

Profile: Ruth Morgan

Now a lecturer in the history department at Monash University in Melbourne, but hailing originally from Western Australia, Ruth Morgan was elected to the National Management Committee at the recent AGHS Annual General Meeting at Armidale.

I never expected to become an environmental historian, or an academic for that matter. My sights were firmly set elsewhere, until it dawned on me nearly a year after I completed my undergraduate studies that my dream career was looking anything but. Whatever new direction I sought would need further study. Discussing the situation with my former lecturers at my alma mater, The University of Western Australia, led me to realise that history had been the common thread in my studies and that further work in this area might form the foundation of a new direction. To explore this further, I met with UWA historian Andrea Gaynor, who encouraged me to undertake postgraduate studies in history. It should come as no surprise that my research interests soon took a decidedly environmental turn—Andrea is a leading Australian environmental historian and author of *Harvest of the Suburbs* (2006).

Meanwhile, Perth and the other Australian capital cities were in the grip of drought and households faced harsh water restrictions. In the nation's agricultural areas, the Millennium Drought (2001–7) was taking its toll and many Australians were becoming increasingly concerned that the extremely dry conditions were associated with anthropogenic climate change. With these issues at the forefront of my mind, I resolved to look more closely at the ways that the people of Perth had used water and how they had responded to water scarcity in the past.

As water restrictions highlight, a great deal of suburban water use takes place outside the home—in the garden, the backyard, and the nature strip or roadside verge. And here my research began to intersect with garden history. How did water, or a lack of it, affect gardeners and their gardens? Exploring this question introduced me to the works of George Seddon, Oline Richards, and John Viska, which in turn led me to see gardens in richer and more complex ways. Gardens, I soon realised, are expressions of attachments to place and community, as well as products of particular environments and styles.



Ruth Morgan at Merredin inspecting C.Y. O'Connor's Kalgoorlie Pipeline, which supplies water to the wheatbelt and the eastern goldfields.

Photo: Richard Aitken

My initial research was especially focussed on the immediate past, when the authorities implemented a total water ban on Perth's garden sprinklers back in the late 1970s. One of the ways that gardeners responded then was to join the growing enthusiasm for native plants, believing that hardy Australian species did not need water to flourish. It was this study that led me to the Western Australian branch of the Australian Garden History Society, whose chair (and resident dynamo) Caroline Grant invited me to speak at the Annual General Meeting in 2009. There I found a warm and welcoming community of garden history enthusiasts who were keen to share with me their memories of Perth's native plant and garden movement.

Before I knew it, I had become a member of the Society and then elected to the branch committee. This led to my involvement in the research for the Historic Gardens of Perth exhibition at the Perth Town Hall, and my participation in the Resource of Landscape Forum at the University of Western Australia in 2011. There I met long-time Society member and *Australian Garden History* co-editor, Richard Aitken, who was presenting early ideas for his recently published book, *Cultivating Modernism* (2013). I was pleased to be selected soon after for the editorial mentoring programme of the Nina Crone Fund, which supported a tour of the Western Australian wheatbelt, its gardens, and its waterscapes. It was fitting then that our journey began at the Mundaring Weir, which supplies C.Y. O'Connor's Kalgoorlie Pipeline, the water source for the state's agricultural areas and goldfields. This experience helped me to think more broadly about my research and more critically about the craft of writing, both vital for what had become a doctoral project on water in southwestern Australia since the early nineteenth century.

In 2011, the AGHS embarked on a project to quietly expand its online presence through the free encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. The Wikipedia model of editable content allows users to contribute to existing encyclopaedia entries, or to create new ones. As I was familiar with the workings of this website and excited by the possibilities that it offered for sharing scholarly research, I put my hand up to be involved. We gradually selected biographical articles from *Australian Garden History* and entries from *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens* (2002) to supplement content already on the website, and identified people and places that warranted

new entries. By adding this content, we could draw researchers' attentions to the work of the Society, and to the field of Australian garden history more broadly.

Online tools such as Wikipedia, as well as Facebook, Instagram, and blogs, offer vibrant new spaces for likeminded people around the world to share their interest in garden history, whether it is for pleasure or research, and the AGHS will surely benefit from joining these digital conversations. The capacity of these online spaces to contribute to vast information networks will help the Society to mobilise wider support for its projects and initiatives, particularly those relating to heritage conservation across the country. Through these digital networks, the AGHS can also build on its relationships with other organisations and institutions, and collaborate on areas of shared concern.

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After I completed my postgraduate studies in 2012, I moved to Melbourne to accept a position in the History Department at Monash University, where I have taught courses on Australian history and heritage. I am keenly interested in public history so I was thrilled to be elected to the National Management Committee of the Australian Garden History Society this year, where I hope to bring new perspectives to the table. For more than thirty years, the Society has done such important work and I see an exciting range of opportunities ahead that will enable us to adapt in the future, while respecting the history and traditions of the Society.

The 2014 Australian Garden History Society annual national conference in Albany, Western Australia, promises to be an exciting event. The conference is scheduled in October, on the eve of the town's commemoration of the ANZAC centenary, which will be marked by the Albany Convoy Commemorative Event to mark the anniversary of the departure of the first convoy of ships that carried the Australian Imperial Force and New Zealand Expeditionary Force to the Front. Developing these kinds of associations with other areas of historical interest in Australia will go far to ensure the longevity of the AGHS and the field of garden history in the decades ahead.