Australian Garden History Society

Oral History Programme 2010
(continuing a project begun in 2002)

This interview is one of a series of interviews being conducted throughout Australia with early members of the Australian Garden History Society. A number of interviews were conducted in 2002/2003 but the project was not completed. A second round of interviews was conducted in 2010. The Australian Garden History Society was formed in 1980 and these interviews will play a crucial part in recording the formation and early days of the Society. The Australian Garden History Society is funding these interviews. Copies of the interviews will be lodged in the State Library of Victoria, and where appropriate another State Library or the National Library of Australia. The master copy will be retained at the office of the Australian Garden History Society.

This interview with Mr Victor Crittenden, OAM, former President of the ACT, Monaro and Riverina Branch, based in Canberra, was conducted by Roslyn Burge on Wednesday, 20th October 2010 at Mr Crittenden's home in Canberra

Restrictions The word "actually" is used liberally in the interview. This word has been selectively edited from the transcript of interview. All use of any written quotes or any audio extracts of this interview must follow the text in the transcript – deleting the word "Actually" unless it is used in the written transcript.

Technical details:
Length: 3 hours 45 minutes
Equipment: Edirol R09HR with two Rode NT3 external microphones
Recording: WAV - 16:44 KHBZ

Victor, thank you for your time this morning for the Society's Oral History Project. If we could just start with some brief biographical details. If you could give me your full name and your date of birth.

Well, my full name is Victor Crittenden, only one Christian name, and I was born on the 27th of April 1925 in Hamilton, a suburb of Newcastle.

Were your parents living there at the time?

Yes. My parents were living there at the time. They came from Maitland, but my father was working in Newcastle and when they married, they moved from Maitland to Newcastle and that's where my older brother was born and I was born two years later after him. Actually, he died at the age of five when we were still living in Newcastle. He died of meningitis. My mother, I don't think, ever really recovered from that. He was, of course— I shouldn't say it, but he was the favourite son. Well, I was only a two year old when he died, but he was— he was named after my uncle, my father's brother, who was killed in the First World War. My father was injured seriously in the First World War. He was paralysed from the waist down for two years after he was buried alive in France. The uncle that was killed was killed in the Battle of Gaza— the Battle of Bathsheba actually— and he's buried in Gaza at the— well, still there. I mean, it's a war cemetery there. So he was my father's— I suppose, almost a father figure for my father. He was somewhat older than my father, and his father, my grandfather, was not home very often. He was a bullock driver and so he was not home very much and so the older brother took over the father sort of role, and so when my brother was born, he was named after the father— the brother that was killed in the Middle East. I would say he was fighting with Lawrence of Arabia.

You're right about the impact of the death of a child on the family and how that ricochets through a family.

Yes. Well, my mother was very ill afterwards for quite some time and it wasn't until six years later that she had another child, a daughter, that was my sister. So we grew up as two children in

the family, that was all, and we were very close. We used to play together and spent a lot of time with each other and so she— well, even when she married we still remained very close and I used to spend every Christmas with her and her husband and her children. They lived in Bathurst. Well, as children we both had our own gardens in every house we moved to.

Why did you move so often?

Well, it was a matter of not having large sums of money. It was mainly during the depression and father— my father lost his job in Newcastle in the depression and lost all his money. He'd invested his money in a shirt factory in Newcastle. They had difficulty paying back the loans of the bank, so the bank took over the business. Didn't— no compensation at all. Didn't get a thing and so we lived for a while on the block of— well, the block of land he'd bought— my father had bought to build a house— was sold so that we had some money to live on. And my mother always complained that she had to sell her piano so that they could have food to eat— so that we could eat. And finally he got a job up in the country and we moved up to Quirindi, which is up in the northern tablelands, up south of Tamworth.

What was he doing there?

He was a shopkeeper. He used to— well, he worked in a shop and was in charge of— usually in charge of a menswear department. That was what he did in Newcastle, and when he went to Quirindi, he took over the menswear department in the department store in Quirindi. There he did a very good job on it. And we lived there then for three years. I went to school. I was just six years old when I went to— when we went to— not went to Queensland— when we went to Quirindi and then I started school in Quirindi and spent three years there. And then mother started a garden, she was a keen gardener, and I had a garden also in Quirindi and that was where I first learnt how to grow things from cuttings.

What sort of things did you grow?

Mother always loved roses and she had along the front fence of the house a lot of polyanthus roses and when they were all pruned, I pinched off with some of the prunings and put them in my garden and they all grew.

Do you still grow roses today?

I still have some roses, yes, yes, but mostly shrub roses, the old-fashioned roses, which I have read about, liked the stories about the early roses. So my roses are basically— they all need, very badly, need attention at the moment, but being shrub roses they don't have to be pruned in quite the same way. So I still have some roses.

When we spoke on the telephone, Victor, you mentioned too that you'd bought bulbs.

Oh, yes, yes. That was when we were living in Ashbury. We did finally, when we settled in in Sydney, we did finally— bought a house in Sydney in Ashbury, which is just near — well, it's halfway between Ashfield and Canterbury and we always claimed that's why it was called Ashbury. They took the "Ash" from Ashfield and the "bury" from Canterbury, called it Ashbury. It was a suburb that was built in the 1920s, late 1920s, so it was a bungalow suburb, and we bought a house there. Well, we lived there in a rented house for a year or two and then bought a house in Ashbury. That was just before the Second World War actually. And mother was then able to enjoy herself buying all sorts of roses and putting them all over the garden.

Was there a garden in the house when you went there?

A sort of garden, but it wasn't very much actually. It was a buffalo lawn in the front and a couple of little garden beds, and nothing much in the back except some fruit trees, mainly peach trees and a nectarine tree. Oh, and a large— oh, what sort of tree was it? Oh, I can't think what it was, but we cut that one down.[1] But there was also a Queensland wattle tree, which was a lovely tree, in the back garden. It's the only one I've ever seen. So those were— that was all there was really in the house— in the garden at the time.

But we established a large vegetable garden in the back which was run by mother during the war, of course, father was away in the Army, and I had— it was a corner block and I had the job of mowing the grass.

You say that with a note of disdain.

Yes. I didn't enjoy pushing a mower around the footpath area of the garden. It was mainly paspalum.

And you went to Homebush Boys (School) from there?

Yes, yes. Well, when we moved to Sydney we stayed with my aunt who lived in Hurlstone Park. Don't know if you know where Hurlstone Park is, but it's .....

I know where it is.

Near Summer Hill, yes. She lived in Hurlstone Park and we stayed with her when we first went

[1] Pepper tree

to Sydney because father didn't have a job at that time, and her daughter, Bobby, a little girl— she was always called Bobby— used to go to Canterbury Girls School and so when we were staying with Aunt Sibyl I was taken off to the same school. It was two (primary) schools, a girls school and a boys school side by side, at Canterbury, and so I was enrolled in the boys school in Canterbury and that's where I continued to go to school, even when we moved to Summer Hill. I used to walk— it was about a mile and a half — to school each morning. And so I stayed at Canterbury and then when we moved from Summer Hill to Ashbury, which is the other side of Hurlstone Park near Canterbury, I still went to Canterbury Boys School, primary school, in, oh, the 1930s and when I completed my schooling there, I was not considered good enough to go to Canterbury High School or Fort Street High School, which was a specialist school in those days, still is I think. And because I'd had a rather broken primary school, I hadn't done particularly well in my final year at Canterbury Boys School so they sent me off to Homebush, which was quite a trip.

Every day I had to walk up to the bus, which I suppose was only about a quarter of a mile, and then I caught the bus to Ashfield and then I caught the train from Ashfield to Homebush and walked from Homebush Station another half a mile or more up to the school. So that was what I did each day. I did fairly well at Homebush and finally sat for the Intermediate Certificate, got a few As and a few Bs and then that was sufficient to take me then to Canterbury.

They considered I was good enough then, of course, to go to Canterbury to go on and do the Leaving Certificate, as it was called in those days, but I didn't finish actually. I left school after fourth year and went to work as my father was having problems with his war injuries and I decided that it was up to me to do something. So I went to work in a warehouse in Sydney, a good old warehouse called Sargood Gardiners. They still exist, but not— they had a big warehouse in York Street, just next door to what is now a famous hotel.

Not the Grace?

Yes, yes.

I think the name may still even be there on the building. Was it on the building?

Oh, Sargood Gardiners, yes, I think it is, yes.

I know the name. I've seen the name.

It was quite a substantial brick and stone building.

There were some fine buildings along York Street, fine warehouse buildings.

Yes, there were a lot of warehouses along there, yes. So I worked there in the soft good furnishings area, which I enjoyed doing, curtain .....

For someone who may listen to this in a hundred years time, what are those items?

Mainly curtains, carpets and blinds, the sort of— they're soft good— it was a soft good warehouse and it dealt mainly in men's and women's clothing and soft furnishings. It didn't have any hard furnishings. Didn't have any tables or beds or any of that sort of thing, but all the soft furnishings that you have for a house.

Could I ask you, Victor, that's a big choice to make to leave school and to take on the responsibilities for bringing money into your family. Was that your ambition?

No, no. My ambition was to go to university and I had to put that on hold. I thought I would go and do some night courses at the technical college in Sydney, but I didn't get round to doing that.

What area were you looking or thinking of going into?

I wanted to be an architect. I'd built houses, model houses and mud houses in the garden ever since I can remember.

Did you build them with gardens?

Oh, they always had a garden, yes. I had a whole village of them at one stage.

Did you?

With gardens and roads and a church and all modelled mostly out of clay, and I would always arrange a garden around the house and— the houses and what have you, usually with a fountain in the garden. I always— I built a palace, the clay palace, and it had a garden with a fountain in the— always had a fountain.

Is that because you lived in a house with a fountain?

No, no, no, never had a fountain in the (garden) — I had a childhood image of a palace and the image of a palace always had fountains. I think it must have been from Versailles or something like that. And then it was— interior it always had chandeliers.

Heavens, that's a very detailed palace.

Yes, well— and so ever afterwards, every house I've had, I've owned, has had a chandelier in it.

Oh, that's a lovely story. In fact, that reminds me, I'd like to go back. Is it always the same chandelier in the house?

No, no, no, no, no. I've usually left the chandelier in the house, or the apartment, when I sold it with the rather romantic idea that the chandelier belongs to the house, not to me.

Again, when we spoke on the telephone you spoke about these bulbs that we're .....

Oh, the bulbs, yes, let's get back to the bulbs.

Well, I'm interested because there's that same theme that you spoke of always having bulbs with each house you've gone to.

Yes. Well, this was as a child I— this was when I was working in Sargood Gardiners. I used to go off at lunchtime, usually to the bookshops, and— but sometimes I would call into Selfridges, which was a— well, it was like the American five and ten cents stores, you know, it was the cheap store and it used to sell all kinds of things. I think you would compare it perhaps to the Reject Shops these days.

Was this in York Street as well?

No, they were opposite each other in Pitt Street, close to where the famous arcade is, the Royal Arcade in— goes from George to Pitt. It's still there.

The Strand?

The Strand. No, it's The Strand, that's right, yes. There were a number of arcades, but in what is now the Pitt Street Mall, Selfridges was on one side of the road and Coles was on the other side of the road.

Ah, yes, I know where you are.

And I would sometimes call in there to buy something or to look for something and they always had a plant section. You could buy your plants in little bundles, and it had bulbs. They used to have roses at the appropriate time all wrapped up in a piece of cloth around the root. And I bought a rose there— it was a white rose, Karl Frau Druschki *[Frau Karl Druschki]* I think it's called— for the centrepiece in my little garden. I like white roses, but my mother wouldn't have white flowers in the garden.

There was a general feeling that white flowers were sometimes funereal.

Yes. They reminded her of the grave of her favourite son. I shouldn't use the word "favourite" because it gives a wrong impression that I wasn't the favourite son sort of thing. But, no, she wouldn't have any white flowers in the garden, particularly she disliked jonquils.

With their lovely fragrance.

Yes. They used to grow them in the cemetery because, you know, you plant the— and they would come up each year, so you would have these on the grave in the cemetery, so she wouldn't have them in the garden at all.

So how did she feel about you bringing home a white rose?

She didn't worry about that actually. She didn't impose her likes and dislikes on us. One of the things, she wouldn't drink tea. That was another one of her peculiarities you might say. I don't know the reason for it, but there must have been some reason in her childhood. Perhaps it made her sick on some occasion so she wouldn't have tea. She always had coffee. That was a time when coffee was an unusual drink in Australia. She always had coffee and father always had tea.

Of course, this question has nothing to do with the Garden History Society, but I'm curious, what sort of coffee? Did she drink that chicory .....

Yes, she did actually.

In the bottle?

That's right.

Yes. Very popular at a time.

Coffee and chicory, yes.

So, again, returning to the bulbs.

And get to the bulbs. Yes, the bulbs I bought at Selfridges and they were supposedly daffodils, and I planted them in my garden and they came up and flowered, but they weren't— they were small and they weren't a single flower on them, so technically they weren't really daffodils. They're fritillias or something. I did find out the name once. But, no, they came up and flourished and each year I would plant a few more around the place and so they remained and during the war mother took over, of course. She took over my area of garden when I was not there. I was in the Army. And she planted some of them in the front garden and they flourished in the front garden, and every spring the front garden would be a mass of these yellow .....

Very beautiful.

..... yellow what I still call daffodils. And so when I established— when I bought a house in Armidale— this is taking me on quite a few years— I took some of the bulbs from the garden in Sydney, where mother was still living, and planted them in my garden in Armidale and then when I moved from Armidale to Canberra I took some of the bulbs with me and I planted them in

the first house I rented in Canberra, and when I moved from there and finally moved to this house I bought some of them with me.

So they've been my daffodil bulbs from childhood. And one of the reasons, of course, I like daffodils was because at school we were taught two famous poems about daffodils; "*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*", and the other is "*Fair daffodils, we weep to see thee haste away so soon*", which were poems that we had to learn and I always thought I liked those because they associated me with my gardens and what have you.

And so my daffodils have continued to divide and, as I think I said to you the other night, I thought I'd lost them during the drought because they just disappeared, but this year they shot up and two of them flowered. So I've got my heritage daffodils back.

That's lovely.

Yes, so we did get back to the daffodils finally.

That's good. I don't want to spend too long, because the Garden History Society will think I've come here and we've never got to the Society yet, but I am curious to see your leap from Sargoods to Armidale. Could you just tell me very briefly about that?

Oh, yes. Well, when I turned 18 in Sargood Gardiners I went into the Army and spent the next four years in the Army. No garden experiences in the Army, except there was in St Ives— you know St Ives in Sydney— I was for a time in an Army holding station in St Ives.

Was that at the showground?

It was at the showground, but the commander of that particular— had his headquarters in another part of St Ives where he owned a very large block of land and so the Army was paying him rent to have his headquarters in this large block of land and he used the men, his soldiers, to develop his garden.

Were you one of those soldiers?

I did actually do some help in the garden in his place. I think after the war he built a large house on the block of land and he had his garden already beautifully established. I don't know who— I don't know which man he was, so I can't give you his name, but that was my only connection with gardens during my time in the Army.

So what happened after the war?

After the war, I came out and went to university. Did get there, finally. Actually, I hadn't intended to. When I was in the Army, I started to do some courses by correspondence. The Army had an Army education system and I started to do some courses to get my entrance to— well, get my Higher School Certificate, in effect, but I thought I would go on and become a school teacher and I'd go to teachers college and get a scholarship and become a teacher. I gave up the idea of— I'd given up the idea of becoming an architect. I said I was too old to start.

Too old. Well, you haven't let that bother you subsequently.

It would take me another five or six years to get— and I'd be too old then. So I thought I'd be a school teacher. So at the end of the war they had a whole series of tests for young men coming out of the Army to see what they might be suitable to go on and do and I took all these tests and then I was interviewed and I said that I had planned to go to teachers college and become a school teacher, primary school teacher, and the fellow, a young man, said to me, "Oh, why don't you go to university and then become a high school teacher?" And I said, "Oh, I don't think I'm good enough", being a shy retiring type person I was. I was. And he said, "Oh, yes, there's no reason why you couldn't go to university. Your level is well above the average university student." My ego took a jump and so I said, "Oh, well, okay, I'll go to university then." So they put me down and said they would give me a scholarship to go to university.

This was for— returned servicemen were given this option of a scholarship to study for their new career, and so I came out of the Army about the middle of the year, 1946 I think it was, and I said, "Well, I've got to get a university entrance", and I said, "Well, I will have to sit for the Higher School Certificate and they said, "Oh, well, you can go and study", sort of go back to school, I suppose, "and do that next year." That would have been 1947. So I said, "Oh, okay."

When I went home, I decided that— I had another friend who was in exactly the same position and he lived not very far from me and we both talked about this and we said, "I think we should try the Higher School Certificate ourselves and see how we go. It will be good practice anyhow if we're going to have to do it again next year", and so together we studied by ourselves for the Higher School Certificate, put in our enrolments as private students to go and sit for the Higher School Certificate, and we sat for the examinations and we both failed in the same subject, one subject. We passed in everything else, but we failed in geography, both of us, the same subject. And then they said, "Oh,

well, we can allow you to keep your subjects for the Higher School Certificate that you've passed, but you can then sit for the one you failed in at the university." The university used to run special examinations .....

Yes.

..... for entrants, and so we both sort of went and sat for the geography in the university courses. I passed.

Were you working throughout this time?

No, I wasn't. This was when we got out of the Army. I had still— I had my deferred pay and my pay continued for some time after I got out until we got ourselves organised, but, no, I then— I mean, I then got my scholarship after I got my university— however, my friend he failed in geography again.

Oh dear.

So what did he do? He went to the State Library of New South Wales to their library course and he became a librarian, and then he studied at university— night university and finally got his degree that way. So I then went through university and got my degree and then I went to teach. I still went teaching, but I didn't go into the public school. I went to a private school. I went down to Victoria to Geelong College[2], which is a Presbyterian private school in Ballarat, and spent a year there teaching and then I moved from there down to Geelong College, which is also Presbyterian. I'm not a Presbyterian, I'm Church of England, but it was Presbyterian school who accepted me as a teacher down there. I didn't have any teaching qualifications, but they had a system there where you could take your examinations for a teaching certificate while you were teaching, an intern sort of way of learning, and so I did get my teaching certificate from Victoria.

But at the time I was in Geelong, I had a friend down there who was also a teacher in Geelong (College) and one day— we were great friends. He was a marvellous person. He taught me an enormous amount of things about living and .....

How do you mean?

Well, he was the person who pushed me into studying things. When I was in Geelong he said, "Oh, you don't want to just sit back on that degree you got in Sydney. That's fine, but you should do something else, you know." And so he persuaded me to enrol in a course from London University, London, England, and— London University used to run external courses for the colonies, and so I enrolled in a course to study to be a— it was a course in economics. It was a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the University of London. He was doing a course himself in that area, a bit further on than me, and he then persuaded me to do that.[3]

So I was— well, I was quite happy to do it and so I said, "Okay." So I enrolled to do that and I sat for the first year's examinations and failed, at least you had eight subjects, you were studying by yourself, you didn't have— because I'd already done my Higher School Certificate by myself so I was quite able to, and I had John, my friend, to help in the study, but I failed in one subject.

Rather like your geography.

Statistics.

Oh.

That's a very difficult subject to teach yourself. So I failed in that and so I said, "Oh, well, I'll repeat the year." And you couldn't carry anything over. You had to repeat the whole lot all over again.

Oh no.

That was part of their rules in the University of London.

So this was in your spare time while you were teaching in Geelong?

That's right, that was in my spare time.

And this gentleman who was such a great friend to encourage you in your extracurricular studies, has he seen all the— do you still keep in touch with him? Has he seen the work that you've done since .....

Oh, yeah. He's now dead. We're coming to John. John— I can still remember, we were in Geelong and we were sitting on the headland looking out over Corio Bay, which is the bay on which Geelong is situated, Port Phillip area, and he said, "Oh, I've been given a scholarship." And I said, "That's marvellous. Where and how?" And he said, "It's a scholarship to do a PhD in the University of Toronto in Canada."

His father had connections in Canada. His father was a doctor who had studied in Canada, so that was the reason, I suppose, why he got a scholarship to the University of Toronto. He apparently applied for it. And I said, "Oh, that's marvellous. Oh, what am I going to do without

2 Correction: Ballarat College at Geelong

3 Professor John P. Matthews, Queens University, Canada (he married a Canadian and never returned to Australia).

you to encourage me on?" He said, "Oh, why don't you come to Canada?"

Oh.

And I sat there for a few moments and said— he said— I at that stage had been toying with the idea of studying to be a librarian from my other fellow friend in Sydney who told me all about being a librarian and so I thought about doing it, and I'd told John about this and he said, "Well, there's a very good library school, the University of Toronto. It's a university library school. There isn't a university library school or course in Australia." So he said, "Why don't you come to Canada and you can do a library course there?" And I said, "Oh, that's a good— yes, okay, I'll come to Canada", just on— no sort of ums and ahs, I just said, "Oh, yes, okay, I'll come to Canada." So we set about organising our trip to Canada.

And how long did you live there?

I was there for four years.

It's very interesting. Sometimes life's biggest decisions turn on sixpence, as they say.

Yes, yes. Well, anyhow, I did get to Canada. I did study at the University of Toronto and became a Bachelor of Library Science, which was the library degree, and then got a job for two years in the University of Toronto library. I'm sorry, I'm getting us off gardens.

Well, it would be— I think it would be good to return to the gardens.

But I came back from Canada to Armidale at the University of New England. So that's how I filled in that particular period. Gardens.

Just before we come to gardens, just one last question about education. It's clearly been a pursued and a lifelong journey for you. Is that something your parents instilled in you or would you say that it was more encouraged by your fiend and colleague, John?

No. It was my father actually who used to always say, "You should go to university." He never went to university, never went to high school even, but he always said— oh, he wanted me to be an engineer. I think he had a childhood ambition to have been an engineer, a civil engineer, building bridges and, you know, roads and things like that, but he never did achieve that. But, yes, "You should be an engineer. That's a good job to— that will get on in the world", sort of thing. He said, "Well, you should go to university." And so sometimes when we drove into Sydney in the bus from Ashbury, we would drive past the university and he'd say, "There's the university. That's where you should go." So I suppose I was indoctrinated with the idea of going to university from childhood.

Did your mother influence you as well?

My mother was— yes, she was also enthusiastic. She always said she regretted that she could never go to high school when she was a girl because in those days when she was a girl you had to pay to go to high school. High schools were not free like primary schools.

And that wasn't something her parents could afford?

Her parents— well, she was a family of nine children and, of course, boys were the ones that had to be educated. One of my mother's brothers, who's a half brother, he did become an engineer. He was educated to become an engineer and he eventually became an engineer in a mining company in China. And I've still got some postcards from China from that particular uncle and a couple of little Chinese paintings that he'd sent home to his mother, my grandmother. And so he became an engineer, so that was one engineer in the family.

And the other— my mother's favourite brother— . She went to work in a shop in Maitland. They lived in Maitland. She went to pay for her favourite brother to go through the technical college to become a draftsman, and he eventually became a draftsman at the Australian Gaslight Company in Cabarita and so it was my mother who provided the money for him to be able to go to there.

So she was very keen on educating for a future job, not going off and working. So Sargood Gardiners was just a stopgap sort of job for me, because I knew I would be going into the Army in a year or so's time. So that's filled in the gap I think.

Most tidily. So shall we revert to the Garden History Society?

Yes, please. Yes, Garden History Society.

I'm curious what you knew about the Society before it began.

Well, I joined the English Garden History Society. I came across that in the library at some stage. I came across their publication, so I said, "Oh, I'm interested in all that." So I wrote off to them in London and asked about the Society and what have you and I joined the English Society.

Do you remember when that was?

Oh.

In the seventies?

It must have been in the seventies, yes.

So what prompted you then to join that organisation?

Well, I've always been interested in houses, as I've said, and gardens and in Armidale I bought an old house and restored it. And then I said— it was an 1880s house, lovely little house, with a two attic— I've always wanted a house with attics.

I won't dare ask you why.

It's just a childhood dream, I guess. And that's the little house I bought and the first thing I bought for it, of course, was a chandelier, and it desperately needed a lot of work on restoration, so I set to restore the house. And at the same time, it was a house on a double block and it had the remnants of a garden and a number of plum trees and so I said, "Oh, well, if I'm restoring the house, I've got to restore the garden too", so I set to and restored the garden.

Did you join garden clubs or local groups?

No, I didn't join a garden club or any local groups. No, I just set about doing the restoration and reorganising it the way I thought it should be done from studying gardening books and .....

So you were studying gardening books at that time?

Oh, yes. I started my garden book collection when I was in Armidale and the first garden history type book I bought was Mrs Rolf Boldrewood's book on *The Garden in Australia*. She wrote her book in the 1890s, and this was a little book I bought. [*The Flower Garden in Australia*, 1893]

When I was in Armidale I had started buying old gardening books. I was— being a mad keen librarian and gardener, it was obvious that I would buy old garden books. So I started my collection of gardening books at that particular stage. And so that was the reason for my interest in garden history and the Garden History Society in England. That was a sort of a crossover between the two sorts of things.

So you began your book collection in the sixties, say?

Yes, yes, that's right, yes.

Would you purchase them from overseas or buy them locally?

No, they were Australian gardening— well, I bought both. I bought a lot of gardening books about— Australian gardening books, but I also bought a lot of gardening books about mainly gardeners rather than gardens. I mean, Gertrude Jekyll and all of those, I bought those, some of which I bought overseas.

One set of Marion Cran. I don't know if you know Marion Cran. She was an English garden writer, wrote a whole series of books about buying gardens or restoring gardens and what have you in the 1920s— or 1910s and 1920s, and I bought that in Melbourne at— oh, what was the name of the famous little bookshop in Melbourne that did all sorts of— can't think it offhand— and I bought a set of her books in Melbourne and then I bought various other books in second-hand shops in Sydney. I bought a copy of the first Australian gardening book.

What was your feeling when you purchased that?

Well, I knew about it. It was published in Sydney in 1836, Thomas Shepherd's book called *The Horticulture of New South Wales* and it was the first book about— it was about vegetables, of course - about gardening.

It was the first gardening book published in Australia and I'd looked around for that for ages and it never appeared. I think there was a copy in the Mitchell Library. That was the only one sort of thing. And I was in the little bookshop below the Royal Australian Historical Society's building run by Margaret Woodhouse, and I was talking to Margaret Woodhouse about books. I often popped in there walking down from the Mitchell Library where I was always doing some research of some sort, and I was talking to her and said, "Oh, I've been trying for years to find this gardening book by Thomas Shepherd called *The Horticulture of New South Wales*." She said, "Oh, I've got a copy." She said, "It's not in very good condition. You can have it. It's not very expensive." Oh. So it was in— I mean, the interior was in good condition, the cover was a mess, and so I bought it from her, oh, for only a few— not very much at all. I can't even remember what the price was, but it was just a very small price.

So I bought that and so I had the first gardening book. Not only that, but I then bought the second gardening book which was also by Thomas Shepherd and it was called of all things *Landscape Gardening in Australia*, and it was published in 1836 in Sydney.

What was your response when you purchased these two books?

Great excitement. I think the one I got from the second gardening book was perhaps slightly greater than the one from the second one, the landscape gardening one, which I bought or had bought for me in an auction in Tasmania.

A famous book collector in Tasmania had a collection which was sold by auction, and I knew that this book was part of the— from the catalogue I knew this book was on sale and I said, "Oh, I can't get to Tasmania to go to the auction", so I rang up a bookseller in Melbourne that I knew slightly and I said, "Oh, are you going to the auction in Tasmania for the"— he was a second-hand bookseller, and he said, "Oh, yes, I am." And I said, "Will you bid for me for a book in the auction?" And he said, "Oh yes", he said, and then he said, "Oh, how much do I bid for? What's your top price?" And I said, "No, I haven't got one. I want it no matter what the price is."

So I was all in needles and, you know, sort of a— couldn't settle. And he finally rang me up and said, yes, he'd bought it for me. I was just so excited, I didn't ask the price. Oh, I did finally get round to saying, "Yes, how much am I up for?" And he said, "Oh, it was five hundred and something dollars." I said, "Oh. All right. Okay, that's fine." It wasn't until I got the book that I found out the original owner of it. It was the first gardening— second gardening book, *Landscape Gardening in Australia* and it was owned by the famous painter— oh, now, don't ask me.

Victor, we can always come back and fill in the momentary blanks.

Yes, well, it's a famous painter who painted a painting of his garden in Tasmania.

Oh, not Glover?

Glover, that's right. Yes, Glover (John Glover), and his signature is in the front of the book, and the painting, of course, of his garden is in the Art Gallery of South Australia.

What a thrill.

So here I received this marvellous book and it was beautifully bound and it's a delightful book. I think it's a— well, it's the treasure of Australian gardening books. So, anyhow, I still own it.

How wonderful.

And I still don't know what I'm going to do with it. I think I'll give it to the National Library. It should go to the State Library of Tasmania, but I'm not very happy with the State Library of Tasmania because they didn't reply to my letter when I offered them something, so I thought, well, I'll give it to the National Library where perhaps it should be anyhow. I did think of the National Gallery because of its connection with Glover, but I thought, no, no, no, I'll— it's a book, so I'll give it to the National Library. So that's my present idea.

It seems to me, as you speak, from your body language and your twisting and turning, that this subject of where you put the book is also something that's giving you pleasure to ponder upon?

Oh, yes, yes. Actually in my will I've bequeathed the Australian garden collection to the University of Canberra where I was the Foundation Librarian and where the Clough collection is, Richard Clough's Collection of gardening books, and I catalogued the collection and it's published as the Clough Collection, and I thought, well, my gardening book collection— they teach landscape gardening at the university. It's a course, a degree course, at the university and I thought, well, perhaps my Australian gardening books should be at the University of Canberra. So that's where, at the moment, they're bequeathed at the moment, but I haven't told— or have I? I think I might have told them that I have bequeathed it to them. So, yes, that's the reason why I've been— well, at my age I've been toying with what I do with my various book collections.

I've got a number of different collections of Australian literature and Australia history and 18th century English history and so on, so, yes, I've been toying with all sorts of ideas as to where I should deal with that, whether I should leave them or whether I should just put them out for auction.

I'll leave you to ponder that thought. But it makes me wonder, just before we do come to the Garden History Society, about whether you— were you aware of people like Richard Clough and his collecting at that same time or were you in a vacuum collecting about garden history?

At the beginning I was in a vacuum. It wasn't until after I came to Canberra and after I met Richard Clough and met some people at the Garden History Society that I began to realise, of course, that I wasn't in a vacuum. I'd just thought I was— well, I was doing something that was rather eccentric, you might say, collecting these old Australian gardening books. And I know when I started doing my bibliography of Australian gardening books, I was doing some of it in the National Library because they've got a very good collection of gardening books, and someone at the National Library asked me what I was doing and I said, "Oh, I'm doing a bibliography of Australian gardening books." They said, "What? What a crazy subject to be doing." And I said, "Well, now, I don't think it's crazy. I think they're a very important part of

Australian publishing, Australian literature and therefore we should have a bibliography of them and they should be studied."

As I said, they were among the first books published in Australia. Almanacs were the first books that were usually published in the very early days in Australia, but gardening books followed very quickly on, and the first almanacs had a gardens piece in them. The very first almanac that was published in Sydney had a section on gardening, and I said, "Because Australian gardening conditions were so different from England, they needed Australian information about gardening and so they published things about gardening. The first gardening books were important." And he said, "Oh, yes, I suppose you're right, you know." So after his first reaction of, "Goodness me, why are you publishing— working on a silly subject that that"— I didn't realise when I started, of course, all that. It came as I studied them.

Victor, were you doing this at the same time you were working as a librarian at the University of Canberra or did this work on your publications and your bibliography and your garden books happen in your retirement?

Oh, no, no, no, it happened while I was still working. It started in Armidale when I started collecting some Australian gardening books because I was restoring my garden in my little house in Armidale and when I came to Canberra I just continued. And when I found that the National Library had this collection of gardening books, I asked them if I could have— I started using them and then I asked if I could have a desk in the Petherick Room which they had very early on for scholars that were dealing with particular research work in the Library, and they said, "Oh, yes, we'll give you a desk."

And that was— that must have been right at the beginning of the 1970s, because I came to Canberra in 1968, and so they gave me a desk in the Petherick Room then and I was in a desk sitting next to the research assistant for our famous historian, Manning Clark, who was doing the research for Manning Clark's big history, and here was me sitting beside her doing my bibliography of Australian gardening books.

Audio File 2

As I said, I did write to the Garden History Society in London and joined the Garden History Society and mainly to get their publication, of course, but I went off on leave from the University of New England. I went off on leave to England. And so I wrote to the Garden History Society in England before I left and said, "I'm coming to England. Is it possible for me to go on one of your garden meeting tours in England?" And they wrote back and said, "Oh, yes, we can organise that for you." So I went off to England and went on one of their garden tours, their annual conference and their garden tours. It was marvellous actually. I said, "Oh, isn't this wonderful." And so I went and visited some famous English gardens. I've been visiting English gardens in England ever since, not necessarily with the Garden History Society, but .....

But this first one was in the sixties?

Yes, yes. And so I became all enthusiastic about Garden History Societies and all the rest of it and continued, and when it was suggested by a group of people in Melbourne that they should form a Garden History Society, you couldn't hold me back. I said, "Well, I've got to go down to Melbourne for that meeting." So I went down to Melbourne for the first meeting which formed the Garden History Society at a famous house in— oh, I can't remember the name.

Perhaps Rippon Lea?

No, it wasn't Rippon Lea. It was another place where the first meeting was held actually. Oh, I can't remember.

We can fill in that detail.

Yes. Anyhow, I was there, was most enthusiastic about forming the Garden History Society and said I wanted to be a member, of course, and anything I could do to help. And when I got back to Canberra I said, "Oh, we really should have a branch." So I wrote down to them and suggested that we should have a branch of the Australian Garden History Society in Canberra. I didn't persist with that. I think the Garden History Society people, the new committee and what have you, in Melbourne were very busy organising and getting the Garden History Society off the ground that they didn't respond to my letter, and shortly after that I spoke to Dick Ratcliffe, Richard Ratcliffe, in Canberra about the idea and he said, "Oh, that's a marvellous idea. Yes, we should do that." He was a landscape gardener in Canberra and was interested in the restoration of early gardens, as well as creating new ones, and so he said, "Yes, we should do something about that."

Well, shortly after that I went on a sabbatical leave away from Canberra for a year. The University of— well, it was the Canberra College of Advanced Education— gave me a year's sabbatical leave to go and study in England as I was researching the First Fleet. I was doing my bibliography of the First Fleet. So I set off to England to do the background

research on the First Fleet. In between times I would go and visit a few historic gardens, of course, while I was there. So it wasn't until I came back that I found that Richard, Richard Ratcliffe, had formed a branch of the Australian Garden History Society in Canberra while I was away, and so I immediately got onto Richard and he said, "Oh, we need a treasurer." I said, "Okay. I must become involved", so I joined the committee. It was in its— it might have been its second year by that stage and I joined the committee as the treasurer. I was never very good at being treasurer, but I usually found at the end that I had to put in some of my own money to make the books balance.

That's taboo.

Anyhow, I continued on with the Canberra Branch of the Australian Garden History Society and when Richard retired from that, of course I became the President of the— well, it was called the president in those days— the President of the Canberra Branch and it now, of course, has to be the chairman or the chair or the chairperson, I'm not quite sure which, of the ACT Monaro and Riverina Branch. So that is how I eventually became involved in the Australian Garden History Society.

You mentioned that you heard that it was happening in Victoria. How did that news filter through?

I can't remember. I can't remember how I heard it.

And tell me about the first meeting. What was the atmosphere at that first meeting?

Oh, it was exciting actually. This group of people in Melbourne at this house were all— I mean, you couldn't hold them back … there wasn't any doubt about it being a Garden History Society and— well, there were people like, I'm pretty sure, Peter Watts because he was a Victorian at that particular stage. He was involved in the National Trust.

That's right.

That must have been where I— that must have been how I found out about the proposal, because I'm a life member of the National Trust in New South Wales. So it must have been through the National Trust, I think, that I became aware of the meeting in Melbourne.

One of the questions that the Society is keen to know is, what was the atmosphere in society at that time that allowed for a society of garden history enthusiasts and practitioners to form a society?

It probably came from the gardening magazines, I think. I'm thinking of Jean Galbraith and *The Garden Lover*, the magazine, Victorian magazine, and her writings about gardens and the restoration of gardens and it was a sort of garden sort of— an atmosphere of growing importance of the past gardens. I know interest in Edna Walling, for instance, another Victorian influence, interest in her gardens and the gardens that she had created in Melbourne and her books, of course, became, you know, the sort of ideal gardening books. I eventually had the pleasure of publishing an Edna Walling book which hadn't been published in her lifetime. The Australian publishers refused it.

Why so?

It was a messy collection, if you like. If Edna Walling garden lovers can excuse me, but the book itself was not very well constructed. It really wasn't properly finished. It was a collection of her thoughts and travels and what have you about Australian wildflowers basically, not about the design of gardens and it wasn't the sort of romantic creation of gardens that she was famous for from her other books. It was a book— well, it's called *Wildflowers in Australia* and it was mainly about her discovery of wildflowers on her travels in her motorcar trips around Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales where she wrote about finding all these sort of wildflowers in their natural state. I thought it was a lovely thing when I bought it— oh, when I found it. I got a copy from Jean Galbraith in Melbourne who had a copy of the manuscript and she sent it to me. Oh, when I wrote to Jean Galbraith I wrote to her and asked her whether she had any writings. I knew she'd published lots in *The Garden Lover* and I wrote to her and asked if she had any manuscripts in her bottom drawer about her writing. She wrote back and said, no, she didn't have any, that all of her things she'd written had been published, namely in *The Garden Lover*, and there was a— but there was an old manuscript of Edna Walling's if I might like to look at it. So I said, "Yes, please send it to me." I didn't say post haste. So she sent it to me and that's when I found this particular manuscript and I read it and reread it and thought, yes, it needs a bit of reorganising and perhaps a bit of an addition in some way to close it off properly and what have you.

So I wrote to the poet in Melbourne— again names escape me— who'd written a couple of the poems that appeared in this manuscript. She was a friend of Edna Walling's and had been, well, to Edna Walling's gardens and actually stayed with Edna Walling in her country place that she had down on the coast road, the South Coast road. And she wrote back— I wrote to her and said, "I've got this manuscript which has got some of your poems in

it." Delightful poems they were. And I said, "I think that she needs— I think the manuscript needs a poem to conclude the book and have you got something that can be used?" She wrote back and said, "I'll write you a poem for it", and she did and it just fitted in nicely and concluded the book.

I reorganised it slightly, got Jean Galbraith to check the garden— well, the names of the plants of the gardens and so we put it together, Jean Galbraith helped. I gave some subtitles which tied the thing together a little bit, didn't add any text, and then I organised the publication. Oh, Jean Galbraith then said— oh, was it Jean Galbraith or was it Jean Galbraith? No, it wasn't Jean Galbraith. It was Edna Walling's niece, who lives in Queensland. I don't know if she's still alive. I had to contact her about the book because the copyright of the ownership of the manuscript was really her property, and she was all enthusiastic about having it published and she said, "Oh, I've got some Edna Walling photographs." So she sent me this great pile of Edna Walling photographs.

Oh, how wonderful.

So I included the Edna Walling photographs in the book, or at least a lot of them, which fitted in with the various parts of the text, and then I had— the printer that I got to do it, I said I wanted the photographs done in sepia, not in black and white, as one of Edna Walling's books was published with the photographs in sepia. That's a sort of dark brownie sort of— I said I want them done— and we had all sorts of experiments with various methods of printing the photographs in sepia and finally came up with what I thought was a very good reproduction. And so I published it and then I said to Jean Galbraith, "I want to launch the book in Melbourne." So she said, "Oh, yes." And I said, "Will you launch it?" She said, yes, she would.

So we decided to launch it at that famous bookshop that I can't remember now what the name of it is. It's the name of the woman that ran it.[4] Anyhow, the woman had died by then and the bookshop had been closed— no, it had been moved to another spot, but I still wrote to them and I said I wanted to put— would it be possible to launch the book there in their bookshop and they said, "Oh, yes, yes. No problem at all." So I had the books all sent down to Melbourne and saw Jean Galbraith, met her for the first time.

Oh, you'd had all this discussion by .....

By correspondence, yes. No emails in those days.

No, no.

And so we organised the launch and I'm not sure, I can't remember now who we organised to come to the launch. I think it was the Garden History Society, but I wouldn't be sure. Anyhow, we launched the book in Melbourne and Jean Galbraith did it beautifully. I have a funny joke about— I thought, oh, I'll go into Myers, who have a bookshop in Myers, and see if they will have some copies of this Jean Galbraith— not Jean Galbraith— Edna Walling gardening book. And so I went in to see the buyer and the manager of the— he wasn't available. He was far too busy to see a person like me publishing books, you know. I'm not Angus & Roberston or any of the famous booksellers.

So his assistant said, "Oh, well, if you leave a copy of the book and we'll get back in touch with you." They did. He actually wrote me a letter, which I still have somewhere, saying, "Sorry, we're not really very interested. Our customers wouldn't be interested in this sort of book." Oh, it was addressed not to me, but to Miss Edna Walling, "Not interested in your self-published book", and I couldn't stop laughing. Here was a person in Melbourne, a bookseller presumably, in a famous bookstore where all the famous gardening ladies in Melbourne would have been going to saying, "Oh, no, no, our people wouldn't be interested in your"— obviously didn't know anything about gardening and gardening books or didn't bother to ask anybody. I mean, I was just— well, I was floored. I would have thought, well, really, that gives me my impression of Myers.

Apart from that man whose ignorance you remember well, how was the book received otherwise?

It's the only book I've ever published where I've finally sold all the copies. Yes. I published them. It didn't sell a lot immediately, but it did over a period of time. It sold the whole of the edition that I published.

Is it worth doing a second print run?

I decided not to do it. I thought, well, I'll wait until they do second copies of all of Edna Walling's other books before I dive into selling the *Wildflowers in Australia*.

It must be very hard for you to perhaps— I'm guessing it must be hard for you to answer this question, but is there one book that's given you greater pleasure than another in producing?

I don't know. I think it was a book that was— which I still have copies of— which didn't sell very well and this was Jean Galbraith's book and it's about restoring a garden, about two people in Melbourne who were actually friends (of Jean Galbraith). It's based on a real story. Two friends who bought an old garden in the Dandenongs and

[4] Margareta Webber Bookshop

set about restoring it and Jean Galbraith tells that particular story. It was published in *The Garden Lover* as a serial and I discovered it in Berkelouw's Bookstore in Berrima. You know Berkelouw's the booksellers have a famous, well, book barn they have, but down in the property, in the house itself, in their property they have their antique collection and I was let loose in their antique collection and I was going through all sorts of things and I came across this pile of magazines and I thought, I wonder what that is, and it was a set of old *Garden Lovers* and I sort of opened it and there was this story about two— it was called *Two in a Garden* in the serial. I gave it a different— called it *Doongala, the Restoration of a Garden*, when I published it. But I sat down in Berkelouw's and started to read it. I couldn't put it down. I finally picked them all up and said to Berkelouw, "I must have this. I don't care what it costs. I must have it."

So why did that book give you so much pleasure?

Because I like the book, I like the story and, as I say, having spent some of my own time restoring a garden, it just clicked in some way, and I like the characters and the way in which they did it. They set about the garden the way in which Jean Galbraith told the story and somehow it was me rather than— that's why it gave me so much pleasure, and particularly also when I went down to Melbourne at one stage and called on Jean Galbraith in her house and garden in Tyers and she took me around the garden. And we went back into the house which was full of all kinds of odd old things, like old people often do have— don't look round— collections of all sorts of things and there were some paintings on the wall and I said, "Oh, that's nice, isn't it?" She said, "Oh, yes, that's a painting of the garden that my friends restored in the Dandenongs. She was a painter and she painted these paintings of her garden." So I said, "Oh, can I— can I please use the painting for the book?" So she said— she gave them to me. I said, "Okay."

Oh, how generous.

And so one of them is the cover of the book when I republished it. And all of those sort of things tied together, that's the reason why that is the one that has given me the most pleasure actually. I mean, I did have a similar sort of pleasure, in a way, from the Edna Walling book and meeting Edna Walling's niece in— she now lives in Queensland. And often it's the connection with the people connected with the books that makes them special in that sort of way.

I've noticed that most of your books have the person about whom you're writing in the title and it's the person rather than their work or their garden which predominates, but that isn't the case with the Garden History's publications which are based around the house and the garden that you have worked on, Fifield and the other publications.

Yes, yes. Well, they weren't my publications.

But you worked on all of those, didn't you?

I worked on them, yes, but I didn't impose my view.

What prompted the Society to put the work in those gardens that it did into the booklets?

That was Richard Ratcliffe. He started us off on that. He said that we should be researching the historic gardens in the Canberra area, that it's part of our job as the branch of the Australian Garden History Society: we should be researching the gardens and so we said, okay, yes, let's do that and we started off with Durham Hall, Durham Hall in Braidwood, and Durham Hall is an old garden and an old house and the owner of it at that particular time became a member of the Garden History Society.

I'm not sure how you pronounce their surname.

Royds.

Royds.

Yes. And so we started off by visiting the garden, doing a plan of the garden as we could see it at the time and what parts of it were old and what had been new, what had been added, when it had been added. Then we went through and Richard said— this was Richard Ratcliffe— said that we should identify the plants in the garden and see if we can identify any of the older plants in it and the trees and when they may have been introduced. And so we then set about writing this all up and saying, well, we should publish all this, and so that became the first publication of the gardens in the Canberra district. And Richard continued that, well, until he died. And we moved from that to other gardens. We had great fun restoring another historic garden in the Braidwood area which had a direct Canberra connection in that it was originally started by a woman, the first Australian born novelist, woman novelist, who published a book, not about gardens, in Australia. It was published in Australia and ..... [5]

What was her name?

I knew you were going to ask that. [Anna Maria Bunn. The Guardian]

We can add that later.

[5] Correction: Author was not born in Australia.

Names are not my suit actually.

We can add that.

She was the sister of the fellow who owned Yarralumla Homestead and her other brother owned Woden Homestead and she went to live with the brother that lived in the Woden Homestead and has left us a sketch of the garden that she designed in Woden. And then she eventually went with her son to live in the property in Braidwood which she had inherited from— her husband had owned it, or been granted it in Braidwood, and they'd built a house there. And she then went to live with her son in the house in Braidwood— oh, it's out of Braidwood, which still exists and it's still in its original condition, and she designed the garden there which is still in its original form and we then set about— it was covered in all sorts of— I mean, it was a wilderness and we uncovered it. We tunnelled through some of this wilderness. [St Omer]

Goodness.

Found the rock edgings of her original garden and the paths and then, well, with the enthusiasm of its present owner, who is a descendant of hers, and his wife we then set about restoring the garden, as the Garden History Society, and writing it all up, identifying the plants, doing all those things again and then we published that as a book.

As I go through the newsletter, which I did yesterday at Judy Pearce's home, I see that there's a thread of encouraging people to come along to working bees: getting people involved was something that the Society— every Society I guess— sees its role as, but was it difficult to get people to be involved in those working bees?

No, no. You always got a number of people, not large crowds. Some people liked just coming to visit and seeing gardens and what have you, but there were quite a number of people who were enthusiastic gardeners who wanted to sort of get involved and were, well, delighted to be able to crawl around under the bushes to find anything and start to clear the debris and the overgrown shrubs and all the rest of it to get it back to some order into the garden actually.

Is that work you enjoyed?

Oh, yes, yes, I enjoyed it. It was always fun to see the garden in its original state and then think about how it would have looked when it was originally done and you think, oh, would those trees have been there at that particular time or have they grown up from seedlings since. You know you sort of try and get a sense of the history of the garden and its original creation actually and think how it could have looked. You can't really restore it to that and it destroys the history of it, of course, if you try and take it right back to its original, but you have to get some concept of the original feel of the garden to restore it actually. So that's one of the difficulties about garden history and restoring and preserving gardens is that you're restoring something that is not static; it changes. Well, it's the same with houses too, of course. You can't restore it to its original. You couldn't live in it actually, as I found in Armidale when I sort of started restoring a house there actually. I thought, well, I can't go back to cooking the dinner on a fuel stove.

I might just pause .....

PAUSE

So I've turned the machine back on, Victor, and we're endeavouring once again to return to the Society. Whereabouts did the committee meet?

The committee met at the Ratcliffes' house. We usually met late afternoon or after 5 o'clock. We usually had coffee and something to eat. His wife usually provided a cake or something sweet. And we'd sit there and we'd sit around in his sitting room and have our meeting in his house actually. That is— we didn't meet anywhere else actually. We didn't have a headquarters or a building. We didn't use the National Trust. That happened later actually, when we used the National Trust building. No, it was Dick Ratcliffe's house in the suburb in the northern parts of Canberra— no, southern part of Canberra actually, and we went in through his garden. I remember one day he was very cross when he came— when we met because two girls had come into his garden and picked the daffodils and he caught them doing it and he gave them— yes. So he was very cross about the whole thing actually. But you know little schoolgirls going home, oh, lovely flowers, let's go and pick them, you know, oh …

So you met monthly?

We met monthly, yes, and we usually had— at that time Astrida [Upitas] was the secretary. I think she was Latvian actually, or at least her family had come from Latvia. I don't know if she— I don't think she was— she may have been born in Australia actually, but she had a Latvian background because I know she at one stage told us about her exciting trip back to visit Latvia actually and— but she was a very— one of those— she was blonde, very curly haired blonde girl, or woman I should say, she was married.

But she was so enthusiastic, one of those sort of really enthusiastic sort of people about everything they did actually. She was marvellous actually, and she was our secretary,

yes, and we would sit round and discuss our latest problems or our latest project.

Were there many problems?

No, there weren't any problems, I suppose, except deciding what we were going to do and how we were going to do it, you know. We had to organise things. We did always seem to— we always had something in Canberra itself.

Our main historic gardens were mostly out of Canberra. We always had an afternoon tour of a particular district or particular part of old Canberra looking at some of the old gardens. This was another one of Richard Ratcliffe's ideas, and we would all gather at a particular open spot, one of the little parks or what have you in the area, and we always had something to eat and drink at those as a sort of gathering, getting people together, and organising a picnic spread, so to speak, and drinks.

I used to often find myself organising the drink section and wandering around filling up people's glasses or getting them a glass of something, not always— sometimes some alcohol, not a lot, and sometimes a soft drink or something like that. And then we would give them the plan. We always had a plan of the tour and the gardens that we were going to visit that we had organised for having them open for the people who were agreeing to let us have a look through their garden. Some of them would say, "Oh, but our garden is a terrible mess, no, no, no." They hadn't had time to sort of tidy it up. I said, "Don't worry about that. We're not looking at it from an aesthetic beautiful garden point of view, we're history— garden history, you know. We're interested in the plants and the shrubs and the trees and how they're put together rather than whether there's a nice pretty collection of annuals in the front garden bed.

So in a sense, were you educating the community about the Society as well in that?

In a way we were actually in that people were more familiar sometimes— well, we would usually get at least one new member from our tour actually. One of them would say, "Oh, this is a wonderful idea, isn't it, actually? Oh, I'd love to join", you know.

And, of course, this is a precursor to the Open Garden Scheme which came later.

Yes, it was. Yes, it was before the Open Gardening Scheme, yes, and the Open Gardening Scheme rather took over, I suppose, in many ways and our garden tours of the district. We did do one of the Braidwood area in which we visited a number of gardens because there are some historic old gardens in the Braidwood area. Mrs Royds, their family had another garden which is quite famous in the area and she organised us to visit that. So we had, oh, three or four gardens in the Braidwood area that we could visit in a garden day actually. And I have a feeling we did one which was over a weekend actually. We stayed overnight in Braidwood.

There was a weekend. I remember reading it in the newsletter. You also wrote up the proceedings of the Blue Mountains conference.

Well, it wasn't actually the proceedings of. This was the New South Wales Branch ran a garden tour of the Blue Mountains actually and we went from Sydney up into the Blue Mountains and we stayed at Mount Victoria in a rather funny old house, at least it was— was it a boarding house or an old hotel in Mount Victoria where we stayed overnight actually. I remember I stayed in a room and there were four men in the room. It was quite— it was a room that was— well, it occupied two or three rooms actually, but they all opened into one another, if you know what I mean, and there were four of us actually. One of them snored. I don't know if I did. But that was our garden tour of the Blue Mountains. And then we went and visited a number of gardens in Mount Wilson and when I came back from that tour I said I think I'll write a little booklet about our tour of the various gardens in that particular area. So I wrote the book and then looked up a bit about the various people who'd owned the various gardens, their history and whatever, and so I wrote this little book called— and I called it *An Autumn Visit* actually and that was basically the tour of the gardens in the Mount Wilson area of the Blue Mountains actually.

Just coming back to your committee, that early committee, Ken Taylor was also a member?

I don't remember Ken Taylor being a member, not during the early period at the time. I don't think he was actually. He was a lecturer at the Canberra College of Advanced Education, the landscape gardening courses, but that was a bit later actually. He became involved later actually, not during my period actually, I don't think, unless it was towards the end of mine. Yes. No, he wasn't really an early member of the ACT Branch.[6]

What about Joan Fry?

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[6] Mr Crittenden was overseas in 1982 when Ken Taylor was Branch Secretary. Mr Taylor was then Head of Landscape Design Course, School Environmental Design, CCAE

Joan Fry was an early member, yes. She was one of our staunch supporters and used to help with all sorts of things. She'd come to all the garden visits and she'd come to the, well, the surveys of the various gardens that we set about restoring and surveying. She lived in a house also in the north side of Canberra— no, south side of Canberra. Yes.

There was also Lyn Meredith.

Lyn Meredith, yes, yes. He was part of our group. I can't remember any stories about Lyn. He was rather a shy sort of— well, I shouldn't use the word "shy", but he wasn't a pushy person. He didn't push himself forward actually, but he came and did things. Very knowledgeable and a great help with garden plants and things like that actually.

Then when you were President, your Vice President was Olive Royds?

Yes, yes. Olive used to come in for our meetings each month from Braidwood, drove herself in, leaving her husband to cook his meal. She always complained, "I leave him things and what do you think he eats? He goes and boils some eggs and has a couple of boiled eggs for dinner instead and he's not supposed to be having all these eggs."

But, no, Olive was a marvellous person. Very fond of Olive actually. She was so keen. She would come in every day and— every meeting and drive herself in, drive herself back to Braidwood each night. I always had the Garden History meetings in my place here actually. I always had them down in the sitting room and in the winter months I would always— when they arrived I would always have a bowl of soup, so everyone would sit down with a plate or a bowl of soup and some toast or what have you, and then perhaps some coffee afterwards and sit round and have our meeting in the sitting room downstairs actually, and they were pleasant. They were a pleasant meeting, not terribly formal.

But do you feel that led— how do you feel that influenced the Society?

I think it did in many ways. It made it more of a friendly group rather than people sitting round a table— coming in and sitting round a table, having discussion and going off. I mean, we would often— like I am talking today actually— talk about some other things as well as the business of the meeting actually. We'd often say, "No, we must get down to business", you know.

At one time in the newsletter I see there were concerns about the Society making itself relevant and not seeming to be exclusive and to make them cutting edge. They used that very contemporary phrase "cutting edge". Was there a need for that?

No, I don't think so. That wasn't my idea actually. No, that I think came about with the introduction of the professional landscape gardeners. They wanted to make it more professional.

I saw the Garden History Society as a group of enthusiasts rather than a group of professionals actually. We had that problem also earlier on with the plant people.

I remember at one stage at a conference in Hobart there was a great discussion and conflict actually where a group of people wanted to change the Society into a horticultural society, the history of plants rather than the history of gardens and we were most emphatic, another group of us, were most emphatic that it had to be a Garden History Society, not a plant history society, and that was put to the vote and, of course, fortunately it was defeated, that it wasn't going to be a plant history society. And that's been one of the problems we get, in groups who want to change the Society to what they think the Society should be all about, not necessarily garden history actually.

Is that something that's happened throughout the history of the organisation?

Yes, and it still happens actually. I think that the Society is going a bit too much towards the professional landscape gardeners and it won't be long before they will be saying, "Well, we really should say it's the Garden History and Landscape Society." They will want to fit in landscape. That will be the first process actually. So that's my prediction actually. You always get— well, I mean, it's understandable, I suppose. They think, "Oh, yes, this is a great Society, this is marvellous, but I think it needs a bit more towards what we're more interested in", sort of thing actually.

Is that in the Canberra Branch?

Well, I've not been involved in the Canberra Branch now for some years actually, so I can't really say. It's just my observation with the general trend of the Garden History Society itself actually and the fact that, well— well, the things in the journal, for instance, itself actually. We're getting too much, too much I think, or getting more of the landscape aspect of it, not the garden aspect. They keep saying, of course, landscape is garden, you know, it's— no, no, no, which I don't believe a word of.

You don't?

No, no.

So what to you is a garden?

A garden is— to be a garden is a personal thing actually. Its is a …. It is something that's created by a person for their own enjoyment, and there are other aspects of it, preservation of various plant species and what have you, but basically a garden is a personal thing, not a— I mean, if it's a botanic gardens it's a society thing, not a personal thing actually, and if it's landscape it's nobody's.

Could one play devil's advocate and suggest it's a collective ownership?

You know what I think about collective ownerships?

No, I don't. Why don't you tell me?

Having lived in an apartment block that is collectively owned, yes, quite. I don't think— only sections of it are owned by the person who is occupying it, so to speak, and so a collective garden isn't, in my opinion, a garden at all actually. A landscape is— well, it's not owned by anybody. It's owned by the government actually more than anything else and you don't want the government involved in any of these things.

That was one of the ideas in the— amongst the aims that the Society saw its role as advising owners and perhaps government bodies on different areas of aspects of garden history. Is that something you saw that it fulfilled or had value?

Oh, yes, I suppose so, except that governments don't take any notice of societies.

Is that the case in Canberra where you were so close to government instrumentalities?

Yes.

Literally physically close.

We fought tooth and nail to save a garden in Canberra. We didn't get anywhere because the government organisations were opposed.

Which garden is that, Victor?

It was Harold White's garden on Mugga Way up in the— which was a beautiful garden which he had created in the garden and we got it registered, but they didn't enforce the registration and the people that bought it let it go to ruin so that they could get rid of it and what have you, and it was then sold to a person that wanted to redevelop the whole area, build himself a stately mansion, redo the garden and what have you, and we fought it, but we didn't win.

The government— we got no support from the government heritage group. They opposed it. It went to court actually. We actually had a court case over it actually.

The Garden History Society fighting the case actually. We had a barrister who gave his services, a nice bloke actually, to support us. A quite well known historian actually he was. And the opposing group brought a barrister from Sydney to— I know I had a— I really did dislike him actually. I kept asking the chairman if he would please repeat his question, the barrister's. He was one of those barristers that would go on and on and on in his question and then at the end say, "Do you agree?" And I would say to the chairman, "Would you ask the barrister to repeat his question?" He finally gave up with me actually eventually. But that's what barristers do. I mean, they .....

As you tell this story, Victor, your body language is very— conveys a sense of the frustration that this must have imposed upon the Society to have to do this battle and then to lose it.

Yes, yes. Well, our President at that time— was it Jocelyn? Yes, Jocelyn. Can't think what her surname is.[7]

Is this the National President, Jocelyn .....

No, no, no, no, no. This is the local branch.

Right.

And she was very nervous in her presentation. She'd never appeared in a court as a witness or anything actually. Well, neither had I actually, but I by that stage wasn't going to take any jumped up Sydney barrister telling me— so anyhow, yes.

But Richard Ratcliffe was one of the witnesses. He spoke very well on the importance of the garden as a historic garden. And then there was Judith Baskin who was— Judith was— she was a friend of Sir Harold White. Well, she was a librarian from the National Library, Judith was actually, and she'd known Sir Harold right from the very early stages of the garden actually. So she was one of the main agitators of preserving the garden actually and she spoke well on the importance of the garden as a Canberra garden, particularly a garden from the point of view of Canberra residents, particularly those in the Mugga Way area and the embassies.

Because Sir Harold used to have a morning tea— well, it wasn't morning tea, it was morning drinks, I suppose, in his garden every Saturday morning and all of these important people in Canberra, the ambassadors and the top people in the government and the Prime Minister and, you know, they would all turn up at this meeting in his garden. It was a

[7] Correction: Virginia Berger

lovely garden with a fairly— it was a large garden. It probably cost him the earth to keep it going actually in Canberra with its— well, with its water restrictions and its rates and taxes and what have you.

There was a lovely description in one of your branch newsletters about a cocktail party that the Society had had in the garden.

Yes.

They talked about the design and the layout and so on.

We had a couple of meetings in the— cocktail party type meetings in Sir Harold's garden actually. He was very welcoming to the Garden History Society and its aims and he would open the garden for us, particularly in the spring. He'd let the wisteria go wild and it had grown up and all the trees of the driveway and in the spring there would be this massive view of lilac all the way down the driveway and it was magnificent actually.

Is that still there?

No, no, no. That's been demolished by the people who bought it and destroyed it.

Victor, did you have those morning drinks through your association with Sir Harold as a fellow librarian? How did that come about?

I was never greatly involved in it. I did go to a couple of them, but I was— I lived on the other side of the lake and my connection with the National Library was not— well, not a close connection in that sort of way actually. I always claim that one of the reasons I got the job in Canberra, when I came to Canberra to start the new library at the Canberra College, Sir Harold White was a member of the committee that interviewed, and so I always claim Sir Harold got me the job, yes, and I had the pleasure, of course, of being invited to all the grand events at the opening of the new National Library when it was opened in 1986 actually. No, no, no. No, no, no, not 1986— 1968 actually. I'm getting my dates back to front. Yes, quite.

You spoke then about the aims, he was supportive of the aims of the Society. When you began in Canberra, did you take on the aims of the Society nationally or add to that with your own aims or create different aims?

No, we didn't add anything at all actually. We accepted the aims that the Society had decided on and they were the aims of our group actually, our branch. Some of the things we did, I suppose, like the tours of gardens, we invented ourselves, but they didn't become our aims. They were just part of our work.

One of the other places that I also saw through the newsletter, there was a— caused certain discontent was the Peninsula— is it the Acton Peninsula?

Oh, the Acton Peninsula. Oh, yes. Well, the Acton Peninsula is historic Canberra-wise because it was where the first ACT settlement sort of began, where the … where you might say the city began. I mean, when the city was named in 1911, it was created on Capitol Hill where Parliament House now stands, but the Acton Peninsula was where the offices of the organisation, Burley Griffin and all the rest of it were established. They were established on the Acton Peninsula, where the Canberra Hospital eventually was built, the one that we blew up.

Yes.

Yes. So anyhow, that was where the various offices of the— and that was right through from the various earliest stages of the ACT and, well, there was some agitation about the destruction of some of the trees on Acton Peninsula that had been planted at that particular time and that was where the business of whether this should be preserved or not— we didn't win.

So those trees have gone?

Yes, yes, yes. They blew up the hospital and built the National Museum on it so that they could preserve the bits but not the trees. I think the car park took the trees actually.

Was there much relationship between Canberra and the other groups, the other branches, New South Wales, Victoria and so on?

In the early days there was a lot of cooperation between the Canberra branch— or the ACT Branch and the Southern Tablelands Branch. That's in Braidwood.[8]

They're closer geographically as well.

Not Braidwood— Berrima.

Berrima.

Partly because the secretary of the Society lived in Berrima.

The secretary of the Canberra Society?

No, the main secretary. The secretary of the Society lived in Berrima, Tim .....

Oh, Tim North?

Tim North.

[8] Correction: Berrima.

Oh, he was the federal secretary at the time, that's right.

Yes. And that was part of our connection. When our branch first started, Tim North wasn't the secretary, I don't think. He lived in Sydney down near— he had a terrace house down in .....

Was it Edgecliff?

Edgecliff? Near the retirement village, the Anglican retirement village in— oh, near where the Holdsworth Gallery— near Queen Street.

Oh, yes. Woollahra.

In Woollahra, that's right, yes. He had a townhouse there because I can remember I used to, when I was in Sydney, often walk through Woollahra to the galleries there, particularly the Holdsworth— was it the Holdsworth Gallery?

There was a Holdsworth Gallery.

Yes, the Holdsworth Gallery there which was one of my favourite galleries where I bought a few paintings over the years.

I should say that we're at your home and I really expected to be surrounded by books, but instead I'm surrounded by beautiful artwork.

Well, there's plenty of books if you look in the study and the bedrooms upstairs. Yes. Yes, well, I've collected paintings ever since I was a child actually.

From your— you mentioned your aunt— no, your mother's aunt who gave you the postcards from China when we began much earlier this morning.

Don't let's get back to that.

We won't.

Yes.

You were Treasurer at one time, but always in small societies raising funds is an issue. Was that something for the Society here?

We weren't really into running things to raise money actually. We were more interested in doing things rather than raising money actually. I know you raise money to help support historic gardens, but that wasn't one of our aims and so we weren't really involved in raising money actually.

You mention a stall— the newsletter refers to a stall you held regularly at Lanyon, at their .....

Oh, yes. Yes, we did raise money.

A little.

Yes, a little.

A little. It was never huge amounts.

No, no, no. Yes, that was part of our aim in preserving historic plants actually. We would do a stall at Lanyon and sell plants from our historic gardens. Olive Royds would pot up all sorts of things from her garden in Durham Hall. Richard Ratcliffe would pot up things from his garden. Oh, we had a couple of other people. Joan Fry was another one who used to pot up things for the stall from her garden. There was another member of our staff enthusiastic. Oh, I can't remember what her name was.

Is that something you did, Victor?

I did a bit actually. Yes, I did some of my English Daisies. They're the ones that flower in October. The Cottage Shasta Daisy, English Cottage Shasta Daisy. I think it's Shasta Minor or something, not the big ones. Some of them are flowering at the moment actually. I had the front garden practically covered with these at one stage, but they all got— most of them got killed off by the drought. But, no, they were my favourite because they were the ones that flowered in October. The big Shasta Daisies, I had some of those too actually, flower in— oh, Christmas time, December actually. But these, they only grow about that high actually. They're quite short actually, and they're not big flowers. They're a small daisy flower actually.

But I know I remember at one of the stalls at Lanyon talking a woman into buying a pot of these saying how marvellous they were, that they spread easily and they flower in October. So I sold her those. I remember we actually visited her garden at some stage on one of our garden tours, and I can't think of what her name is or what the garden was, but when we arrived there were all these daisies and she said, "You told me they would spread everywhere. They're marvellous." So I had one success at any rate.

Did you enjoy those sorts of days at Lanyon?

Oh, yes, they were great fun actually. I sometimes think I should have been a salesman.

So what else would you have sold beside daisies?

Well, I would sell anything that was on the stall actually. I would talk to people and say, "Oh, yes, this does so and so and so and so. You really should have one of these."

Actually, you mention there that those days were great fun and, in fact, in reading the newsletters again in preparing for today there did seem to be a very nice warmth that, if one can detect those things from a newsletter, it wasn't all crisp and efficient.

Oh, no, no, no. No, no, no, it wasn't anything like that at all. Everyone would just turn up with their things in the car or in a trailer and we'd erect the tables and say, "Oh, what have you got this time?" And sometimes buy some of them before they went on official sale. No, it was a friendly group. I mean, the Garden History Society was a friendly society in many ways actually. We all got on well together. Some people may have thought we were not serious enough sometimes, but we were serious in our aims and what we did, but we always enjoyed ourselves doing it actually, and I think that's the important thing about a society. If you all just sit round going "Er, what was that about? Oh, we don't agree with the constitution. We should change the constitution", oh. I always say let's forget the constitution and do what we want.

INTERVIEW BREAK

Yes, quite.

You were also a member of the National Management Committee for quite a time.

Yes.

How were those meetings?

They weren't always quite so friendly. I got myself into trouble a few times actually, because I disagreed.

Do you remember what you disagreed with?

Oh, yes. I disagreed when the chairman and the secretary made a decision about something without informing the committee.

Do you remember what the issue was?

I prefer not to speak about it actually.

Okay. Of course, of course.

It's one of those things that I rather sort of made my presence felt. The secretary actually resigned from the Society over it all, so I would prefer not to go into that actually. That was only one of my conflicts with the chairman or chairwoman.

But in general, how did you feel about representing the ACT Branch on the National Management Committee?

How did I feel about it? Well, I thought it was important for the views of the ACT Branch to be heard, and I expressed them. Whether they were always accepted was immaterial really. I just presented what I felt was the ACT Branch's opinion on all sorts of matters relating to the national management of the Society actually. I, for instance, at one stage discussed with the branch about the matter of changing the logo of the Society— this wasn't the recent one, this was earlier— and we agreed that it was not a good idea actually and so when it was discussed at the national meeting, I opposed any change to the logo. They dropped the idea fortunately at that stage. I argued that a logo is intended to give you an identity and if you changed the logo you have to start and create a new identity and so you're destroying everything you've done before. That's why I opposed it.

I didn't have a say in the most recent change of the logo. I think it was a disaster myself, personally, and I don't like the new logo of the Garden History Society. I opposed— well, I didn't oppose him, but I know it was Peter Watts' idea to create a new logo. I still disagree in changing a logo actually. I think you're destroying your history actually by changing the logo, no matter what arguments you produce in favour of having a new logo, because it tells people more about your society or something. Perhaps I shouldn't say it, but I say that the new logo should be the logo for a tree destruction society, not a garden history society because it is the cross-section of a tree to show its history, but you have to destroy the tree in doing it. So that's why I say it's a tree destruction society not a garden history society. And that's now gone into the record, good. I still don't like it actually.

What was the— I'm trying to think what was the early logo.

It was a floral wreath, in effect, actually.

Oh, yes.

A wreath of flowers which was done by our original patron, Joan Law-Smith.

Joan, yes, yes.

And it's about flowers and, of course, the landscape people don't like flowers. They want the landscape as the .....

Usually at the end of an interview I ask people is there anything that I haven't asked them about that they want to discuss, but clearly you've put your issues up front.

Well, yes. I don't see any reason why I shouldn't say them.

The National Management Committee is a group from all around the country with different climates, different communities. Apart from issues that— are there issues of melding together that you would like to talk about that really indicate how the Society functioned, how it moved, how that committee moved it forward and continued to evolve the ethos?

Well, I think one of the important moves in the Society was the creation of the garden history database which was created by Richard .....

Aitken.

Richard Aitken, that's right. Richard Aitken— to pull together all the material about garden history and from that, of course, was to be the book, *The Oxford Companion to Garden History in Australia*. That, I think, is one of the important things that moved garden history forward into garden history, not just garden looking. Up until that time most of the activities were visiting gardens.

The history of the gardens was done by the ACT Branch by doing the history of various gardens, and Melbourne took on a number of gardens it had supported and assisted in repairing and restoring, and Tasmania, of course, was always a very strong garden history group and so that those three states or three branches of the Society were the ones who were primarily interested in garden history, whereas the other states' branches came to it a bit later, I suppose, and perhaps their views may have been somewhat different in that— although South Australia Garden History Society has always been a good advocate of the historic gardens of South Australia.

Queensland is very much behind, I think, in advocating the ideas of the Society and Western Australia always is isolated on the other side of the continent. The area that I think New South Wales has neglected is the New England area, the Northern New South Wales area. It's well supplied by the ACT Branch on the southern, because we include the Monaro and what have you, and we've got the Southern New South Wales Branch in Berrima and the Sydney Branch, but anything north of Sydney is neglected, and that's another area that New South Wales should be promoting, I think.

It has Northern New South Wales in its title, the Sydney Branch. I think it's Sydney and Northern New South Wales or Northern New South Wales and Sydney.

Yes, but it doesn't do anything.

Is that a question perhaps of volunteering and people's time, as you must have encountered to some extent in ACT?

Well, perhaps they haven't promoted it. You've got to promote things. They don't just happen automatically actually, I don't think actually. I think there was some recent sort of move for the New South Wales Branch to do something in Armidale, was it? I mean, there are hundreds of historical gardens in Northern New South Wales.

As you know.

Well, of very long standing actually, not just 20th century, 19th century.

I was going to ask— this leads on in a fashion to the question I was going to ask you about the centrality of Victoria and Melbourne to the Society, the development of the Society, and I wonder— well, there's probably a couple of questions, so I won't do your barrister's trick, but there's a question of locality and there's a question of geography and I wonder if in New South Wales the geography of the state doesn't lend itself as easily in access, transport, the time involved in getting to these northern places that perhaps may not prevail in the ACT or may not prevail in Melbourne?

Well, yes, this is a problem actually and it's a problem not only in New South Wales, but in Queensland and in Western Australia, probably South Australia as well. It's a geography problem actually, but there is a Northern New South Wales area that used to have a new state movement actually. There was even a referendum on having a new state for the New England area, an ideal spot for another branch actually. But what is the central organisation and the national committee doing about it? Not asking— did they ask New South Wales to try and establish a branch in New England actually? Set it in Armidale perhaps or anywhere else. Well, they've got a university in New England, so it's a centre where there are educated people, you might say, who would be interested in that sort of thing.

So that's my feeling about the Society. It's centred in Melbourne. It wasn't always centred in Melbourne. The national committee wasn't originally in Melbourne at all actually. It was moved there from when Tim North gave up his secretaryship in Berrima. It was then moved by— the President of the Victorian Branch organised it to be located in the Botanic Gardens in Melbourne. She organised for it to be established with the secretary and the headquarters in Melbourne. So that is why it's now still in Melbourne. But the Victorian Branch always was a very strong part of the Garden History Society. That's where it started, in effect, actually.

Why did it start there?

It started through the— I think it started through the National Trust of Victoria who always regarded Victoria as the garden state anyhow, and the historic houses that they had, like Rippon Lea and— oh, I can't think of what the other one is. It was the garden that was restored as well as

the house actually, and it was the garden and the house that was open for exhibition.

Not Werribee Park?

Oh, no, no, no, no, it's not Werribee Park. Yes, I know Werribee Park quite well because I lived in Geelong for some time.

Of course, of course. But you mentioned the National Trust. Could the National— just playing devil's advocate here, could the National Trust in New South Wales, in Sydney perhaps, have also brought forth the Garden History Society or is there a difference in tone or ethos or style?

Yes. I think in New South Wales the National Trust was, in the beginning, the early days, was much, much more interested in the houses, in the buildings. It was preserving the buildings, gardens didn't come in until much, much later actually.

I know the first fight that the National Trust in New South Wales had was to preserve a building, a house, where there was a plan to put a road through, a super highway through, and they fought the battle to— they didn't win, of course, and the house was destroyed. But that was what got the New South Wales Branch going and so they then from there went on essentially preserving houses.

The Trust?

The Trust, yes, sorry.

So could one suggest that the Garden History Society could not have evolved out of New South Wales but only from Victoria?

Well, that probably is true actually. I mean, Melbourne had always carried on about its marvellous Botanic Gardens, and they are. They're wonderful actually. Although Sydney's Botanic Gardens are older and, in my opinion, much better, but that's because I've got Sydney connections, I guess. I love the Melbourne gardens actually. Every time I go to Melbourne I go for a walk through the gardens, no matter what I've gone to Melbourne for. Usually end up in the art gallery afterwards. I have a few stories I could tell about that too, but I won't.

Are they to do with the Garden History Society?

No.

I have a feeling you have many stories.

Yes. Well, I think that was the reason why. Melbourne always saw itself as a garden state, a garden— Melbourne is a garden city and not just the Botanic Gardens, but its other gardens, ones in behind Parliament House in Melbourne.

And what about the Western District and the outer gardens, country gardens?

Yes. Well, some of the stately homes in the Western District of Victoria had magnificent gardens and they are written about and talked about in all kinds of ways, more so than any in New South Wales. Our stately homes were usually much more restricted in their size and we didn't have— I say "we"— New South Wales didn't have the same boom in gardens, in houses, country houses and what have you that Victoria had and that was partly because Melbourne became an industrial city and that was protected by protectionists. Victoria was a protectionist state, protected its buildings, protected its— not its buildings, but its industries and so the industry flourished in Melbourne and that had the boom after the gold rushes and all that.

New South Wales was a free trade state, so it didn't develop the industries and so didn't develop quite the same ethos of wealthy country people building their magnificent houses and creating their wonderful gardens and what have you, that Victoria did.

So that was why Victoria has always considered itself pre-eminent in gardens. I mean, it has these garden festivals and garden— even today it still has this garden consciousness. I know its motorcars at one stage used to have the "Garden State" on them at one stage actually. And that's the reason why it would start in Victoria actually. That's where the Open Garden Scheme started, in Victoria. So it was obvious.

Peter Watts speaks about the 'tone' of the Society being different then. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Well, that gets me back to my thing about landscape gardeners. No, the feeling was that it was the Dame Elisabeth's sort of set, you might say, that were the people who owned beautiful gardens that were, I suppose, the backbone of the creation of the whole idea and the whole concept of the idea. You were wanting to preserve and promote the beautiful gardens that people in Melbourne had created actually, and so you had the ladies who wanted to have a garden history society which was, you might say, a ladies' society.

How was the tone different in Canberra?

Well, Canberra being a public service town, it differed in that it was looking at things from a government point of view actually, I think, and gardens were part of the promotion of Canberra as a garden city and that's why they've got—

that's why Canberra has got such an enormous quantity of trees in that you sort of set up a suburb and plant trees and then build houses. I mean, when I came to live in Cook, the only trees were that group of trees in the little park opposite.

No, it's ..... (6.50.47)

There were no other trees in Cook at all. So now you drive through Cook, all these gums trees all down all the streets and, you know, they've all been created since 1968. So it's a different concept of— and that's why our Garden History Society perhaps, ACT Branch, might be more interested in trees rather than in flowers.

And your publications have all been, except for the Ainslie one, they've been on old gardens. Ainslie was on more recent gardens.

Yes, yes. We didn't do one on Sir Harold White's garden, which is something we should have done, of course, but, no, they've all been on old gardens and we've always looked out of Canberra, not in Canberra. I mean, we've looked in Canberra on our garden tours within the city, but not as part of our program of— well, we were restoring old gardens, in effect, the old ones, but we've not done surveys of gardens in Canberra actually, except for the Ainslie one, which is a more recent one where we did a district or a particular area of particular gardens. Ainslie was one of the old suburbs and, well, there have been a few problems about trees in that area too recently where our ACT government wants to cut down the trees.

We're not left in any doubt about your views on that. But in terms of surveying and so on, I also recall reading in the newsletter that there was a workshop here in your garden which you used as the example.

Oh, yes.

Could you tell me about that then?

Yes. Well, we wanted— Dick [Radcliffe] had written a booklet about surveying gardens and he showed how to draw up a plan and then once you've got your ground plan of the garden, you then look at the planting of the garden and the trees and what have you. Oh, you put the trees and what have you in the plan, if it's got any. And then we decided that we would sort of do a garden and get people who wanted to to come and draw up the garden, do the basic plan first and put in the other bits, the plants, the trees and what have you, and we discussed where we would do it and I said, "Well, you can do my garden if you like." I said, "It's not a— it would be an easy garden in many ways because it's a courtyard garden and it's formal." It's not— don't look at it at the moment. I've lost my gardener at the moment, and my lawnmower man and— yes, okay. Well, anyhow, it's a formal garden. It's in … a walled garden actually. The whole of the backyard is walled with a brick wall, eight foot high, and a piece down the bottom where you go down some steps and into another area. And it's a formal garden with a piece of lawn, a square, a pergola down one side and what have you. I said it's a sort of straightforward plan in that if you want to sort of draw up an easy plan … you don't have to have the curves of some driveway or what have you. It was to be the back garden. So they said, "Oh, yes, that's a good idea."

So they organised it. Richard Ratcliffe said he would supervise it. And so people came with their sheets of paper and pencils and rulers and all the rest of it and he showed them how to go about drawing up plans of my garden actually. I know one girl, or one woman, said, "Did you know that your central point in your garden is off centre?" I said, "Well, I'm not surprised. I did it by eye." Because I've got a square garden in the middle of the square part of the lawns and the central part of that has got an urn in the middle of it and so it's slightly off centre.

[Difficult to distinguish] … might agree with that. You also in the minutes— or the newsletter I remember there was a great mention of the fantastic lunch that you and Joan Fry and Olive Royds put together.

Oh.

Do you remember that as well?

No, I don't remember that at all actually. I've prepared so many fantastic lunches. But, no, I don't remember that one in particular actually. But Joan Fry was very good, and Olive. Both of them were fantastic cooks and did marvellous jobs with providing us with appropriate things.

All our meetings, whenever we met on a garden visit to Braidwood gardens or what have you, we always had a fantastic afternoon tea.

The Society, as you know, is documenting people's stories and recollections in this way with this oral history, but one of the things that your group looked at doing was having a visual record, a sort of logbook, scrapbook. You talked about it. I wondered if that ever came to fruition.

No, I don't think it did actually. To do something like that you need one person who is enthusiastic who will do it and everybody else was too busy doing all the other things for it to really get off the ground actually. It's a good idea to do that, but, no, it's— well, we took

photographs of all the gardens that we visited, but we never ever put them all together as a single database or logbook or what have you. So that, no, we never ever did achieve that actually, which is a pity actually. I don't know that the national group has ever produced a group of material on its various annual meetings and district conferences actually.

We've gone to a number of different places … in Tasmania we've been in Launceston and Hobart, a number of ones in Victoria. We've been in South Australia at least twice, if not more. We've been to them in New South Wales. We've had two annual conferences and garden tours in Canberra. We've had one in Queensland in Toowoomba and I think there was a recent one in Western Australia, wasn't there?

There was. And I think the one next month is in Tasmania again.

Yes, yes. Well, Tasmania is a favourite spot because it's got so many lovely gardens actually, and it's got a climate, of course, that is different from the rest of Australia actually. It's much more green. That's why Mr Brown is green.

Are you going to the conference?

No, I'm not actually. I've pretty well given up going to conferences. I find it too difficult to get around so much actually, getting in and out of buses and even getting myself there to the place I find a bit of a chore actually and so, no, I've given up. Most of the people I knew no longer go to these. I haven't created a new group of friends and acquaintances in the Garden History Society, so, no, I haven't been for a few years now actually.

Was there a favourite amongst the conferences?

I don't know actually. I think the one in Western Victoria I enjoyed, particularly because I was seeing things that I didn't know about and I hadn't seen and I hadn't seen photographs of, and I saw gardens there which were just superb. Actually, I think I wrote an account of that for the journal actually.

In the journal of the Society?

Yes, yes. That was the Western District of Victoria. I can't now remember what year it was even actually.

Well, the record— the time can always be added into that. ***[Ballarat 1984?]***

Yes. But, as I say, it was an area that I didn't know and I'd never been in and, as I say, I've never read anything about the gardens or the houses or what have you from that particular part of Australia and so I found that fascinating, and I loved it actually. I mean, I've loved the tours of Tasmania, both the Hobart one and I think two in Launceston area because they were gardens that I knew about and houses and buildings that I knew about as well, and that was like meeting a lot of old friends actually and seeing them in person rather than seeing them from a book or from photographs.

Do you think the Society— how do you feel the Society juggles that mix of the intellectual academic development with the conference papers and then the social aspect and the garden viewings afterwards?

Yes. Well, in the early days we used to sort of argue that there should be more papers. We should have more of the garden history and then have a look at the beautiful gardens. A lot of people were more interested in the gardens and looking at the gardens rather than sitting and hearing about the history of a particular garden or about gardens, historic gardens in particular, and it's a difficult mix.

I think the Society has managed now to come to a good mix actually by having a group of lectures and then having sometimes the garden visits in between, sometimes then the gardens and then following it with a special garden tour afterwards for those people that are not particularly interested in sitting listening to a lecture, because you've got both sorts of people actually and some people couldn't stand sitting listening to someone talking about these things, even with a nice collection of slides.

Of course, the ACT Branch had its winter seminars regularly. Do you remember those?

Oh, yes, yes, yes. They were a success but not a raging success, you might say, actually. As I say, some people are not particularly interested in sitting and listening to— perhaps they are more so nowadays than they used to be, but .....

I spoke to Stuart Read and he recalled one at Cooma which— I think it was a Pat Boley or Pat Bolling, a name like that, and he raved about the paper.

I don't remember the one at Cooma. I'm just trying to think actually.

It was in winter and in the newsletter they said it was the best time of year to have a conference in Cooma because you could see the structure of the garden and the vegetation.

No, I don't remember that one. Oh, wait a minute, yes, I do. Trisha Dixon was involved in organising it. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Yes.

You've organised so many.

Yes. Trisha Dixon became the president— the chairman after me actually, after I was president. Trisha Dixon, you know, of course, is— she lives in Cooma actually, and— yes, she lives in a property out of Cooma and has a lovely garden herself actually which is a historic garden. And, yes, she organised the tour of the garden in Cooma actually, and that really was a marvellous— as you say, you could see the garden structure when it no longer had its luxuriant green coverage actually, and that is an interesting thing. That takes me back to the garden that we restored in Braidwood where I said, you know, the garden was smothered in foliage and we had to climb through underneath all of the foliage to find the structure of the garden, and that's sometimes difficult to see the structure of a garden until you actually— well, in a place where there's a lot of deciduous trees when you can actually see what is underneath it all actually and what holds it all up.

Just referring to my notes for that, I think it was '94 and it was an August winter seminar and you spoke on *Erudite Literature for the winter months*.

Oh, did I. Oh. Don't remember that. Yes. Well, I'd always been interested in winter flowers and winter— mainly winter flowers actually, and what you could grow in the winter when you could have some flowers. That came from my interest in the English garden writer, Beverley Nichols. Beverley Nichols was— actually, in many ways Beverley Nichols started me off on garden history. He wrote a number of books about gardens in England. He's a bit, well, romantic type novels about his gardens and the people that were involved in it and what he did with the garden, and his cats. And I remember buying— when I came back from Canada I bought a copy of one of his books at a book sale called *Merry Hall*. It's called *Merry Hall* and it was about his buying of an old house in England in the country. He'd previously written earlier books about old houses in the country but this particular one was about an old house which is the manor house and he bought this manor house called Merry Hall and moved into Merry Hall which he then started to restore and restore the garden in Merry Hall. It was far too big for him and the garden was far too big and elaborate. Well, not elaborate, but it was just far too big, surrounded by elm trees, enormous elm trees. Well, he set about chopping them all down actually, and he ....

INTERRUPTION

Victor, we were just talking about Beverley Nichols when the CD expired. So would you like to just .....

Oh, Beverley Nichols, as I say, was the first person who— well, he set me off on the whole thing because he said in one of his books that you must own your garden. It's no use trying to create a garden when you are renting, renting a house or if you don't own it. You've got to own the garden, own the land that it is on and so that set me off. And I'd been living in Armidale for a couple of years in a nice little garden flat actually and I said to myself, Beverley Nichols said I must own a garden, so I must buy myself a house.

That wasn't something your parents inculcated in you?

No, no, no, no. It was the comment in Beverley Nichols that hit me and I said, oh. So I then set off to find a house. I wanted an old house. As I said to the agent, "I want an old house in bad condition." He didn't believe me, of course. I wanted a house that I could restore, you know. I didn't want one that had already been beautifully painted and had a perfect garden with a green lawn sweeping down to— I said, "No, I want an old house with a wreck of a garden that I can work on."

And what was the reaction of your friends to this?

Oh, they thought I was mad. I know someone who came to see me just after I'd acquired this little house and they said, "What on earth did you buy an old house like this for?" And my mother when she saw it she said, "You're stupid." So anyhow— so it was Beverley Nichols that set me off on that and started me off on my career as a garden historian, I suppose, in some ways actually and creating my own garden in the way I wanted it and so that was all .....

Was it hard for you to leave that garden?

That was the hardest thing of all, to leave my house and garden in Armidale, and I said, well, I want my own library. I want to be able to work on and create and develop a library, my library, not doing someone else's. Because up until that time I'd been deputy librarian at New England, University of New England, where I was doing what someone else wanted and someone else's concept of what he thought was a good library. Oh, he was a very good boss and I learnt a lot from him, but I wanted my own library and so I said, well, I'm not going to have to sit round here for the next 20 years until he dies, and then I might not get the library anyhow, so I reluctantly said, when they offered me the job in Canberra, I will move to Canberra and start a new life in Canberra, and very regretfully I left my little old house with its chandelier.

Have you been back to see what's happened to its garden?

I've never been game to go and have a look. I've always believed the saying "never go back". It's never the same and you're invariably disappointed when you see it actually. I know I did this when I first went to— when I first visited Florence— not Florence, but I have been back— to Venice. I just simply loved Venice and I was a much, much younger person then and I was by myself and I just— Venice to me was magic and so I said I'm never going back. And it's the same with the gardens.

I don't want to go back and have a look at the garden of our old house in Ashbury and I don't want to go and have a look at my little house in Armidale because it won't be mine any more. It will be somebody else's and it will be different and I prefer to remember it as it was for me actually. So, yes— so anyhow, that was when I bought my old house … tt was in need of reconditioning indeed.

You speak about wanting to start your own library and I don't— I daren't, not I don't— you're holding up your hands in horror. You've been so generous this morning with your time and your recollections for the Society about the Society, but this is just a sort of a slight tangent that perhaps we should put the egg timer on for so it only goes for three minutes, but you were— at the same time you were involved with the Society you were also publishing a raft of publications. How did you manage the involvement of your work, the work of the Garden History Society and the work of your publishing?

Well, when I came to Canberra to create a library, I had to start from scratch. There was nothing. I was given a room, a telephone, a telephone book, which is the first book in the library, and a secretary and they said, "There it is. We need you to give us a library." So I had to create a library from the ground up, from nothing, and so the first two years I was in Canberra I spent creating a library. I rented a house— I rented two houses, I had to move from one to the other, and at the same time I was having this house built. When I came to Canberra I had a look at— they didn't have any old houses that were disreputable or needing attention.

On that note, did you think of living outside of Canberra?

I did and I did at one stage have a thought of buying one of the old houses in Bungendore, which is out of Canberra. Then I thought, oh, it's a bit too far out. Nowadays it's almost a suburb. And so I said— I looked at all these houses and I didn't like any of them at all. They all had pokey little dining rooms and pokey little living rooms, I thought. They had nice kitchens and nice bathrooms. I said, I'm not interested in kitchens and bathrooms. I want a house that I can enjoy the space, you know.

Anyhow, I finally— the bloke who was showing me round the various houses in Canberra took me back to the office to see what else he could find from his books and on the wall there was a picture, a photograph hanging on the wall of this house, and I'd seen this picture before in Armidale in a magazine and I thought, oh, I like that, it's nice, isn't it? Oh, yes. And so I saw this on the wall and I said to the fellow, "If you could show me that house, I'd buy it right away." He said, "Oh, that's no problem. We'll build it for you." I said, "You're on. Let's go and look for land." So he then took me round looking for land. And they did build it actually.

And did you build the garden, your garden here?

Yes, yes, I did that myself actually. I designed the layout and the pergola and the walls and all the rest of it, and they were all built at the same time as the house actually. It was all planned beforehand. I wasn't going to have any lawn in the front. As you can see, I don't have a lawn in the front. I was just going to have a wild garden in the front. It's certainly wild now. And my formal garden in the back with the balcony of the house looking out over the garden and the back verandah opening out onto the garden, the formal garden, and the wisteria over the pergola, which is all in massive bloom at the moment. Yes.

But coming back to your other library, it's not the library at the college— I've used the word loosely— the library of your publications.

Oh, I see.

You have ..... (6.38.49) all of that at the same time?

Yes. Well, I didn't do any publishing, although I started the Mulini Press, which is the publishing— my publishing company, so called with a one-man show, I started that in Armidale, in my little house in Armidale. It started on a very old hand-operated duplicator, you know. My first publication was a publication on it, and then I published a couple of other little things in Armidale.

When I came to Canberra I put that on hold because I was spending all my time creating a library, keeping an eye on this house, which the builder went broke on it. He had 52 houses in construction and went broke. When this house

was just— it had just got to the lockup stage, it wasn't completed. The receiver took over his 52 houses. Mine was the last to be finished two years later. So that was all happening while I was creating my library, my job time library actually, the one at the College.

But you were still working at the library at the College when you began your involvement in the Garden History Society?

Yes, yes, yes.

When did you retire?

Twenty-two years ago.

In '88— '86?

Eighty-six, yes. Yes, it was July the— the 4th of July. I said it's my Independence Day. 1986, yes, that was when I retired.

I've only made a note of some of the books that are more garden history and I've resisted putting down your other vast panoply of publications, but you've been incredibly busy in your retirement.

Well, I always keep saying I've been lazy actually. Yes. Well, I continued the Mulini Press while I— more or less as a hobby while I was working in the Canberra library, the Canberra College Library, and I said, well, when I retire I'm going to become a full-time publisher. So I did. When I retired I said, well, now, I don't know— I had a number of books that I'd already published, including the Edna Walling book and Jean Galbraith book. They had been, I think— I think they were published when I was still working at the College Library actually. However, when I retired I then settled down to become a full-time publisher concentrating more on Australian literature, early Australia literature, 19th century.

All the books that— or a lot of the books that were published is serials in newspapers that never got published as books because English publishers were not interested in all that stuff. So I've been publishing those books. And about 10 years ago, 10 years ago probably, I started on the John Lang project, which was the republication of all of John Lang's books.

John Lang was the first Australian born novelist. He was born in Parramatta in 1806. Don't know if it was 1806. No, no, sorry, 1816. He was born in Sydney in Parramatta in 1816. His mother was also Australian born, so he was the second generation Australian born. She was born on Norfolk Island in the 1790s actually. He was born in 1816 in Parramatta, grew up in Sydney, educated in Sydney and wrote his first novel in Sydney which was published in England anonymously, and I've discovered since, nobody knew about this one, I discovered it was published anonymously and he never, ever claimed it officially and it was a best seller in England, and he never claimed it.

He could never claim it because he used his boss in Sydney— he worked as a clerk for William Charles Wentworth and Wentworth was a bit of a bully actually. He had a mistress who had his three children before he married her— who lived in a property called Petersham, after which the suburb is named, next door to Ashfield which is where John Lang's mother had a property.

And so he based his character on William Charles Wentworth and the character in this novel is a man who has political ambitions and falls in love with a ballet dancer. It's set in England. It's not set in Australia— this ballet dancer but he can't marry her, she's a ballet dancer. A gentleman can't marry a— and a gentleman that's after political ambitions and what have you couldn't even think of marrying a ballet dancer. He persuades her to come and live with him. That's in John Lang— let's stop.

I have to put on record that we've been talking for almost two hours and usually by that time people are flagging and I think the reverse is happening. You're full of enthusiasm about your latest subject and I .....

Yes, yes. Well, you should have stopped me at three minutes.

Well, we need to return to the Garden History Society just briefly because I think it is time to wind it up and leave your publications for the next interview. But just as we wind up, what has been your— what do you feel has been your most significant contribution to garden history?

I think my Bibliography of Australian gardening books is my chief contribution actually. [9] Perhaps the publications of some of the books I have published. I've published Thomas Shepherd's *Landscape Gardening in Australia*, Jean Galbraith's book about restoring a garden in the Dandenongs, Edna Walling's book on Australian wildflowers. Those I think are probably my chief contributions. I mean, the little things I started en route are *The Cottage garden in Australia*, which is called *The Front Garden* actually.

[9] *A history of Australian gardening books and a bibliography, 1806-1950*, , Victor Crittenden, Canberra, Canberra College of Advanced Education Library, 1986

I started off the craze for cottage gardens with my little book on cottage garden in Australia. That came from a Canberra woman who is— Polly Park, I don't know if she was— she's an American. She lives in— I think she's still alive, lives in Canberra. She's mad keen on garden history and she created a series of tiny historic gardens in her suburban plot. She had a tiny walled garden, an Arabic garden, and she wrote a ook about them and in it she said she was going to write a book about cottage gardens in Australia but she couldn't find any material. Well, I mean, what she meant was she couldn't find any written material, any books about it. And I said to her one day, "I'll see what I can do."

So I went researching on cottage gardens, or *The Front Garden*, as I called it, in Australia and so I wrote this little book about the cottage garden. I called it *The Front Garden: the Cottage Garden in Australia*, which was a history of the front garden from the First Fleet onwards where the first garden plant was the geranium and the fact that each little hut that was erected in Sydney at the time had the garden in front of it, a vegetable garden, of course, and those were the first front gardens and from that developed *The Front Garden: the Cottage Garden in Australia*. I always claimed that Australia gave everybody— because of the way in which it built its houses back from the street it gave everybody, even the poorest person, a cottage garden, a front garden. So anyhow, that was my book about the cottage garden so .....

And that was coming out at about the time that the Garden History Society was developing?

Yes. I think I might have preceded the Garden History Society actually.

Yes, yes.

I know I dedicated the book to Polly Park actually.

And also looking back, what do you see about the Society? Has that fulfilled your expectations?

Oh, yes, I think so actually. I think it's done for Australia what the English Garden History Society has done for gardens in England actually. It's made them the important part of the— well, of the landscape, I suppose, actually, an important part of the cities and the country in that it's made people— I mean, there always were gardens, but it's made everybody aware of the beauty and the value of the historic gardens actually, and they keep— well, it keeps on actually.

And so now we're pretty well on the way to, well, preserving them. Even if we don't actually physically preserve them, we're preserving them in other ways actually, in books and records and that way, and hopefully some of them will be preserved in some form for our people in the future actually. And there I said "actually" again.

You've been very generous today and we've encompassed a range of areas. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to record?

Well, I don't think so, really, actually. Actually, actually.

It's like a bell when it's started.

We haven't talked much about trees.

Would you like to talk about trees?

Particularly Australian trees. I've always loved gum trees. As a child I ran a little magazine of my own, a little one. I was only— well, I suppose I might have been— I was at high school actually. Actually. I was at high school and I started to run with a— I had another friend down the road who— we started a little society, just the two or three of us, and we each produced a little magazine and his was Arthurian. He was keen on Arthur's knights of the noble— well, you know, all that sort of business, and I started mine and I was interested in trees and in houses and I remember I— I've still got them actually. I wrote an article— which I must look up actually sometime— about Australian gum trees because English people hated the gum trees, said they were dreadful, scraggy sort of things and I wrote a gum tree in favour— wrote a story about the gum tree and in favour of the gum tree and what I thought, the gum tree was beautiful and I painted a painting of a gum tree in this magazine actually. Actually.

Well, in fact, that reminds me that I saw amongst the writings in the newsletter that you went to visit St Johns Church when there was an issue back in '92 about two gum trees that were in the churchyard. Were you picked for that very purpose because of your interest in trees or did you go wearing your .....

No, I went wearing my Garden History— but I do love gum trees. I love them actually. And I can remember in Quirindi, when I was a little boy at high school, we used to go down to a park which was a wilderness because it was during the depression and the council had neglected everything in the town at that particular time, and there was a group of tennis courts, because my mother and father both played tennis at the tennis

courts and I was just left to wander round in this wilderness, and I eventually found a statue of Queen Victoria in this park completely obliterated by gum trees. I loved the gum trees and I said, why don't they take the statue out and put it out where it can be seen. Yes. So that was— and it was living in the country in Quirindi that I first became a fan of the Australian gum tree. I saw the country as it really is, not from it was in Maitland or in Newcastle or in Sydney. I saw it in the country, and you'd go out for a walk in the country, up a mountain called Who'd A Thought It.

What a splendid name. Just on a slightly kindred tack before we wind up today. I understand you're learning French?

Yes. Well, I did French at school, not very well. I wasn't very good at it. I didn't do well at it at all at school, but one of my interests, apart from garden history, literature, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, is Napoleon and I became fascinated with a book about Napoleon which gave the story of Napoleon and his son and it was the story of Napoleon's romance with Josephine and it went on to talk about the life of his son.

But I suddenly became— well, not suddenly, I suppose, over a period of time I became interested in the fact that Napoleon wasn't just a general who went round and lost the Battle of Waterloo, he was an interesting man. He had a fascinating life and he fell in love with this beautiful woman and he wrote a series of love letters to her. And, oh, it must be about 10 or 15— no, it must be longer than that. It was while I was still working in the College library. I found a book in a bookshop in French of Napoleon's love letters to Josephine, so I bought it. I've got a Napoleonic collection actually, but that's another thing. So I bought this book and it's been sitting in my library, my personal library, ever since and recently I thought I really would like to be able to read these letters, so I thought, well, I'll start teaching myself French on what little bit I can remember from school. So I started teaching myself French. I would then do it each morning. I got some tapes which I found very useful, teaching me to speak it, and I got some books and would do— each morning I would do a diary. My diary for the day was written in French.

And have you read the letters yet?

I've started. I'm not— I'm translating them. I have some of them on the computer. I'm very slow. I do about a sentence or two each morning. And perhaps by the time I die, not for another 10 years or 15 years or so, and I might have finished. But they're beautiful, actually marvellous. I got a completely different impression of Napoleon and I think he was the genius of the 19th century actually, and he transformed France, completely transformed France. Reconstructed, not restored, he reconstructed France. So anyhow, that is my French bit. I am still persisting with my French. I keep saying, well, you've got to persist in these things you know, otherwise you don't get anywhere.

Well, I think it shows you're still persisting with all these things. Victor, thank you for your contribution to the Society's Oral History Project.

It's been a pleasure actually. I love talking.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED