



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 Sophie Ducker was carried out by Jane Holth on 6 September, 3 and 21 October 2002 at 36 Percy Street, Balwyn, Victoria.

Dr Ducker

Don't call me Dr Ducker—I'm Sophie.

Sophie. First of all, just for some background information, can you tell me where and when you were born?

On 9th April, 1909.

In Germany? Is that right?

In Berlin.

And when did you come to Australia?
1941.

And when did you start becoming interested in horticulture?

I'm not interested in horticulture. I'm a botanist, but I like my garden and I'm interested in gardens but I'm not interested in horticulture per se. I'm interested in the environment and when this society was being founded somebody put my name down without me even knowing.

Were you involved in the botany world very much at that time?

All my working life I've been in Melbourne University, Australia, and I'm still there as an associate professor. [Corrected to senior research associate on 21 October]

Do you know why you became so interested in botany, was it your family?

When I was six my grandmother taught me—I had scarlet fever—and she showed me how to press plants and I've been ever interested in it since, then I studied botany in Germany, and I was particularly interested in marine botany.

Was your grandmother very interested in botany too?

Not at all, mother of eight children and a garden.

And it was something for you to do when you were ill?

No, I was recuperating.

When the Garden History Society was formed, why do you think it was a good idea?

I wasn't even there but Professor Turner came back [from the inaugural meeting] and said that he put my name down, and I said 'What for?' He said there was a group of people who'd organised that. I was at the time very involved with my work and they all said 'Oh, you must join that' and I joined it and then I didn't have the time to go to any meeting. But then it was very soon the first outing and that was to Tasmania and I joined them to go.

Did you stay being a member because you enjoyed those sort of outings?

What I call outings — we went to Tasmania and there were some lectures — I gave them some lectures. Well, it was a group of people, I got very good friendship out of it.

Do you think 1980 was a good time for the Garden History Society to be formed?

I don't know — I cannot judge.

Did you have a particular interest in historic gardens by that time?

No, but I was essentially writing on the history of botany and I've gone all over Australia for writing about it because I was the first who wrote history from a botanical point of view.

Have you mostly been involved with the society for botanical reasons?

No, I was just a member of the society because I got involved and I was interested in what they were doing but not for botanical reasons because they were essentially not

doing botany. I was interested in the gardens and in the people who were there. I enjoyed going to Tasmania — that was my first trip. I had actually quite a funny episode. In the beginning, I didn't know who was in the society and the only person I would have known was Professor Turner and he didn't come, he never came to anything. I've never seen him at anything afterwards. And I went to the waiting room for Ansett, where we were flying, and I saw that there was a group of people standing together and I realised that they were going the same way so I walked to them and I said, 'Are you going down there?' And they said, 'Yes, we are but we are flying first class'. So I turned tail — they were very elitist and I took fright — Did I look so poverty stricken? So I had a place in the plane and they flew first class and I flew just ordinary class. Then we arrived and there was a bus took us somewhere and I sat down alone in the bus and the seat next to me was empty and a very nice lady came along — one of the highlights — that was Alice Jeffery, you have probably heard of her — and she said — I didn't know her — 'Can I sit down?' And I spent the rest of the four days with Alice Jeffery and it was wonderful.

From that grew a very deep friendship which I had to Alice, then she died three years ago. And Helen told me last night to tell you about it and it was wonderful because we did lots of things together.

Helen reminded me last night of the time when she saw Kitty Ghan, who was also one of the early persons in the Garden History Society, and Alice Jeffery and me in the chair lift being lifted into an Ansett plane. That was when we went again to Tasmania [corrected to Canberra, 21 October] — that must have been about two or three years later when Kitty was almost paralysed on her legs and she could only go onto the plane if they pushed her there in a wheel chair. But that was impossible and she was to be lifted and she said she wouldn't go in the chair lift, it would make her nervous, so I said 'I'll come with you' and then Alice said she would come too. Helen told me last night that the first impression she had was that these three older women — and she was quite young — were lifted in a chair lift, all three of them, into an Ansett plane. From then on I went to all the outings, to all the

trips, always with Alice Jeffery and Kitty Ghan — both of them are now dead. Alice had a most wonderful garden — have you heard about that? Here in Kew and developers have moved in. [Corrected on 21 October]

Did she have an historic sort of garden?

Yes. She made it herself but it was in many books. It was actually the garden which belonged to Sir MacFarlane Burnet, she bought that house.

In your opinion, did the society at the beginning have a particular purpose?

Yes, but it was very much a playground, as somebody put it at the time, of the well-heeled, and Helen has brought quite a different wind to it for everybody — working bees. At the time it was really very luxurious.

What was its direction then?

Much more enjoyment and — we always stayed in the best hotels and had dinners there and it was quite different. Helen Page has changed the direction — I enjoyed it at the time but my introduction to it, as I told you in my beginning, that was a sort of — I can't explain it any better.

So its main purpose?

Now Helen has made it into a working bee helping old gardens, it's much more become a working society which it wasn't in the beginning at all.

So it was more just to enjoy historic gardens?

Yes

Did they have any sort of philosophy?

No, they did not. Helen has much more pinpointed the mission. I did not think in the beginning [there was one], at least it didn't trickle through to me, and also they asked me to give them a lecture — it didn't matter what I lectured on, as long as I lectured, do you understand? Now it's always much more pin-pointed. I'm not so interested whether they have different types of azaleas or gladioli or things because I'm not really, as I've told you before, not interested in horticulture. I'm a botanist and I'm an historical botanist. I'm very interested, for instance, in the French. There were ten exploring expeditions, French ones, which came to Australia, and the repercussions of those in Europe are tremendous and that's the sort of interest I have, and the impression which the French took back, quite different to the English explorers.

Do you think the society should have more of a focus on the early plants and the preservation of early plants?

That would be nice but they have not got the expertise to do it. I think the society has got much more purpose than it had in the beginning—it did not have a purpose. The purpose is now to help to resurrect gardens, old gardens. Now, for instance, Helen Page has working bees working at Bishops Court, a garden which was established in 1853. I mean much more older gardens you will hardly find. You might find them in Western Australia but not many in Victoria. I'm not aware that there is any, yes, there might be one or two. I don't know which is the oldest garden in Melbourne — I don't think anybody has made any reconnaissance in that direction. I don't know, I'm very ignorant.

Going back to the early days of the society, after your trip to Tasmania do you have any particularly memorable memories of outings or meetings?

Yes, lots. But one very nice item was Professor Stearn. I don't know if you know him. He is a very famous botanist from England and he went to Adelaide, but a few days before that he came to Melbourne. I entertained him in my house and my husband was here and I enjoyed that particularly. Professor Stearn was, I think, partly paid for by the Garden History and by the Botanic Gardens to come out here and he gave several lectures. He died two years ago. I liked that outing particularly because we then went to Adelaide and Adelaide was a particularly nice meeting. And then there was a lovely meeting in Launceston where we were really shown very nice gardens.

Why was the Adelaide one particularly interesting? Was it mostly because of Professor Stearn?

Professor Stearn and I saw gardens which I hadn't seen before and we had some very good lectures, although I don't remember the lectures. One of them was Stearn but people who showed gardens knew their gardens and talked about them. It's no good looking at gardens when you don't know anything. You trust in the last minute piece of paper telling you about the garden — I like an owner to introduce a garden and say, 'I've done that' or, 'We have done that', or 'We have found that'. I think that's nice. I like talking to the owner because when I was

active — don't forget that I am now a spent force — I always liked to meet the people.

What was Professor Stearn a professor of?

He is one of the most famous botanists who ever was in England and he's written I don't know how many books and articles. He was very knowledgeable in the history of botany — he's wonderful. To talk about Professor Stearn would fill a whole day. He's very famous. He edited very famous books — I can't walk from here but I'll show you a lovely book on Hooker.

Were you on any committees in your time in the society?

Never, never. I've never been asked to do anything — only to give lectures.

Have you enjoyed giving lectures to the society?

No, I'm always terrified. But I don't mind. I mean I've talked about things I knew about. They just wanted to fill an evening probably and they asked me. And Helen even asked me last night if I would still talk and I said 'No, I'm not talking any more'.

Did you get a good response when you did talk?

Yes, very, very, very.

Well your contribution to the society would be through giving talks, wouldn't it? Would that be your main contribution?

Yes, I don't think I was any good in anything otherwise.

What do you think your main contributions to botany have been?

I worked first on penicillin and then I started to work on algae and I started the algae course in the Melbourne University — the marine course in Melbourne University. Since my retirement and I can't use a microscope any more I'm writing the history of botany — Australian history of botany — botany in Australia.

Going back to the society, do you think the society has fulfilled its main purpose?

It's doing a good purpose now, in the beginning it was an elitist pleasure, it had no mission, now Helen has given it a mission. She is very good. You see the Royal Botanic Gardens' entire object is to make money whereas as the Garden History Society's is to help gardens. Even with the money in the plant sale, they put it to a purpose.

Oh my friend was just here, oh he is still here, she's just gone back to the nest. Eatern Rosella, look how beautiful. I'm so pleased that they come.

Would you have any ideas how the society could improve from now on?

No, I don't. I can't go to Tasmania because I would like to go but they don't allow cars and I can't go in a bus — not that I can't go in a bus but I hold everybody up because I'm slow.

Do you think it should broaden its range of interests apart from just ...

No, I don't think so. No. My only worry is that if Helen is not able to do any more. I think Helen is actually sacrificing herself to a great extent that she is giving voluntarily so much work. But I wonder if there's anybody who will help her or would voluntarily give up working hours where she could earn some money. I think that that is a pity.

What do you think of the journal? Is that a....

That has improved tremendously since Nina Crone — tremendously.

In what ways has it improved?

Well, paper wise, the whole set-out, and also what she solicits in articles.

Do you think it's published often enough?

Yes, yes.

Going back to those very early tours you used to do, are there any gardens that stand out in your mind that you saw in the early days of the society?

It's so long that I've been. I enjoyed very much that first Tasmania trip and I was amazed — we toured from Hobart and then we re-embarked into some plane in the north, and I don't know if it was Launceston, and on midday we were entertained by the Archers. The Archers were very wealthy and they had so many cars and they entertained us in such a luscious way — one person tried to overdo the others. We had, that whole group, quail for lunch and oh, it was really an elitist society at the time.

You talk about it being elitist, are there or have they found any early gardens that do not belong to wealthy people?

Oh there are lots, lots.

And have those people become involved in the society, the ones with smaller gardens?

Oh yes, yes.

Can you give any examples? Have you been to any?

My memory of names is very bad but one, I talked with Helen about it last night, the people have died now and I went there myself because they wanted some help with their books and I went with our librarian there in my car — that's near Ballarat, I can't, my memory, and don't forget I'm ninety-four.¹

And what was special about that place?

It was a lovely old garden and they have working bees in there now — it was the original garden.

Do you know how old it was?

It was early last century.

And do these gardens, do they have plants, or did they have plants that aren't so common now?

There was a lovely garden near Ballarat. [Phone rings]

A garden near Ballarat and whether in these old gardens there are early plants that aren't so common now.

Yes there was, well there was lovely flowering floribunda, male floribunda, oh that was a lovely garden — that garden history outing to Ballarat was really the one where I learnt most and I enjoyed most because they had old gardens and I saw plants which one wouldn't see today and — oh, it was a lovely, lovely outing.

Why are those plants not so common now?

Now people have huge roses, pink roses, want lilac roses. You see what people do nowadays, they think if they have an old garden, plant modern plants. They shouldn't do that. They should have the cultivars which were in 1880 if they have an 1880s garden and in England they do this but here I've never seen it. I mean they plant the modern rose which is very wrong. That's one of the big criticisms that was made about some of the English television shows, that they showed modern cultivar roses in an old, I think it was a Jane Austen, garden — you can't do that.

¹ On 21/10/02 Sophie added that 'the Ballarat place I was talking about was people called Watkin and the place is called Belmont ...There's a garden group working there.'

Is that something you think the Garden History Society could encourage?

They should encourage to grow the old cultivars, they should grow the old apple trees and not put in modern roses.

Would that be very difficult?

No it wouldn't, but they shouldn't plant in those gardens modern varieties, they should try and find the old ones, and they can, because they are in Australia and if not you can import them from England.

Is there anything else you think the Garden History Society could become involved with that it hasn't in the past?

Well I think that making sure that old cultivars of the period, I mean if you have an 1853 garden and you plant modern roses it's quite incongruous in my opinion.

That's a matter of education isn't?

No, it's not a matter of education, it's a matter of pounds, shillings and pence.

In the future can you think of any other ways the Garden History Society could broaden its interests?

I think that cultivation of the old plants which belonged to the period is one of the prime things — it's a matter, as I said before, of money. But I think that the aim which Helen has put in is so wonderful. I think one of the aims should be that it should find other people and if other people aren't there, there should be some money made available that she gets more help, that she doesn't do everything herself. I don't want her to be sacrificed.

Have you noticed whether there is more of a bias towards interesting city gardens as opposed to country gardens?

I don't know, I couldn't judge.

The only other thing I'd like to ask is if you have any particular memories of anything that stand out in your relationship with the garden history society?

You see I'm now so old I can't drive anymore, I can't go, so I can't judge things — all I could say is that for the hours I've spent with them I was always very grateful and they were always very friendly, and the snootiness which I was frightened of in the beginning broke down when they realised who I was — I mean they didn't know at the time I was Dr Ducker, they just thought, I don't know, there was this old woman coming up to them — 'But we are travelling first class' — which annoyed me very much.

And that was the attitude, and that's not anymore. Helen has broken that down. Helen, in my opinion, should get a gold medal.

So, do you think it has a bright future with a large membership?

No. I don't, I don't, because it hasn't got a bright future. To begin with Helen can't go on like that, she's not any more the youngest and unless people step into her shoes and take it on.... Let her be ill! Now she goes to every working bee herself, there's nobody else who does it for her. There's nobody who says, 'Now you have a weekend off'. I mean I asked her go to a lecture with me, or something, I've forgotten what it was, 'Oh no', she said, 'I have arranged a working bee in Bishopscourt, I have to go.' That's impossible and she's running a one-man show. Everything falls back on Helen and I think that's why it hasn't got a bright future. She hasn't got anybody, if there would be three or four people, and there's nobody else. I know somebody who grows her some plants, well that's all, just because they have so many. There's nobody who says 'Helen, stay home', or 'Go to Timbuctoo'. That's why I don't think it has a bright future.

It needs younger people to be encouraged to come into it, doesn't it?

Yes, but they are all so selfish nowadays, not many people are so self-effacing as Helen is.

Second session

I want to talk now first about Alice Jeffery. Alice Jeffery was born on the 3rd May 1911 in Narambeen in New South Wales and her father was a grazier and he moved about a lot from the Riverina to north-eastern Victoria.² And Alice was educated at MLC — I don't think her life has been recorded — I think what I'm doing now is the first record of her life. Her mother died when she was 18 and when she was about 22, she went to Burnley. She worked for some time in a nursery in Riversdale Road, I think it was called the Silver Birch Nursery.³ And then

² On 21/10/02 Sophie added 'and then to north Tasmania.'

³ On 21/10/02 Sophie added 'She did work in a nursery but we're not certain that it is true that she worked in the Silver [Birch] Nursery — that is only from hearsay.'

she surfaced, so to say, to the general public, but then she worked at Como with Dame Elisabeth and she had a good friendship with Elisabeth. Kitty Ghan she knew for a long time. Kitty Ghan was born as Miss Blackburn [corrected to Mitchell] and married Mr Ghan. Her husband was killed at Alamein and she was a war widow.

Is that Ghan?

Ghan. And she had a very close friendship with Alice Jeffery. She also has a cousin here who's called Louise Hamilton, who's given me most of the information. Alice went to Burnley and then almost immediately afterwards, she then lived still in Hawthorn, started gardening, for instance at Melbourne Girls Grammar as a gardener and that's where she met Joan Anderson who was very important for the Garden History Society.⁴ And Alice lived by herself, had a wonderful garden, but it's very well described in its prime glory with Alice's plants in it, in an article in the Age which has been written by Anne Latreille. And if I were you I would also interview Anne Latreille, or are you doing that anyhow?

Yes, she's on the list.

Yes.

In the days of the garden history society why was Alice so important for the society?

Alice? Because of her knowledge.

Was she particularly interested in historic gardens?

No. She was essentially a plants woman. There are garden women and plants women — she was a plants woman. She would drool over a lovely plant. She was not very interested in the design, no.

So was she interested in the preservation of historic sorts of plants?

Yes.

Was she very busy in the society activities? Did she go to a lot of tours with the society, like Tasmania, for instance?

Yes, that's where I met her. She went always to Tasmania, she adored Tasmania because her father at one stage lived in Deloraine and for her Tasmania was the

best in the world, second best was the English countryside.

Was she instrumental in starting the society?

No. No.

So with her interest in plants, did she have a tendency to prefer any particular type of plant?

No. She had what many people would call 'green fingers' and if she saw a plant then she said 'Could I have a little bit?' She would take it home and then make cuttings and have it lovely — that's the sort of thing.

So she wasn't particularly worried about whether it was an exotic plant or a native plant?

No. She wasn't interested in native plants at all

So she was mostly interested in English plants?

In temperate plants. You call temperate plants English plants, I mean European plants — temperate plants.

There would be some from Africa too, wouldn't there?

Yes, certainly. She was just as much interested in temperate plants from Africa, which are from South Africa, as she was from northern Europe or England. But she put some people off because she immediately always said the Latin name.

You said you met her on your Tasmanian trip and you spent the rest of the time on that trip with Alice?

From then on I went always with Alice. She was very nice to be with, she was excellent company, we complemented, we had the same interest in looking at the plants and so on — is that what you are talking about?

Do you have any particular memories of trips with Alice?

Yes, both Kitty and I and Alice went to Canberra and it poured with rain the whole time, everybody thought it was ghastly. And I didn't mind and I thought one should take the good and the bad together. Well anyhow I remember that very well because we were sloshing through the mud and Kitty was so handicapped and she couldn't do it.

Do you remember any particular gardens in Canberra?

No.

Was there anything special about Alice's own garden?

Well it was just very beautifully laid out — you read the article by Anne Latreille, I'm not

⁴ On 21/10/02 Sophie corrected; 'At Burnley she met woman which is very important, Joan Anderson, which developed into a life-long friendship, and Joan Anderson and Alice worked jointly in many Victorian gardens.'

such a good garden describer. It was just very nice, there was a rose tucked here and a rose tucked there, lovely clematis. You have to get the description by an expert.

And did Alice stay a member of the society her whole life?

Till she died, yes. I don't know if they kept up her subscription when she was ailing the last year, I don't know, I have to find that out if you want to know.

Was she the sort of person who sometimes wrote articles for the journal?

No. No. She didn't. She did not. She did some broadcasts on 3DB with Louise Humphrey [corrected to Hammond on 21 October] — you know Louise Humphrey?

No.

Well you better find out. I didn't hear them — it was before my time, before I knew her and the scripts must still be available if you want to get them, and 3DB together with — what's 3DB called now?

3MP I think.

Did you ever write any articles for the journal?

Yes.

Can you remember what they were about?

I've written so many articles in my life that I don't know what I wrote about in the Garden History Society journal. You see I've been publishing profusely in the last 20 years.

And what can you tell me about Kitty Ghan?

I only know Kitty Ghan really as a friend of Alice. She was very handicapped, she had a stroke and had both legs in calipers. She had a lovely garden. She had a prefabricated, imported round house in Kew which is now demolished, and she had a lovely garden all around it and when she couldn't do that anymore Alice did it for her, all in the type, in the period of the house which was 1880s.

And was she an active member of the society?

She was too handicapped to be an active — what do you call an active member?

Well, going to lots of meetings or tours.

She always went on tours with Alice, yes.

And was she the sort of person who was particularly interested in historic gardens?

No.

Or plants, like Alice?

No. She just liked to have the company.

Why do you think Dame Elisabeth was such a good chairwoman in the beginning? And why do you think she was chosen?

Oh because of her garden associations, her knowledge and her — I mean there is a German proverb about that — she was patron of the Botanic Garden and she was just very outgoing.

When we went out for these weekends, it was always very well catered for and particularly in Tasmania when we went to private homes, they were just absolutely fantastic, the meals. It's one of the main memories I have, not as much of the garden as the wonderful meals and how beautifully they were done. They had little baskets where each one got one and I really thought it was done with love. And when we were in Canberra we each had a posy in several of the places when we got to the hotels — there were lovely posies in the rooms and they had been done by the local groups. I know I came into a room, and I think it might have been Ballarat, there were particularly nice posies and there were some plants in them which we can't grow in Melbourne because it's colder in Ballarat. We didn't know what the plants were and I know now it was a Verbena, a pink Verbena, and many of us took the cuttings out of those posies and took them back and grew them. And that was lovely — the intimacy of the early time of the Garden History Society was wonderful because people put their personal pride into making welcomes to people from Melbourne or Adelaide or Sydney and that was particularly good in the beginning of the society. It was the fellowship and the hospitality of the entertaining group — now it's sort of gone very much into collecting money or working at Bishops Court. At that time it was very refined hospitality. We went on a trip to the Western District with the Garden History Society and the quality of the hospitality and the quality of the garden inspection was first class. And it's lost it.

Was there anybody in the society who was particularly responsible for

It was the early members which vied, they competed with each other to make it nice. We stayed in rooms and in each room was a little posy and it said 'to Sophie' — I mean they had rooms allocated and then it said so-and-so had made the posy. It was lovely. One felt one was a personal guest.

Do you think maybe the members went a bit too far — competing against each other?

No.

It was very amicable? It was all very friendly still?

Yes. I know on one trip I took somebody with me from overseas and she said 'What a lovely society'.

Third session, 21 October 2002

I was also told that she [Alice] developed a life-long friendship with Grace Fraser, whom you will also interview won't you?

I don't know her. No.

And that they did the planting at the Hermitage. Have you been told about the Hermitage?

No, the school?

No. This is a place which is on the Acheron Highway where these women, these gardener women, apparently met. I didn't know really till last Saturday that they regularly all met there — Joan Anderson, Grace Fraser, Alice Jeffery and there. I mentioned somebody else before. Anyhow these were the nucleus of the Garden History Society. Apparently the Hermitage was quite important. I've never seen it. It is a guest house which is up on the Acheron Highway and these women planted that.

Alice was then asked apparently by Professor Turner to take on the gardening, some gardening, at Como, when Como was established. And it is there that she also met Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and then they became friends.

Kitty [Ghan] was a war widow and she started the War Widows' Guild and was not the receptionist but the person who organised it all till on the first Garden History outing she actually had that accident that she became — that stroke — became paralysed. It's not true that the garden [Alice's] which I have said here is now ruined by developers but a woman from the Lyceum Club has actually bought the garden and she's trying to resurrect it to the glory of Alice. But she has taken out both the trees which were already in the Burnets' garden and which were the main feature of the garden, so she can never restore it to it. The other thing I wanted to tell you is that I definitely think that if you wanted to know more about the Garden History, and much

more than I could tell you, is talk to somebody called Grace Fraser. Are you seeing her?

No.

And her telephone number is 97872705. You should really also speak to Flora McDonald but Flora McDonald is very hard to get hold of because she is totally blind. Coming back to Alice Jeffery One of the features of Alice Jeffery was that when we had outings with the Garden History Society everybody cottoned on to Alice Jeffery immediately wherever she went because everybody realised that Alice Jeffery knew all the plants and then asked her — there's only generally one or two leaders and so it was very opportune for everybody that they were able to have an additional person who could help. Alice — I'm coming back to Alice because after all we were really doing Alice last time and I think she was very important. Alice prided herself in knowing all the plants and she openly showed that she did that and when she talked on 3DB she talked then also about landscape design which I negated last time I spoke to you. Alice actually made landscape designs herself too. The other thing is that Kitty Ghan lived in the oldest house in Kew that was a round imported, fully imported, 1850s house. And that the house was bought by the Vasey Housing Trust, did I tell you that?

No.

And then she had that because she was the first war widow who joined War Widows, of the War Widows Trust. Do you want to have the birthday of Kitty? It's 2nd March 1912 and she was born in Melbourne. And she was mostly, I was told that by her cousin, interested in decorative art and she did a lot of weaving and embroidery and she also collected, which I didn't know, garden designs. That's the sort of thing, I haven't got anything more. I hope I have not brought you here under false pretences.

Oh no, no, but I'd like to ask you why you thought Flora McDonald was so important?

Because Flora McDonald was important a) because she was very friendly with Alice — I think she trained with Alice, I'm not quite certain, I think she did. And also she knew a lot and she used to work, don't let me get that wrong because my memory is now not anymore so good, I think she worked at Melbourne University — yes, she gardened

there and she worked at other important gardens.

And what about Grace, Fraser, was it?

Yes, Grace Fraser.

Why was she important?

Grace Fraser is important because she trained with Alice and Grace Fraser was very much a leading spirit at Como. And also there was a very important garden designer in Melbourne called John Stephens — have you heard of him?

No.

And he worked with her and they — he still lives up in the Dandenongs. He should really be interviewed at some stage. And they always harp back to Grace Fraser's idea — Grace planted that or.... so Grace Fraser is for them sort of the oracle.

And she was busy in the society? Do you remember her going on various trips?

Never. Only once I met her and that had nothing to... yes, yes, I met her once on a trip. Yes.

So she was a member?

Yes.

And Flora McDonald was a member for quite a while?

I remember her once. Once. Once.

Anyway once she was blind it would have been very difficult to be an active member, wouldn't it?

Mn. But she recognised me immediately because of my accent.

Yes.

Now one person I haven't heard much about from, of, from anyone, is Joan Law-Smith.

Did you know her well?

What do you really want to know about her?

Oh, just what she did for the society?

Wasn't she president for a while?

Yes. Why? Not the hands on like was she president?

She took over from Dame Elisabeth.

Alice Jeffery wanted it [the society] because she went twice to England to do the English garden tours, once organised from England and once organised from here and then she said we must have something like that here.

The treatment of their homesickness — that's why they imported here all these terrible beasts like rabbits and blackbirds because they got them in here for homesickness, they wanted to hear a blackbird and then we have got the menace

— I mean when Harvey was here in 1853 in the period I'm working, they had huge cherry orchards down at the Yarra, where the Yarra bend is now, where we couldn't grow a cherry tree now if we tried because we have got all this European vermin here. Why have we got it? Because people were homesick for rabbits, for blackbirds, for sparrows and brought them here. And that's the same, that's why they wanted English gardens. I think it's absolutely time that we liberated ourselves from the attachment to European, I mean I don't come from England but I come from the same temperate climate — I mean essentially it's the same sort of vegetation — not much different between England, and you call it English, I call it European because it's the same vegetation. It's only until it becomes Mediterranean — we must just liberate ourselves and see we are now in Australia. I think it's very important that even the Garden History Society doesn't veer back only to the English garden or to the European garden. It's Australia and we have a history which is now 150 or 200 years old. We must go back to the early Australian gardens. I think that's very important.

Are there any early Australian sort of gardens? With Australian plants?

Very much so. I mean look at what, what do think they did in London, I say in Sydney, when they first came? Wonderful.

With native plants?

No, not native plants, they brought back their own plants but it is important what they did bring and how much they did use the environment — there is a book on early Australian gardens, 'Australian in Australian' underlined (sic), no we must, we must, we must not look only back to one particular type of garden, that is the English garden, we must look back to all the roots because Australia is now a multi-nation, I don't like multi-cultural, but I mean there are many nations here and we must look at all of them, I think, otherwise we'll never become uniform as really Australians — I find that very important.

So when you talk about an early Australian garden, you still mean one with European plants?

Yes, yes, because they only did that. They didn't even know how to transplant the Australian plants. You see, they weren't

clever enough to say, "Look, this is native ground, let's grow a house in it, in this, and have that as a garden". They didn't accept it because they were so homesick. Look at Governor Latrobe's cottage — I mean — how he put himself out and then planted all European plants. You call them English, I call them European because he planted European plants. And when the American consul came he planted all American trees around him.

Yes, it's natural isn't it, I s'pose.

So although you are talking about early Australian gardens, the only Australian aspect about it is maybe the design a bit or? Was the design, could you call that Australian in early, some of the early gardens?

Well some of them, if they were to leave some Australian plants, I mean they accepted eucalypts pretty smartly because they knew that they needed them as a backdrop. Look how beautiful the alley, in Elisabeth Murdoch's drive, is — I mean how clever. She made use of the Australian environment and I think the first thing my husband did was that he said we had to have a centre tree and he wanted to plant an oak and I said "No, we don't plant an oak tree, we are going to plant a gum tree". This rounds my garden off, it gives me an Australian background and I thought it was necessary.

It's beautiful. What sort of gum tree is it?

It's the Armidale gum tree. I selected it but I was foolish not to take one which is indigenous here but it so happened that a friend of mine had that growing in a little tube and he gave it to me. My husband planted it '67. Up 'til then, the fence was further forward, that was sewer land but which we incorporated now, I think because they said, doesn't matter where the sign is, it's still sewer behind there.

Right.

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