

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
SYDNEY AND NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH



INTERVIEWEE:	MARY ELIZABETH DOUGAN (NEE COLES)
INTERVIEWER:	ROSLYN BURGE
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	6 & 21 SEPTEMBER 2006
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	AT HER HOME AT WARRINA MOWLL VILLAGE, CASTLE HILL
NUMBER OF TAPES:	1 [66 MINS]
RESTRICTIONS ON USE:	NIL
TRANSCRIBER:	ROSLYN BURGE
QUOTATIONS / EXTRACTS:	EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD.

Summary:

It should be noted at the outset that Mary Dougan left her beautiful garden in Beecroft eighteen years before the time of interview - in 1988, at the age of 86. She has lived at Warrina Village (within the Mowll Village complex at Castle Hill) ever since.

Mrs Dougan was 104 years of age when interviewed. Only a very tiny woman, she walked and moved with surprising vigour. She also spoke with vigour but her voice can be heard to tire over time, particularly when she was frustrated by her own memory struggling to recall events decades ago.

Mary remembered her childhood at Maclean and briefly describes the environment. Her grandfather influenced her greatly in her love of plants and gardens. He had been gored by a bull and spent much time at the house. His instruction on how to graft plants left a great impression and Mary credited him with this twice in the interview.

Mary came to Sydney to study at Fort Street High School, but that ambition was thwarted. Mary talks about her efforts to dig a garden in the front yard of the house she was boarding at – not well received by the householder!

Mary met her husband when bushwalking in the Burragorang Valley and their first home was a flat in Kirribilli. During wartime Mary and her daughter Jennifer lived with neighbours in Beecroft and after her husband returned from war they bought a block of land and built the house.

Mary talks briefly about Dr Alan North, for whom she worked, who had a garden on the Blue Mountains and they became great friends.

Bulbs were a great love for Mary and she was also an avid collector of pots. She corresponded with garden clubs overseas, bought many seeds and bulbs from overseas by mail. She visited England, the Chelsea Flower Show and many great gardens.

With some prompting by her daughter Mary remembered a number of aspects of living at Beecroft and her garden at 15 Kirkham Street.

Mary gradually grew tired and had difficulty remembering.

* * * * *

Jennifer Lord, Mary's daughter, was present at all times during the interviews and assisted with questions and prompts for Mrs Dougan.

Mrs Pam Fowell of the Beecroft Garden Club generously provided access to the Club's newsletters.

This interview is being conducted as part of the Australian Garden History Society's oral history project. It's an interview with Mrs Mary Dougan at her home at Warrina, Mowll Village [Castle Hill], on 6 September 2006.

[The interview also continued on 21 September]

The interviewer is Roslyn Burge.

Tape 1, Side A

Mary, thank you very much for participating in this project today.

Not at all, I'm very happy to do so.

Well thank you. I wonder for the tape if you could give me your full name please

Mary Elizabeth Dougan – did you want my maiden name?

Yes please.

I was Mary Elizabeth Coles

And where were you born Mary?

I was born in the little country town on the Clarence River, called Maclean. It was formerly called Rocky Ridge¹ - but it sounded a bit unwieldy so the powers that be got together and they changed the name to Maclean. Chiefly I think that was called Maclean because of the fact that so many Scottish migrants were coming out and a lot of the Scottish people settled. You see we had a beautiful – a most beautiful river – the Clarence River – a most beautiful river, in front of where I lived. I think it was about a mile wide.

You were talking about the wide river outside your house.

Yes, and there were fishermen who had nets ... have you seen the frames that fishermen keep – frames, and they pull their net onto it. Well they were next door – it was down a hill. My grandfather was a great gardener in his day. I think he worked in some of the very notable gardens in England, particularly in a little place called Nymeth Rowling. It was in Devonshire.

Do you know any of the gardens that he worked in?

No, I can't remember.

What was his name Mary?

Harris, William Harris.

So that was your mother's father.

¹ Mrs Dougan's daughter, Jennifer Lord, suggests Mary may have been thinking of Beecroft at the same time. Beecroft was originally known as Poverty Ridge.

Yes

And what was your father's name?

George Coles.

Is he from the Maclean area.

No he had a property out in the ... we didn't see very much of him actually. He had a property up in a little place called Ramorney. At the beginnings, you know how a river begins, yes – well at the beginning of the river...

The Clarence River?

Yes, a very beautiful river. The fishermen would go out at night and they would come home with baskets absolutely packed with fish and it never seemed to make any difference much to the number of fish still in the river.

What did your father do?

He was a farmer.

What sort of farmer?

Oh just an ordinary old farmer. But we didn't live up where he was because my mother had to look after her father who was a cripple. He had been horned by a bull, unhappily for the poor old boy because he taught me all I knew about gardening – about grafting and all the rest of it.

47 *Mary, did you have any brothers or sisters?*

One sister only.

Younger or older.

No, two sisters, but the youngest one died in .. when she was quite a small baby. My other sister was married.

Where did you go to school?

I went to school in the ordinary school at Maclean. And then my aunt – I had an aunt living in Kensington in England² – and she wanted me to go to Fort Street [School]. She lived at Kensington and we decided it was too far for me to travel because on one occasion the Wills factory was at the end of the ... and there was a man on the bus or the train or whatever it was and he followed me. And he tripped me. He was about to ...

Jennifer is suggesting rape.

He was going to rape me. That's the word. And fortunately he tripped me and went like this to my leg and I fell. But fortunately for me I fell where there was a lot of sand so I picked up a handful of sand and threw ... I can't bear to think what I did to him ... I threw it into his eyes and he couldn't see of course. And then I ran! I ran – it was then end this section and I ran home to the aunt's place where I lived. She came to the conclusion that it was a bit too dicey having me ... too much of a

² Misspoke – means Kensington, the Sydney suburb

responsibility having me where things like that could so readily happen to me. So I was then sent to Sydney and stayed with a friend of my mother's at Petersham.

That shows you have a great deal of self-control and survival.

Oh yes ... I was the most fortunate thing ... Oh the good Lord looked after me. I never cease to thank God for that. He certainly looked after me.

79 *How did you travel from Maclean to Sydney?*

In those days they used to have big passenger boats that used to come up into the river and I was given in charge of the Captain and my aunt would pick me up at the end of the line but this man came along and he watched me all the while. And he came up and he tripped me with the .. certainly his object was quite ... visible.

No way – and so I threw this sand and I ran and ran and ran home to my aunt's. Well my aunt then decided she had only just had word that her only son had been killed at Gallipoli and she was the sort of woman that would go into hysterics. Ohhhhh!

Talk about a mix up. I had the most mixed up life I could possibly tell you and I was sent to Sydney to stay with a friend and the friend's brother went into the army and they were setting off the next day. Setting off to go to the front. And I can remember being on the wharf and all the women – I was ashamed of them really – they were yelling and screaming, you know, with the distress, I know how they felt. I did too, but I never do that.

Have you always been so self-controlled?

I've tried to ... well life has made me that I've had to be. It was either that or not survive. So there we are. It was terribly mixed up, I couldn't begin to tell you.

Well it sounds most interesting. When you came to Sydney did you go to Fort Street?

No – it was too far away. I went instead to Crown Street which was the next best school to Fort Street.

Did you do well at school?

I only had twelve months. I left and I had a short ... I don't know how many weeks tuition, of shorthand and typing. I had to get a job.

113 *Where was your first job?*

Now I'm trying to think where my first job was – I've forgotten. They were jobs that the people who had the jobs go on holidays and you'd just go on in and take their places for the person who really worked there was given holiday. So there we are.

I understand you knew Lord Kitchener.

Eh?

You worked with Lord Kitchener.

No I did not. Who said that?

Your daughter, Jennifer. Kitch – you were lent to him?

Oh yes, I was lent to him. I was lent to a lot of the doctors. In Sydney there's a little short street called Phillip Street. I had to do a bit of study and I had to go for an exam ... you couldn't just go and be employed by the government, you had to pass an exam which I did fortunately. I did that.

What was it Jennifer said that reminded me of something?

Kitch – you were lent to Kitch – you went to his holiday home in Lake Illawarra?

Oh, at Seven Mile Beach, yes that's right. We went down there. He had a holiday home there and he and his wife became more like friends to me and they took me with them to their holiday home down at Seven Mile Beach. Wonderful stretch of beach that was.

140 *And in later years you holidayed down there yourself? Austinmeer – you went there later in life.*

Yes, that's right.

Mary – coming back to your work. You later worked in Macquarie Street I understand.

Yes I did. I was ... oh I had such a mixed up lot of jobs. You see, you go and you first of all you have to go and be taught shorthand and typing and all that. Then you go and you try and find yourself a job. You go ... What I did – I'd go to such a lot of different jobs where the person who had the job would go on holidays. I used to go to some of the judges and some of the doctors – prominent people I worked with temporarily.

I had a most interesting life actually that way and every department would have somebody at the head of it who'd come from ... *what is the word I want* ... I was the person who went along. Their secretaries wanted to go on holidays and the people who employed them would be prominent judges and doctors and I was the person who would go along and help out.

And you worked for Dr North I understand

Oh yes, Dr Alan North. I worked then with three doctors. Doctors North, Rogers and Claffey. Three eye doctors.

Ophthalmologists?

Ophthalmologists – yes that's the word slipping me. And I worked for them. Most interesting job. I loved it.

175 *What did you like about it?*

Just I like people and meeting people and I'd go and ... some of the people would be really scared at the thought of coming to doctors and I sometimes used to just come along and chat with them and say that to just calm them down a wee bit and it was very interesting.

And Macquarie Street must have been an interesting street in those days?

Oh, still is. The building that I was working in was later pulled down and only a small framework to show where it was and where the first Government House was – they had to just leave a framework. Where it was they had a great high sheet of something all round it - digging and so on. I couldn't see. So one of the men came along and he made a hole further down so that I could see in.

Because you're only quite little. How tall are you Mary?

Oh I'm not quite 5 feet. (laughter)

What was the name of the building that was torn down – where you worked?

Yes what was it ... do you know, it's slipped my mind.

Jennifer – she worked in Beanbah

If you wanted to go to the toot you had to go to the eighth floor – too bad if you didn't get there in time.

Mary where were you living during this time. You were boarding I understand.

- 203 Oh I boarded with three other girls. We had a flat at Kirribilli. Other girls did other things but I was the one who worked in the government and of course I was off earlier than the others so I, as a rule, used to set the table and get the vegetables done and all that sort of thing. It was quite ... I had quite a mixed up life.

And you met your husband at this time.

Two – or was it three – four of us - four girls, we all went down to Burragorang Valley and unhappily it's now all under water but it was *just like paradise*. You've no idea how beautiful it was. I don't think you'd find a more beautiful place in the whole of Australia. There were beautiful birds and little animals and things there. All, all, all went. It was – I know I wept.

Were you bushwalking?

I used to bushwalk, yes.

Did you belong to any of the bushwalking clubs?

No, I don't think I did. ... I don't know my memory's a bit sad.

What about your husband Mary, how did you meet him?

Oh I happened to go to Burragorang, which he thought he owned.

Laughter He was furious that these women came down and think ... but

he went home, he went home – he went home and got another week's holiday and came back to get to know me and so on. Oh! Then it went on for quite a long time. We went together for a long, long time before we decided to get married. You couldn't just do what people do these days, just live together and hope for the best. I wouldn't have done it anyhow.

So you were both camping in Burragorang at the same time.

Yes, and what was your husband's name, Mary

Robert Dougan

What sort of work did he do?

He was a bank manager. He was very young to be a bank manager and then of course he went to the war. He enlisted and went to the war and they went to

Mary one important thing I'd forgotten to ask you was your date of birth?

31 July 1902. **I am now 104.** *Laughter*

You say that with great vigour. (laughter) That's a great age too.

Yes. I don't know why the good Lord let me live so long. I'm not very important.

Let's go back to your husband, Mary. When you married – where did you first live.

Wait a minute and I think – oh, I think we had a flat somewhere ... I know, at Kirribilli. We lived at Kirribilli.

Did you have a garden there?

No not much because I was working most of the time.

Where was your first garden?

Ooooh. I remember. I was living with some people and I decided I'd have a garden and I started to dig the ground in front of the house and *they were not amused*. I got into trouble. (laughter) Oh ... I'm looking back on things now it seems as though I've just been put into another ... another century or something.

Well I think you have. So when you started that first garden what did you want to plant?

Oh I hadn't got that far!

Where was your own first garden when you were allowed to plant it?

When we had a little house – a little cottage built. And it at ... gosh, where was it. Kirribilli?

You were telling me –you'd just begun to tell me about your first garden – your first real garden.

Where was it ?

You told me a bit about digging when you were in the boarding house...
Yes - and I was digging along in front of the house oh the woman who owned the place where I lived. She came out and she took me to task
But then you got married to Robert – do you remember when you got married?

285 Yes! I got married on 30 July

No – 8 October - Jennifer's saying you got married on 8 October 1930.

Long long time. I'm a pretty ancient old girl.

But you're quite a determined old girl I think too!

I have had to be ... yes – golly I have had to be. Now then, where were we. Jennifer just mentioned you were married at Haberfield That's right, St David's Church.

Were you living near there?

I was living at Granville with my very dear friend - I stayed with her parents but she died, unhappily, so I went with three other girls to Burragorang Valley. It was like a place of paradise. Most beautiful, beautiful place.

Where did you go after you got married?

Went to Kirribilli. We got a flat at Kirribilli. I think that's what we did.

Where was your first home?

We built a little house I think.

Was that the house at Beecroft.

Where was it ... I'm trying to think ... it was so long ago.

Beecroft – Jennifer's over here suggesting from the wings it was at Beecroft.

Yes. Yes, I remember we were going for a drive somewhere and we came across this lovely little place called Beecroft and I said this is where I'd like to live. And we did live there too.

When did you move there Mary – before the second world war?

I can't remember ... I wish I could remember it all.

What's important more is the lovely garden that you built there.

Did I? Oh yes, the people who bought my cottage – they were not allowed to take anything out of the garden.

Is that right?

They put a Heritage Order on my garden. My very big garden. That's all I know.

How did you feel about the restriction on them taking plants - garden

Well – because I had belonged to a lot – two or three overseas seeds ... seed clubs – I'd have their books with hundreds of different seeds but I

couldn't ask for any particular one that would be likely to become weeds in our country.

So I had to be most particular about that and I'd get them with great excitement when I'd get these seeds then I had to submit them to be checked – to see if I could grow them and many of them ... some of them I had to destroy. Others I used to grow.

What were your favourites?

Oh, now you're asking me something. Bulbs were the things that I loved best of all. I grew all sorts of bulbs.

How did your interest in bulbs begin?

I don't know. Just did! Years and years and years. I don't know how I first became involved in bulbs. But I did.

What sort of bulbs Mary?

Any bulbs! Any bulbs at all! You see Australia hasn't got wait a minute (Mary points out a print of *Calestema*) ... rare Australian bulbs. Because Australia didn't grow ... didn't have many native bulbs at all but I happened to see that in a shop window.

It was as it is now, all framed and everything, and I have planned when I died to give it to the Botanic Gardens. To have in there because it's not very much known, I think. It is thought that that particular bulb is now extinct. They'd have to find that out.

380 *Mary I understand you went to the Horticultural School for a time. Did you feel it was important to be educated about gardens and plants.*

Oh yes! I wanted to know more about the plants that I used to get from seed lists. People used to send me seed lists from overseas. The most wonderful ... there was one little country (I've forgotten it's name now) I happened to stay the night with some friends in this little place and ...

So you exchanged seeds as well – with other countries, with England?

Oh yes, yes, you did.

You must have built up some extensive friendships during that time?

I did!

Do you remember anyone standing out.

Of course the war interfered ... you've got me scratching my memory.

I hear you made a trip to England and you went to the Chelsea Flower Show.

Yes! Actually there was a world exhibition was on and the Minister – see every department (I worked in the Department of Labour and Industry) – every government department had a ... (now wait a minute until I get myself straightened out, I can't remember)

Wasn't that before you were married. Did you continue to work after you got married?

Yes I did after a while. ... My husband went to the war. He was ...- his picture's over there. He was a very good looking man. I often wonder why he bothered with me! I was never much. However ...

So he came back from the war. Did you work through the war

I was secretary to the under secretary

That was before your marriage Mum – (Jennifer)

Can we go back to your garden at Beecroft and your plants and your bulbs.

Jennifer might remember.

Do you remember the big trees that you planted?

Jennifer – we lived in the house next door called Old Ways, during the war. Remember we lived next door. We lived in the house Old Ways with the Badgery Parkers.

Yes,

And uncle Ed and Dad went off to the war. And when the war was over you and dad bought one of their blocks of land (next door) and you built in 1948 – you built the house. But before that - before we went to live with the Badgery Parkers you lived with the Tierneys on the other side. You lived in the Tierneys' house and that's where you grew peanuts and things like that, in the backyard of Tierneys.

Yes. Peanuts, I did too. (laughter)

That must have been very unusual at that time?

Then we moved in with Badgery Parkers and we lived in Old Ways – very big old house, used to be a boarding school for boys.

What street is that?

Kirkham Street, Beecroft.

(Jennifer) We had four and a half acres with an orchard and we minded animals, all the horses and things for farmers and then you built next door – you built in number 15 Kirkham Street. Remember? Took two years to build.

Yes it did – the war intervened.

And building materials were in short supply. And then you started your garden.

Did we?

Yes.

What was the block like – was it a flat block. Are we confusing you?

No I think it is a tall ask to ask you to go back all that way. But Mary, somewhere I read that you called it 'Poverty Ridge'?

Because the soil was so poor, it was shockingly poor soil and that's why they called it *Poverty Ridge*.

Did you have to work much with the soil to get it to be a garden.

Yes.

What did you do?

Laughter – A lot of hard work!

Jennifer – she used to chase the milkman and the baker up the road, following their horse. Do you remember doing that.

Oh, you're telling things.

Jennifer - There was a man in Beecroft with a horse and cart who cleaned the gutters and he had a horse too! Lot of horse manure went into the garden.

Dear oh dear.

Jennifer - And what about the time the Barwick's pulled up with their chauffeur driven car and pulled out a bag of elephant manure from the zoo!

Jennifer I can't hear what you're saying!

Jennifer - Remember the elephant poo they bought you – I think it was them, or it might have been the Fergusons? They bought you a big bag of elephant poo from the zoo

Can you tell me about your garden in Beecroft – what sort of plants you had in it?

Ohhh ... I had mostly bulbs ... I got from overseas.

What sort of bulbs in particular?

Oh, any that I had to put the list in to make sure it wasn't something that became a nuisance. You don't bring in plants and bulbs ... that will be a nuisance.

You must have had to spend some time studying your plants – did you enjoy the studying part of it?

Yes

Did you have any particular favourite people you enjoyed corresponding with in your lifetime of gardening?

No ... *wish I could remember*

What were some of the things you enjoyed doing in your garden?

I'm afraid I'm a bit hopeless!

...

Jennifer - Porch at Beecroft – what happened when you went down the step onto the pavement (sandstone crazy paving) – what was between the back porch and the fishpond.

Tape 1 Side 2

Pots!

Jennifer – what was growing around the fishpond – you had a weeping something that went over the edge of the pond.

I can't remember. I can't remember!

*Jennifer – remember the pine tree behind the fishpond and those wretched kids across the road kicked the football into your garden. They kicked it into the pine tree and they couldn't find it but you knew it was there so forever after you called it *pinus ballii**

Oh wasn't I nasty!

So Mary you have a lovely garden here at Warrina Village - what sort of things have you put in your garden here?

Lot of daisies –

Jennifer – things have changed over 18 years.

Jennifer – one of the things you loved was your clematis, all your clematis. Mary Dougan azalea

You have an azalea named for you Mary?

Apparently!

Jennifer – Mr Neale used to have a nursery and named Mary Dougan – he had a nursery at West Pennant Hills – Neale's Nursery, by the Koala Farm.

How did you know Mr Neale. The nurseryman.

Jennifer - He had a nursery like Hazelwoods. He's the one that developed your azalea and called it Mary Dougan.

Did he, oh that was nice of him.

Laughter

Tell me – what a bout the Beecroft Garden Club, do you remember going to some of their events. Oh yes, I was a foundation member. I spoke to Pam Fowell – some of the articles you wrote in the Garden Club newsletter – Tussie Mussie.

Garden Club of Australia – article by Mary Dougan

Jennifer – we had a Dr Joyce Vickery – a personal great friend ... she solved the Graham Thorne murder because of her work with grass seeds.

Did you enjoy writing?

Yes I did. As a matter of fact I was ... *trying to think of what happened.*

Discussion between Jennifer and her mother about Jim and Richard Prentice's garden at Mt Wilson, Cherry Cottage.

Do you remember it Mary?

Oh yes, huge garden – I contributed so much towards it.

Jennifer – she did!

What sort of things?

Bulbs, yes, mostly bulbs.

You did a lot of grafting work as well ...

My grandfather taught me how to graft – my dear old grandfather. He used to sit on the verandah of our house all day because he'd been horned by a bull.

It's tiring to take me back to a time I can't remember.

It's a bit of a tall order isn't it. I'm sorry to be pushing you with all these questions

No, don't worry about that you ask me what you like.

What sort of plants did you particularly like to graft – fruit trees?

BULBS!

No grafting ...

All sorts

You gave a lot of them away – you've probably given half of Beecroft plants

Yes, I probably have. Because every meeting we would take something that somebody would want. It was a lovely idea actually, to be so generous.

Did you ever think of doing indoor pursuits – knitting, sewing, those sorts of pursuits?

Oh yes I did all those sorts of things. As a matter of fact, I got Jennifer to bring me knitting needles and things and I was going to try and do something, but it was no good, I couldn't.

110 *general chat*

The man who bought the place, he hadn't a clue about gardening. But he learned and he got quite enthusiastic. I don't think he used to love showing the garden – how he had looked after it.

Did you put the Heritage Order on?

No they (Hornsby Council) did it.

Discussion of what the property looked like before Mary and her husband built the house.

Jennifer – it was stoney ...

Marie Byles was a great character – what was so famous about her?

Jennifer – Mum, think about the backyard at Beecroft – that huge crab apple – lovely big huge crab apple, biggest crab apple we’ve ever seen.

I can’t remember dear.

Jennifer – and why did it grow so big?

Because it liked being there I spose (laughter).

Jennifer – oh there’s another reason. Because Marcus Aurelius is buried underneath it – the dog.

Yes, our favourite dog. He was called Marcus Aurelius after a famous ... he used to sit in the middle of the road and everyone coming along learnt to go round him.

- Garden was protected by the bush a lot.
- Nissa tree
- People overseas – brief discussion of seed list. Travel to overseas gardens.
- Chelsea Flower Show – sat beside huge man – Lord Abercrombie.
- Butchard Gardens in Canada
- Zeny Edwards – she was the loveliest person

199 END OF INTERVIEW