestions for activities involving taste and smell, as well as for hearing, sight and touch.
- Write a short story told from the viewpoint of a wild or domestic animal, highlighting its superior sense of smell. To help prepare for this, you may wish to read 'The Dog Beneath the Skin', and the postscript to it, in **The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat** by Oliver Sacks. Alternatively, after reading this case study, you may want to write a story about a human being who develops animal-like perceptions of smell. It could be presented in any genre—comedy, crime-detective, science fiction, fantasy, horror.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### Books

Selected Works by Max Lake:

**Cabernet—Notes of an Australian Wineman**, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977

**Classic Wines of Australia**, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1966

**Food on the Plate, Wine in the Glass**, Max Lake, Pokolbin, 1994

**Hunters Winemakers: Their Canvas and Art**, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1970

**Memoirs of a Folly**, self published in limited edition, 1994

**Scents and Sensuality: The Essence of Excitement**, John Murray, London, 1989

**Vine and Scalpel**, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1967

Other:

Peter Abrahams, **The Atlas of the Human Body: A Complete Guide to How the Body Works**, Silverdale Books, Leicester, 2002

Kevin Brownlow, **Hollywood: The Pioneers**, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1979

Helen Devereux, **What's That You're Eating? Food and Nutrition For Australian Students**, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986

John Douglas Eames, **The MGM Story: The Complete History of Fifty-Seven Roaring Years**, Sundial Publications Ltd, revised 1982

**Food**, CSIRO, Canberra, 1986

James Halliday, **Wine Atlas of Australia and New Zealand**, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1991

John Napier, **Hands**, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1980

Oliver Sacks, **The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat**, Picador, London, 1985

### Film and video

Carlo Buralli (director), **Slow Food Revolution**, Film Australia, Sydney, 2003 (Documentary looking at traditional methods of food preparation, food education and pleasure)

Jonathan Nossiter (director), **Mondovino**, 2005 (Documentary about winemaking families and businesses in Europe and the USA)

'The Hotel Inspectors', episode 4 of **Fawlty Towers**, series one, 1975

## Websites

### Film: MGM, Famous Players Lasky

[www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org) (Look for 'Film History by Decade')

[www.scripophily.net/faplcoofcaca.html](http://www.scripophily.net/faplcoofcaca.html)

(History of Famous Players Lasky)

[www.culvercity.org/cityinfo/history/10202.html](http://www.culvercity.org/cityinfo/history/10202.html)

(Early history of MGM)

### Medical Surgery

[www.questacon.edu.au/html/micro\\_surgery.html](http://www.questacon.edu.au/html/micro_surgery.html)

(Information for young students about microsurgery)

[www.eatonhand.com](http://www.eatonhand.com) (Electronic textbook of hand surgery)

<http://www.plasticsurgery.org/reconstructive-procedures/hand-surgery?sub=Hand+surgery+procedure+steps#section-title> (Hand surgery procedures)

### Pheromones

[www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pheronet/pherom.html](http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pheronet/pherom.html)

[www.athenainstitute.com/pherodef.html](http://www.athenainstitute.com/pherodef.html)

### Science Education

[www.csiro.au](http://www.csiro.au) (Use search facility to find items on taste and smell)

[www.questacon.edu.au](http://www.questacon.edu.au)

<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/nosek.html>

(The Nose Knows)

### Wine, Food, Quality Control

[www.picwine.com.au](http://www.picwine.com.au)

(Australian and New Zealand Wine and Food Pictorial Atlas)

<http://ewineplanet.com>

(Wine around the world, including Australia)

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/industry/safetystandards/pages/default.aspx> (Food regulation in Australia)

[abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s255588.htm](http://abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s255588.htm)

(References to Food Standards Committee)

[www.fawltysite.net](http://www.fawltysite.net)

(Fawlty Towers—see 'The Hotel Inspectors' episode)

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