



Australian Garden History Society

Oral History Programme 2002/2003

This interview is one of a series of interviews being conducted throughout Australia with early members of the Australian Garden History Society. The AGHS was formed in 1980 and these interviews will play a crucial part in recording the formation and early days of the Society. The AGHS is funding these interviews. The AGHS acknowledges the support of the State Library Victoria for use of interview equipment.

This interview of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch was carried out by Jane Holth on 9 September, 2002 at Cruden Farm, Langwarrin, Victoria

Just to start with, if you say your name and where

Elisabeth Murdoch, Cruden Farm,
Cranbourne Road, Langwarrin
This is 9th September in 2002

Dame Elisabeth, can you tell me how your interest in gardening started?

Well, my mother was very keen on her garden, in Toorak Road below the village, and it was quite small compared to other properties in those days but it was an acre and I think I really probably grew very much to love the spaciousness of it and then my sister, Sylvia, a little older than I was, when she married, she married into the Ritchie family at Delatite, Mansfield, and there was already a large garden there, beautiful area, and she made a lovely, lovely cottage garden across the river before moving to the bigger garden and I think she was my role model— she was— she had a very good brain, and was a wonderful gardener and I think probably I was inspired to try and follow her suite.

Was that historic gardens that she was interested in?

Well it has become a very well- known garden — I think it's going to celebrate its 80th, its 100th year next year and I think I had enormous respect and love of my sister— probably I think she did inspire me to do my very best to become a good gardener and I think she was one of the outstanding gardeners of her age. Next, I think in December, there's going to be a memorial lecture in the garden up there because she was so well loved and so respected and I think she was one of the outstanding gardeners of her time.

And why do you think you followed through an interest in historic gardens?

Well I've always been interested in history and David Yencken approached me and really sort of almost bullied me into accepting the idea that there should be an

Australian Garden History Society and that I would help to get it going. He's a very forceful person, David, and it's very hard to say no.

What involvement did you have in gardening at that time, before you actually established the society?

Well I'd helped to build this garden. In 1928 we were married and there was a very small garden here and Edna Walling had designed the walled gardens and I had been very involved in making a garden but she didn't consult me very much and it was a difficult time because I was not very experienced and I didn't realise that the walled gardens as planned were really not quite big enough. And they were not altogether in the right position but of course that mustn't be laid at her door, because that was how the land lay and it seemed to be the place for a garden. But ever since then I've been trying to somehow change those plans so that I could do better in the rest of the garden. So I've really been deeply involved in the garden since 1929 and I have a very great feeling for the garden and I have now a remarkable man—we see eye to eye, we think alike, and I think we have developed this garden into a—perhaps it's rather arrogant of me to say—but it's thought to be a very beautiful garden and it's one that's always changing, you know, no gardens could be static, you've always got to be moving forward. And I think that gradually it has become a very beautiful garden with lovely environ.

And when David Yencken was encouraging you with the History Society, why was 1980 a good time for that to be formed, do you think?

Well I think there was a tremendous widening of interest in gardens, you know. There was a great proliferation of gardening books and I suppose that the gardens in England that became open to the public—I think that people who travelled saw how

valuable it was, although our gardens were so much younger, that we must start to record the history and build it up because many of the gardens in Europe, you know, [are] hundreds of years old, and we're only beginning our historical life. And I don't quite know who put the idea into David's mind but certainly there were a lot of people who were really ready for it and were very enthusiastic in helping to get it going.

And can you describe your early involvement with the society?

Oh well, I don't know who, I can't remember really who helped, but we did call a lot of people together and I was the sort of first, I don't know what they called them, I suppose patron—and I got it going and very shortly afterwards handed it over to Joan Law-Smith. But I've always been very closely interested and in all their records they always pay tribute to what I'd done in the early stages—I mean that's not the point really—but I think I've always been an enthusiastic person and I've been probably helpful in getting quite a number of things going, and with my keen interest in the garden I threw myself into it and I think it got off to a good start.

Did it have a purpose in the beginning, a particular purpose?

Well I think it was to start the historical records, to build up the history, the past history and to look to the future—how it could be strengthened and how it could be recorded. I mean there was, of course, the Australian Garden History Society Journal which was very amateurish to begin with but it's developed into a very good publication now.

And when it started, was there a sort of collective philosophy amongst its early members, about the preservation of historic gardens?

I don't know about a philosophy—I think there was a lot of enthusiasm for starting a Australian Garden History Society—maybe a lot of us weren't very clear in the heads but we were enthusiastic and the idea appealed to us and it had quite a small beginning but it didn't take long to get off to a very sound organisation and I very much admire the people who came, joined up and took the movement on—I think they've done very well. Joan Law-Smith was very good for a time and then of course Margaret Darling's been excellent and I'm not too certain who succeeded her. Do you know?

Is that Jocelyn?

Yes, and Jocelyn has been splendid. Jocelyn Mitchell. I think that generally speaking the gardening community is

becoming very much better educated and that's partly, I think, because there have been such wonderful books written and more people have travelled more often and [there have been] a lot of gardening tours to the other side of the world and I'm always impressed as to how knowledgeable so many of my friends and acquaintances are.

You must have been on a lot of committees at the beginning, or the original committee.
Can you remember who you worked with in those early days?

I'm ashamed to say I don't remember. It's awful—I think I've declining memory, definitely, probably if I were given just a few names it'd come back to me but I don't remember very clearly who was on those original committees—which is shocking of me but that's my age, I have to be excused.

Definitely. Do you have any early memories of particularly interesting gardens that you went to see, interesting tours?

Very interesting tour to Tasmania—a wonderful tour to Tasmania I think. We enjoyed that enormously. We had another one up to the Blue Mountains, no, Mt Victoria, I think, that was a lovely time and I think

Why was the one to Tasmania so interesting?

Oh, it's a wonderful state for gardening and of course a lot of those gardens were old, you see, because it was settled very early, but there was some beautiful gardens in Tasmania with a lot of history attached to them—that's what I think probably is so fascinating—

and it's very English, very English, Tasmania I think, don't you think? You know, so much reminds you of England and English gardens.

Can you remember any particular gardens in Tasmania or any particular owners of gardens?

It's all gone.

And what about particularly interesting lectures that you would've attended in the early days—do any of the speakers stand out? Professor Stearn was one very...

Yes, that was remarkable. I think we went to the Western District with him and I found a great accord with him and he really was quite outstanding—and I'm just trying to think of the gardens we went—I've got photographs tucked away where we were but he was very good. I always was so sad that we didn't have that famous landscape gardener who wrote the book *The Education*

of a Gardener—don't you remember?
Absolutely outstanding.

English?

Yes, oh yes. It's really my Bible, it was Joan Law-Smith's Bible.

Gertrude Jekyll?

No. [Dame Elisabeth later recalled the name—Russell Page]

And, of course, we all were so interested in Gertrude Jekyll—I didn't ever go to her garden but I must cudgel my brains.....can you turn it off for a moment?

[Cranborne Manor] It's hundreds of years old and also the soldiers' garden at —isn't it awful—stayed there too but when you have visited those wonderful gardens which, you know, go back hundreds and hundreds of years you realise how important it is to record history and we're so very young here that I think people who had travelled and had those experiences realised how very important it was that we should start and build up our history.

Are most of our historic gardens English in theme?

I think they are. I think that it's only recently that the native gardens have become so popular and so successful but I think, generally speaking, certainly in this part of the world, we have concentrated a lot on exotics because we've got the sort of climate that suits them. I've been interested all my life in the Royal Botanic Gardens of Melbourne. I'm very proud to be their first patron and, of course, they are such a wonderful—what'd we say?—I always think they're one of the gems in the crown of Melbourne and they go back a long, long way and I think now the history of the Botanic Gardens has become very important and in a way so related to our private gardens that have that history. I don't quite know, or I should remember, when the Botanic Gardens were first established. Von Mueller was one, of course, and Guilfoyle another, and all that history is so absolutely fascinating—and I think in time the history which has been built up over our private gardens will be very interesting indeed, especially as, alas, it's not been easy, I think, to develop large and maintain large gardens. I think that gardens are becoming smaller and it's those fewer, larger, old historical gardens which will be, always be, very significant in the history of gardening in Australia. It's such a varying climate, I mean I know so little about gardening in any other state but they, all of them, have things wonderfully, particularly suited to their climate, and of course the Australian Garden History Society covers the whole of

Australia. But it's in Victoria, [and] I think in New South Wales, where it's strongest.

Is there a range of types of gardens or are they mostly large?

No, I don't think so, I think some of them are quite, quite small, but they're historically significant. The Australian Garden History Society deals a lot with botanical history and botanical art, too, so it's a very a comprehensive society which covers anything and everything to do with horticulture.

And that could include even vegetable gardens?

Yes.

Cottage gardens?

Yes, I think so. Not as many, I mean of course Rosemary Verey's garden at Barnsley House — it had a most exquisite vegetable garden, sort of potager, lovely. Although I have seen some extremely well-designed and well-kept vegetable gardens. I think that it is pretty hard for most people to have the labour to do that. They're very labour intensive, you know, these beautifully designed vegetable gardens, and kept up, but they are really designed largely for their appearance, almost more than their practical use.

How does the society encourage research into plant history?

It does, I think, I don't know how it does but certainly every time the journal comes in there's always something very interesting of that nature. And I think that research is so very active in all areas today and I think there's a lot of research still to be done about our early gardens. But each time I get a journal I think they're getting deeper in and even more scholarly, you know, in their research and their recording of the history—I'm amazed how very well it's come on.

Going back to the earlier days of the society, do you remember meeting any particularly interesting people through the society, any particular gardeners, or owners of gardens? Did you establish a friendship?

In Australia?

Yes.

Oh, I don't think so, I think we've got some very good gardens, newer gardens I'm thinking of—the older gardens, the Mawallok garden was interesting, that was the Mitchell's garden.

Where was that?

That's up in the Western District, up, not very far from Skipton, on from there, can't think of the name, the number of the address—Mawallok. That's a very well-known garden and that's very interesting.

And of course the Delatite garden has always been interesting, my sister's garden.

How long have the Mitchells been there?

Not, not a lifetime, the Russells owned it originally. I think the Mitchells may have been there, I don't know, as I say I can't keep track, 25 years or more I think. Let me see now, the gardens round here that are interesting. Frightful of me, I can't think of them at the moment. When they have the Open Gardens Scheme—my mind's a blank—sorry.

That's alright. No. In the early days when you were chairman and president

I wasn't for long ...

No, but were there any particular issues that had to be resolved?

Oh, well, always, you know, I think there are varying views of how things should be done and I think that's the history of most associations that are formed—as they developed, you know, there is a variety of opinion but I think it depends largely on the chairman, on their ability, they've got to be tactful and kindly and encouraging. As a rule, I don't think there was any very strong dissension in the Australian Garden History Society, I don't think so, because, you know, you've always got to think that their aims and objectives are so much bigger than the sort of personal view, or interest. There may have been some sort of slightly shaky times when the funds were not good enough, they had not got enough members or perhaps there'd be some dispute as to how the money was being spent. When, of course, we started the Australian Garden History Society Journal, that was all expensive and I think everybody pooled and put in a bit of extra time and a bit of extra weight and I don't think it ever went through any serious trouble because I always say gardeners are always very nice people, in my experience.

In its early days did the society mostly consist of gardeners, or were there some academics, and some landscape designers, botanists?

Yes—everybody, yes it was very widespread, interested people, you know, from all areas.

Do you remember anybody who was particularly influential or interested in the society from ...?

No, I don't remember, really, that it was a David Yencken was obviously one.

Oh, he was a tremendous force—yes—tremendous force, David. And Joan Law-Smith was a very gentle but a very influential person [phone rings] Excuse me.

You mentioned how enthusiastic David Yencken had been and also Joan Law-

Smith. Professor Turner, was he involved in this?

Yes, indeed, he was. He was very scholarly and very artistic and, of course, had a great influence on the school of botany. He encouraged me to join the Como I was convenor of the Como garden committee for a number of years. I don't quite remember relating him to the Australian Garden History Society but I'm sure he was. And, of course, Carrick Chambers was also, I'm sure he must have been some way involved in the Garden History Society—that I cannot accurately recall, but I'm sure he must have been because he succeeded John Turner at the Botany school and did so much for it. Sorry to be so awfully vague about it all but, as I say, it's such a long time ago now.

No, no, this is fascinating. Do you remember when Sophie Ducker joined, and Alice Jeffery?

Alice

Jeffery?

Oh, she was a splendid person, absolutely splendid, Miss Jeffery? Yes, she was a great person. She was a great enthusiast, very knowledgeable, and I admired her enormously. And the other one you said was?

Sophie Ducker?

Sophie Ducker. I didn't really get to know Sophie Ducker very well at the early I've got to know her better now. She's a tremendous character and, of course, a great scholar in her particular field, a great scholar.

Did Alice Jeffery have a garden?

Yes, charming garden, yes, yes, a charming garden. Smallish garden but a charming garden. No, she was quite one of the outstanding people.

In what way?

With her knowledge and her taste and her, able to communicate, you know? You could always learn from her, always learn from her. And it's a wonderful world, the gardening world, because it does attract such interesting people who help to widen your own horizons so much. As I say, gardening is something very special in our lives and, as a rule, gardeners, either professional or any kind of gardener, they're always rather special people. My own gardener's a very special, very special character.

Can you define why you think gardeners are such special people?

Well I think they have such an affinity with the earth and the beauty and I think there's a serenity in gardening and you don't have quite the same friction or perhaps, difficulty

as the other sort of pursuits which people have to follow in their business lives and their professional lives. I think that gardening is so serene and somehow contributes something to people's character—that's been my experience. Nearly all the gardening people I know are quite exceptional people and somehow I never think gardening people are greedy. They're very unmaterialistic, put it that way.

Although some people tell me they are very ambitious and very jealous and quite immoral when they visit other people's gardens—that sort of thing. I've never—I've opened the garden here so much—tens and tens of thousands of people—and I've never had the slightest bit of damage done or anything that was, you know, out of order..... pinching things, I've never, never had anything like that at all. So I think gardening people on the whole are pretty good.

Now you were the first chairman, were you elected unopposed?

Well I think probably David Yencken managed all that. I think in those days, it was amazing—I think that's something that has changed. I was sort of chosen by my president to be president of the Children's Hospital. I'm sure that there was no kind of general concourse with the rest of the committee. I'm sure they were not consulted, you know, the president was determined I was to be, and that was it.

Nowadays everything has to be discussed and voted for and there has to be general approval for anybody who's being elevated but in those days it was very much unorthodox but it worked.

And in your opinion has the society fulfilled your expectations?

Yes, far beyond my expectations. I'm full of admiration as to how it's developed and for the people who, for many, many, many, years, you know, bore the heat of day and the worries and the difficulties that come to everything, mostly on having enough money and how it was managed and I think they've done extremely well—I'm very proud of having had only just the very early association with it, that I helped to get it going, and that's what's so pleasing, if you're able to help you feel very proud of the way things develop. I am very proud of the Australian Garden History Society.

How do you think it's changed over the years?

I don't think it's changed—I think its aims and objective has always been the same. I think they probably set their sights higher all the time and they've achieved those heights

and that's what has to be in everything, you know, you don't stand still, you have to move forward all the time and I think that they've been very wise the way they've done it.

And how do you envisage the future of the society?

You can't, I don't think you can foresee the future of anything these days. I just say I travel in hope.

Is there anything you think could be improved?

No, I'm not close enough to know that. I'm sure that the standards have been very high and they've kept them and I think that there may be further heights to which they will climb and, as I say, it's just like gardens, they never stand still. They've got to develop and go forward and they have to improve—so there's always room for improvement in anything we do in life and I'm sure that there will be improvements and it'll survive as a very important influence in the world of gardening.

Do you think it has appeal to younger gardeners?

That I don't know, I'm not close enough to know, but certainly other peopleI can't tell you that. I think that younger people, on the whole, in a quite ordinary way are becoming keener and better educated and more capable.

So you envisage a bright future, anyway?

As I say, I always travel in hope.

Thank you very much.

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