

Profile

Sue Ebury, now Lady Wilton, has a very long connection with the Australian Garden History Society, from its foundation and now as its new patron. As well, through her work as an editor and publisher, she has contributed to Australia's gardening history.



In 1980, as Sue Ebury, you attended the conference at Illawarra, the National Trust of Australia property in the Melbourne suburb of Toorak, which resolved to form the Australian Garden History Society. On the mood of that initial conference, a fellow attendee recalls: 'a very disparate but stimulated group, excited to have found a linking point, or commonality, for a subject area that could be approached from many different ways'. Would you agree with that description?

Yes, there was a deep interest. It was a distinguished group of now well-known figures whose interests intersected in their concern about the conservation of Australia's gardening and landscape heritage and the wider environment. They included David Yenken, Ted Fawcett from the English National Trust, George Seddon, and James Broadbent, Peter Watts, Oline Richards, and Phyl Simons (the four people surveying historic gardens for the Australian Heritage Commission in NSW, Victoria, Western Australia, and Tasmania). Trevor Nottle, Miles Lewis, and Dr Norman Wettenhall, a great 'mover and shaker', were also present. Groups represented included the National Trust and the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union. Mrs Weatherly from Victoria's Western District represented garden owners. At the end of the conference, the Society was formed and a committee appointed under Dame Elisabeth

Murdoch's chairmanship. I volunteered to edit the proceedings, becoming first honorary editor of the Society. This first publication for the AGHS, with Peter Watts' and Howard Tanner's recent publications, marked a turning point in Australian gardening literature that reflected a new spirit of research and inquiry—as opposed to aiming solely for popular appeal (although many shared popularity with scholarly rigour).

Moving to another dimension of garden history, can we explore your work publishing books about Australian plants?

I worked in publishing for 19 years, from 1968, before moving to Asia. The use of Australian plants in gardens was obviously the area to be in if you were going to publish books on plants in this era. As commissioning editor then publisher with Thomas Nelson, I was directly involved in several of Nelson's successful titles in this genre. I realised early on that in building any publishing list one or two books representing a particular field are no good. You need a range: once certain books are on your list, they attract other authors. After upheavals at Angus & Robertson, Thistle Harris came to us and hence we published her *Gardening with Australian Plants* series, edited by Margaret Barrett, and featuring shrubs (1978), small plants and climbers (1979), and trees (1980).

Botanist J.H. (Jim) Willis, in his foreword to Harris's Gardening with Australian Plants: Shrubs (1978) captures the spirit of the nursery and publishing industries specialising in Australian plants at this time: 'Nurserymen now attempt to satisfy an ever-increasing demand for native shrubs, trees and ferns, and some firms trade only in these Australian plants. Hand in hand with nursery sales has also grown the demand for literature, especially pictorial publications, on the culture of our native flora.' Thomas Nelson was one of the significant players in this wave of illustrated and informative publications on Australian plants, with many successes. As commissioning editor and publisher, how did you come

to publish some of their notable titles, in particular, Grow What Where?

The Australian Plants Study Group, who included Ross and Gwenda Macdonald and Natalie Peate, had put together something they called *Grow What Where* (1978). They contacted me, knowing I was a publisher and because I was going to Society for Growing Australian Plants meetings. I was very interested in Edna Walling (particularly the time when she'd 'gone native'), and the work of Graeme Gunn and Ellis Stones for Merchant Builders' developments. Not having grown up in Australia I found the landscape and its flora fascinating and I loved Walling's book *The Australian Roadside* (1952—see story on pages 26–27)—although it was not especially popular then, being somewhat ahead of its time. When I arrived in Australia, many people were interested in retaining as many trees and as much of the understorey as possible on their land, but they also wanted to introduce more variety in the planting, because [indigenous] species found within a particular area can be quite limited. SGAP and *Grow What Where* reflected this interest and I put it to my publishing committee (I was at this stage a commissioning editor). While enthusiastic about the idea, they didn't like the title. I argued: 'I think the title is catchy, and I don't think people will forget it!' Anyway, I won that battle. And we published it. So that's how *Grow What Where* happened.

Grow What Where was clearly a successful publication, with a number of editions—published by Thomas Nelson (1980, 1986), then Viking O'Neill (1990), Lothian (1997), and Bloomings Books (2006).

There were also four spin-off publications—*Grow What Wet* (1982), *Grow What Basic* (1983), *Grow What Tree* (1985), and *Grow What Small Plant* (1987). Interestingly, some considered *Grow What Where* not a 'proper' book as it consisted of a series of lists: grasses, bulbs, etc, and it calendarises things. You can have an acacia in flower, for instance, every month of the year. It gives lists of blue flowers, yellow, pink, lists of everything you can think of. You look up a particular plant in the index, which identifies the lists that plant figures in.

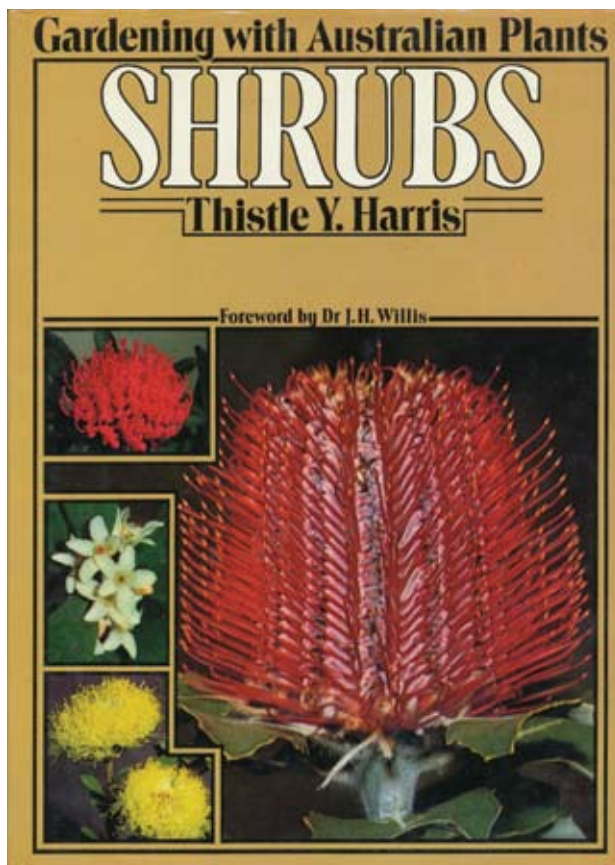
Was this a novel layout for its time?

Absolutely. Others followed with quick-pick lists, but as far as I'm aware *Grow What Where* was the first to adopt this structure.

What were some of the other noteworthy publications assembled on the Thomas Nelson book list?

Bill Molyneux and Ross Macdonald's *Native Gardens: how to create an Australian landscape* (1983) was one, and I published John Patrick's first book—*The Australian Garden: designs and plants for today* (1985 and 1986). One that was really frustrating was *Australian Native Plants: a manual for their propagation, cultivation and use in landscaping*, by Wrigley and Fagg (Collins, Sydney, 1979)—since reissued in many editions. I was not allowed to chase them and would never have been given the budget that the managing director of William Collins could commit on the spot when he heard them lecture. What I did do was approach CSIRO about publishing the new edition they were preparing of *Forest Trees of Australia*—the first three editions were published in 1957, 1962, and 1970. And they agreed. This fourth edition, co-published by Thomas Nelson and CSIRO, was much updated, and departed from the old-fashioned style of the previous editions traditionally published by the CSIRO, thus reaching a wider audience. But my brief was not to be exciting. I published a wonderful book on *Australian Terrestrial Orchids*, for Nelson had published W.H. Nicholl's *Orchids of Australia*, and I worked on the first volume of Stan Kelly's *Eucalypts*—and by the time Stan's second volume came along I was responsible for it. And there were many more.

You've also observed the conservation of a significant eighteenth-century landscape, at





View of Heaton House, 1824, engraved by Thomas Jeavons after John Preston Neale. This view shows Heaton Hall (then called Heaton House) before the addition of the Orangery and one of the pair of Lewis Wyatt's chimney stacks.

Heaton Park, the ancestral seat of the Earls of Wilton, outside Manchester. Could you describe the conservation approach adopted there?

The whole landscape surrounding Heaton Hall, now in public ownership, has been restored to its late eighteenth-century plan, thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund. In 1770 William Emes was commissioned by Sir Thomas Egerton (later the 1st Earl of Wilton) to reshape the landscape to offset the neo-classical house (totally remodelled by architect James Wyatt). Emes worked in the style of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown. It was a restrained style of landscaping and the restoration, also admirably restrained, aimed to resemble Emes’ plans. The recent works removed *Rhododendron ponticum* thickets and much of the bedding surrounding the house and orangery. The Cherry Walk was restored and a lot of work was done on the trees scattered throughout the park. The landscape slopes away from the garden front most handsomely, with great rows of trees left and right plus groups of trees judiciously dotted in the landscape.

Are there other people, or places, or plants that have shaped your ideas about gardens?

I grew up near Sir Heaton Rhodes’ garden at Otahuna and spent much time there (he married

Alister Clark’s sister); it was very much an Arts and Crafts garden—a secret garden containing a dipping well *a la* Gertrude Jekyll, a primrose wood, hillsides of narcissus, a walled kitchen garden, and espaliered fruit trees. At home we had a huge orchard with cherries, cherry plums, damsons, and gooseberry bushes in all different varieties, and red, black, and white currants, peaches, apples, plums, nectarines, wonderful vegetables, so I became a gardener very early. This was in New Zealand. My grandfather planted it in the 1890s with varieties you don’t often see these days. But I have none of that here—too much work and too many predators.

Living in the country I am very conscious of water, and the hazards of garden escapes into surrounding bushland. In my own garden I am strongly influenced by the philosophy that underpinned the work of Beth Chatto—finding the right plant for the right place—so I always seek a plant’s country of origin, soils, and climate.

Sue Ebury is the author of *Wearry: the life of Sir Edward Dunlop* (Viking, 1994) and *The Many Lives of Kenneth Myer* (Miegunyah, 2008)—and promises to write a story for a forthcoming issue of *AGH* on Ken Myer and his interests in Australian plants. She has also recently been appointed to the Development Council of the National Library of Australia.