



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 Miranda Morris-Nunn was carried out by Sallyann Dakis on 14 June 2003 at 221 Warwick Street, West Hobart.

Miranda, can you tell me how you first became involved with the Garden History Society?

I was working at the School of Environmental Design, which is the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education, then on Mt Nelson, and Phyll Simons was working there as a Landscape Architecture Lecturer. It was a few years after the Australian Heritage Commission had been set up, and they were really keen on expanding beyond the built environment. I'm not quite sure what it was, who it was exactly who instigated it, but there was a national study of historical gardens, and the Heritage Commission organised for people in each state to do a survey of historic gardens. And I was employed by the School of Environmental Design to help Phyll Simons do that. It seemed quite a radical thing at that time not to be looking at houses, you know, which was where the National Trust had been. I suspect that there had been some recognition of how many gardens were being damaged when the gardens weren't specifically protected. You'd get road works and subdivisions, and it was a way of just kind of assessing what was there.

So this was a national push, but what was the climate in Tasmania? Was there a recognition that Tasmania had any particular level of priority gardens?

I think there was a recognition that Tasmania was important. Victoria you've got that same sense, but Tasmania was kind of known as the Georgian place. I'm not sure whether correctly or not. But certainly there was an idea that there would be gardens here, and there were some places that I would say were probably already recognised as having important gardens, like Panshanger in Longford and probably Woolmers. But we were also interested in looking at gardens that really hardly existed any more, and we were interested in those early - ways of trying to track down what a garden would have been like. And there was also a

growing interest in what kind of plants had been grown, and inventories of old imported plant types.

That study that you referred to was pretty much the landmark for Tasmania, so how did you do it? Where did you begin?

I remember driving around with Phyll, we had a wonderful time almost knocking on doors and asking people if they knew people. We did a lovely tour of the East Coast, you know, staying in places and just visiting. I think probably one of our initial ways of going about it, apart from peering over hedges, was looking at which houses were likely to have had important gardens. But we were also really aware of wanting not just to record gardens that were architecturally landscaped, and that we wanted cottage gardens. So we would stop in places, and Phyll had a huge knowledge of gardens and botany, and she'd recognise a plant from miles off, so we'd hunt it down. If we saw a particularly unusual fuchsia or something we would then go in. But mainly she was - I'd been working at the School of Environmental Design, but I was about to move to Launceston, so we divided ourselves up a bit into North and South as well. So I'd go and visit gardens around... I can't actually remember, I think we went to Stanley at some point, but I can't really remember doing the North-west Coast very much. And it was mainly the places within about a fifty mile radius of Launceston.

So when you went to a garden, what would you do?

We'd talk to the owners first of all, and we would do a sketch of the garden, do a sketch of the layout, and then write down any plants that were still there. And if they had any records of what might have been there or what might have been cut down, we'd enter that in. It wasn't very sophisticated. I mean there were forms that the Heritage Commission had, so we kind of went by the form, if you like. We took photographs, gave

a bit of a historical context, but nothing that would stand up today I would think. And we'd have cups of tea. That's sort of what I remember, is meeting nice people and having cups of tea in their kitchens. It was most fun when I did it with Phyll, when we did it together, but obviously that wasn't the common way of doing it, usually it was one or other of us.

Do you think some of the garden owners were flattered that you were taking an interest in their gardens?

I think some of them were pleased. You know, the higher social echelon, the less pleased and the more presumptuous it kind of became, I think. So there was a bit of a change about who was doing who a favour in that sense. But usually it was with people who enjoyed the joint exercise, who loved their gardens and were really pleased that other people were going to love their gardens.

And what was the feeling that you had on the completion of that study? Did you have a sense that it was significant, looking retrospectively?

I think it was. We've stopped doing that kind of scale of study of anything really, and I think the Heritage Commission at that time, doing all these scoping studies, did a lot of really significant stuff. In gardens, but also industrial heritage and all those other areas. And I think there was really a level of awareness raised by doing that study that hadn't existed before. I mean I haven't actually looked at what we did at that stage. I know Phyll Simons produced a book on Tasmanian gardens which was from that study.

And how was it received in Tasmania?

The book?

Or the study.

Look I don't know that it was received as such, I mean it wasn't launched or anything. But I think – later the Society, it grew quite a lot from that. And I would say that that was very definitely the beginning of an interest, a kind of more general interest rather than an individual personal interest.

So how did your involvement with that study then transfer to the Garden History Society, is there a link?

Yes, well we got – I'm a bit hazy about this – but I think the first time we decided we all wanted to meet, the people who were doing it in each state, and I seem to remember that the first time we met was in Tasmania. And that we met in Launceston, so I was kind of hosting that first meeting. And we went and visited some gardens, and talked about forming the Society. We had

another meeting the following year, so I'm not quite sure which of those, whether that first meeting was just all the state representatives meeting together or whether that was the start of the Society. The next year it was in Victoria, and there were far more people involved. But certainly at some point, either after one or the other, we decided to form a Society, because there were people interested who weren't undertaking the studies, and the studies were nearly finished at that time. So I took on the newsletter, and I think I did three issues of it, I can't actually remember.

We're talking about a national newsletter?

Yes. National, but not a very huge circulation. I'm trying to remember, there was someone from... Melulli? Something like Mulini Press in Canberra -

Mulini?

Mulini, yes, who was publishing things on plants. And so we got to know people who were doing other work in garden history apart from us. And the newsletter was really supposed to be, was about the history of gardens and gardening. It wasn't just here actually, I was just thinking there was a huge exhibition in England on garden history at that time. So there seemed to be quite an international interest. Well, when I say international, kind of Anglo-Australian perhaps, not so broad. And I'm sure that transferred. A lot of things came out about Capability Brown, and Peter Watts was working on... it's completely gone. A very famous Australian gardener. Oh dear. A woman.

Edna Walling?

Yes, thank you. Edna Walling. So there were obviously things that were going beyond the recording of the gardens that were going on, and we wanted to have a newsletter that reflected that.

Can you recall some of the subjects or articles?

No I can't! I had a desperate search this morning for them and I couldn't find the journals, and I really don't know. But I'm sure there's someone would have them somewhere.

Was there much social networking involved with the newsletter? For example, was it mostly article or information based rather than talking about what other groups were doing, events and things?

No, it was actually articles, mainly about the histories of places. No, I mean there wasn't really much of a network, there wasn't a very big network at that time. I can't actually remember what the distribution was, but it would have been very small.

And how was it published?

I think I typed it up. I think we had a Daisy Wheel at that time, and [unclear], and it was all very up-to-date. And [Lettraset?] on the cover, and the cover design was Phyll's, this kind of wreath of flowers. I think we allowed ourselves to have it stapled together and folded at a printers. In fact I think we might have even had it printed at a printers. It was kind of typed up then shrunk down and then doubled up.

Can you tell me much about the Society, the Committee in Tasmania? Who was on that, and I presume that you were part of that?

Well, there wasn't a committee in each state, we were just a national. Because there were only about three or four of us in each place. So in the time that I was there, there weren't really state committees, we operated at a national level.

And can you remember some of the people that you were working with?

Well I wasn't working with them, I was quite isolated. I mean I was in the North and Phyll was in the South. The other people in other states were people like Noelene Richards and Warren Nichols and Peter Watts. James Broadbent, Howard Tanner. David [Aitken?] was involved. We used to interact quite a lot. You know, if only email had existed it would have been much easier, but as it was it was mainly by letter, it was not even often by phone that we'd connect up. And I think in the third year that people like Pat Cameron became involved, and far more. In fact after the second meeting we had, which was in Victoria, there were far more people. The Victorians had become - I think they might have had their own Association by then. So it had kind of expanded, and there were far more home owners involved. And that then spread out, kind of happened here as well. So at that meeting it had suddenly really changed. I'm trying to think of who else was involved. Dame Elizabeth Murdoch was one of them. I think May Casey was involved, who died some years ago now. And it felt to me a bit as if the whole idea of it had changed, and my work with the recording had ended by then, and I was sort of going on to different things. And it was no longer quite what I wanted to be involved in.

So when did you cease your involvement?

I think it must have been quite - well, three newsletters in I guess. I mean I think the other thing was that it was a time of my life where I couldn't travel or anything, and the time that people got together were at these national meetings. So if they weren't where I was, I wasn't able to attend them. Yes, I think it was probably after about three years that I stopped being involved. I kind of stayed in touch with

some of the people whose gardens I had seen around Launceston, particularly with Woolmers, where I went on to do other studies of the same place.

So your involvement in an academic level continued past your involvement with the Society?

Well I shouldn't really call it academic, but it was kind of being interested in the history rather than the present, I think, was probably where my problem lay with it. And I was involved in heritage generally, rather than gardens specifically. I went on to do architectural and industrial heritage then I went on to do women's heritage, so I was more involved in interpretation of place, that kind of thing. I think it really nice at one level, it was really important in terms of the gardens, that there was this big following by the owners of those gardens. I think that was terribly important in terms of preserving those gardens. It was just that it gave it a different slant. I mean, I didn't have a garden, it wasn't something that I was doing.

So in Tasmania who do you think were some of the key people that were then involved in the Society when it became more of a popular organisation? Do you recall any of those people? You mentioned Pat Cameron as one?

Well I remember Pat Cameron, but I don't actually remember... I was kind of not involved by the time that happened, and I really don't have a good recollection of it. I'd be really interested in reading those first three newsletters, because I'm sure it would come back to me a bit.

Are you aware of what the Garden History Society does now, would you be able to comment on the sort of activities, and whether you think that's fitting in to your any sort of interest, or having any value?

Look, I haven't been involved for so long that I don't know. I mean I'm sure it has value, and I love the way that all these kind of plant exchanges and things began to happen after then. You know, people changing cuttings, and going around collecting things from graveyards. There was a terrific enthusiasm, and I don't mean by my absence from it that it wasn't going in a direction that was important, it was just that it wasn't my direction. And I don't think it would have survived going in the direction that I might have gone. It was too small a group involved with that kind of thing. So if it's gone on doing that, kind of being a support network with interests in historical gardens and plant exchange, then I think it's doing a really good job, but I don't know that that's what it's doing.

That's part of what it's doing, there's also an academic stream where they foster research

and that sort of thing. Looking back now, what can you say about why it happened then? Why that interest then? Was it because of the Heritage Commission, or was there just, like, a recognition that heritage gardens go with heritage properties?

I'm interested in the fact that it was happening in other places as well.

You mean overseas?

Yes. In Britain as well, and I don't know why that was happening there at the same time. I'm just thinking, Peter Watts' interest in Edna Walling already existed, so there was a recognition of Australian gardens. In the 1970s there was this really strong move towards native gardens, and exotic gardens were a bit of a no-no. Pretty unpatriotic, really, to talk about important historic British gardens in Tasmania, or whatever, which is what they were. And I think we've begun to move a bit away from that need for a dichotomy, protecting either or. But there had been this thing, you know, that all exotic plants are weeds and that we should pull them up and we should put our native species back in. And in a way, that was what was happening. New gardens that were being planted, were being planted with native things. I don't know how that relates to where it was at, except that it probably couldn't have happened ten years earlier. And I think that Landscape Architecture as a taught subject, I don't know how common that was. It felt to me in the Department of Environmental Design, which was quite a radical department at the time, that there was a new fostering of social environments beyond buildings. I mean, it had really changed from being a School of Architecture to being something that was much broader, so landscape and social space was a definite part of the built environment. So I think there was, within the college environment, I think that there was a recognition there already. And I think that the Heritage Commission was trying to redefine itself. It had its three sections, it had the Aboriginal and natural and built, and there was some recognition that those separations, they weren't very natural boundaries if you like.

Was it an exciting time for you? When you think back on your involvement with the study and the beginnings of the Garden History Society?

It was very exciting, yes. I really loved it. It was work that I really enjoyed doing. I mean it had to be enjoyable really, driving around looking at gardens. It was fabulous. And I really enjoyed doing the newsletter as well, I think it was an important time of my life. Also, when I moved up to Launceston I was quite isolated, and it was

really nice to have this connection with this really – I mean the whole group was really excited about what it was doing. So yes, it was a very exciting time.

And do you think there were some highlights?

Well I think that trip I was telling you about, up the East Coast with Phyll when we first started out, it was like a big girl's adventure really. [laughs] And she was such fun to be with anyway. And you know, we would meet people and have a really nice time with people and then we'd debrief, and that was terrific. Also the first meeting that we had in Launceston, this small group that I was talking about earlier, when we went and had picnics at Woolmers, and went around the gardens, and went to Panshanger, and I'm sure we went around several other gardens too. And it was just, because it was kind of a new field in a way, that was really exciting. And we felt that, you know, slightly trailblazing feel to it. On a very sedate kind of subject! [laughs]

Do you think back now, if you hadn't done some of that pioneer work, collecting some of the information about some of those gardens, that would have been lost? That you've actually preserved something?

I think so. Some of them were very nearly lost when we went. We included a lot of gardens where there were really just traces. And I think just promoting the idea of preserving gardens was probably as important as the actual listings of them. No, I think it was a good thing to have done.

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