

## MAX BOURKE AM -- SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW 20 NOVEMBER 2019

Max Bourke spoke briefly about his childhood responses to his family's interests in gardens and growing orchids and vegetables, and his own Canberra garden and the impact on gardens of climate change.

His was first aware of the Society before it was formed, when working at the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC - of which Max was Foundation Director) and he, David Yencken and Reg Walker in 1976 first discussed how the Commission could strengthen not-for-profit organisations, including those involved in industrial archaeology and public history. Max recounted how he visited *virtually all of the historical societies ... to try and get them more interested in Place.*

David Yencken was very keen that the Heritage Commission should work with gardens and from 1976 began commissioning scholarly work with Howard Tanner and Peter Watts; and encouraging the National Trust to undertake more scientific research.

Max recalled Peter Watts telling him about the first meeting at which the AGHS was formed when David Yencken persuaded Dame Elisabeth Murdoch to become Chair, producing *out of his hip pocket the constitution* for the AGHS. The AHC supported the Launceston meeting and subsequently the Melbourne conference of the AGHS.

At the same time the Burra Charter was being formulated and because of his background in plant sciences Max was fascinated by the dilemmas of garden restoration and the difficulties and joys of growing plants. While employed at the AHC Max did not belong to organisations where there may have been a conflict of interest.

He reflects on the pace of urban development from the 1960s and community reactions to that which lead to the environmental movement and Jack Munday and Green Bans. Political leadership lead to the establishment of an inquiry into the National Estate and behind that were social movements in response to *a very widespread feeling that we'd gone too far too fast ... a sort of building wave of pressure to look after the national estate. I think that culminated in the creation of the Heritage Commission.*

Max refers to David Yencken's style and influence behind the AHC; general discussion about the impetus for heritage and advocacy on a local level; recalls doing post-graduate study in Bruges 1979 – rationale for the university and the course and describes interview in Australia. *The course was in conservation and urban conservation ... because this place had a lot of prestige. It used to be able to drag in the most amazing people to lecture. We had some of the real leaders of Europe come and visit us, political and intellectual leaders.* An essay about the history of garden conservation prompted the King of Belgium to summon Max to a meeting to discuss how to establish a National Trust.

Max has always been interested in trees - *I attribute trees to my being here. Well apart from Stardust as our source of all of life on earth, trees are certainly much more recent reason why humans are on earth and I've just always been interested in trees as plants I suppose. Because I've been interested in botany, trees have grabbed my attention and I just think they are the most wondrous machines.*

He recalls the chance involvement 40 years ago and the development of the arboretum he co-owns on the NSW south coast: *We bought this block of land with the aim of, I suppose, putting back the native flora that had been there. When we bought it, it had three very old Pinus radiatas on 28 hectares and the rest of it was kikuyu and buffalo grass. We set about initially putting back the flora that was there so we spent a lot of time in our backyard here, we had lots of plots, we grew thousands... we sourced local seed ...*

He describes how the plants were sourced, grown and particular trees for which he has a great passion: *Allocasuarina decaisneana* (one of his favourite trees in Australia); and quite rare *Eucalyptus conferruminata* from southwestern Western Australia. He describes locations where particular trees may be found in the nation.

He describes the changing demographics of Tilba region and community engagement with the project: *... As the years went by, went from being "let's save the coast" to conserve ... to do so we were going to put the vegetation back. Then we thought, why don't we do a bit of imperialism and encourage a corridor back up so that the flora and fauna can work between the coast and the mountains ... 60-100,000 trees have been planted.*

Speaking about the AGHS Wellington Conference Max recalled the notion of an offshore conference was part of NMC discussions when he was Deputy Chair, and reinforced during the Armidale conference by the New Zealand-born members of the AGHS. He recalled the speaker, Dr Hamish Campbell. He discussed the Wellington Botanic Gardens and particularly his hero, Leonard Cockayne, who is buried at Otari-Wilton's Bush near Wellington. Max considered writing a PhD and had read much of Leonard Cockayne's writings.

Max recalled the Canberra conference – he and Kay Johnson twisted people's arms to emphasise the elements of soil and water, and recalled Peter Watts and Colleen Morris believed the Society's conferences should be themed.

Returning to discussion about his PhD he referred to his research into extensive plant introduction / importation programs (ornamental plants and even strawberries) by the pre-World War II CSIRO Plant Introduction Unit. Busy with many commitments, his PhD was abandoned, though he loved the research and *working with Libby Robin, who was my supervisor and John Dargavel, who was a wonderful forest historian. That was a pure joy working with them*

His interest in the PhD was about the way in which Australia was an extraordinary participant in acclimatization movement importing trout, foxes and hoards of plants; and cross-Pacific tree-based trade.

Given the Branch's regional name Max prompted the Branch to hold its conference - *Meandering About the Murray* - outside of Canberra, in Albury in 2007, with logistic difficulties in long distance organisation. He praises the work of the Branch – its range of events – *financially secure and ... good leadership.*

That regional focus was important for him when he joined the Branch - *I was particularly interested in trying a bit of imperialism I suppose, in trying to make sure that we linked up with the Monaro and the Riverina. I didn't know of personally of great historic gardens, but I knew of historic horticulture in the Riverina.*

The Branch conferences in Griffith and Narrandera - *They went down very well. We had quite amusing visits to these specialized growers who turned out there were some incredible rose growers and rosarians in places like Griffith where roses really flourish.* Managing the Branch was a necessity and he gives credit to Margie Bourke helping with *at least 50%, probably 70%, of the load.*

He describes the approach by Christina Kennedy at Horse Island to growing Australian native plants: *I've always admired her not only for her skills, but she's done something that to me is really important and she's got people to see that you can manage Australian plants like you can manage exotic plants.* Further discussion of native gardens.

Discussion of Branch publications, involvement of Victor Crittenden, Richard Clough and Richard Ratcliffe; measuring the garden at Fifield House near Yass; proposed association with Jephcott

Arboretum with some of - *the best specimen trees in Australia of their type ... very interesting historic collection.*

Discussion of "The English Garden" project; Charles Weston; monument: *I didn't have anything to do with that, but I think it's one of the really great things that the Branch has done.* Discussion of Tony Byrne documenting Yarralumla Nursery and significance of the Nursery in developing Canberra's treed landscape.

Response to being on the National Management Committee, involvement on Publications Committee, publication of Studies with Colleen Morris. Engagement of Mariana Rollgejser (designer of the journal) to design Studies. Discussion of Dr Bernadette Hince, Editor of the Journal; and believes: *Bernadette does a fabulous job. I'm an unabashed fan of Bernadette Hince and she does ... I think there's a diversity of subject matter and a lightness of touch with a bit of humour;* perennial debate about public and academic approach; discussion of *Companion to Australian Gardens - a triumph.*

Old Parliament Gardens – controversy in 2004 – internal restoration and garden, supposed reinstatement of Walter Burley Griffin's design when there was no association with Griffin.

Award of AM - *I was very honoured, extremely honoured.*

Asked about involvement with many organisations Max recalled his mother's comment that he is a *bit of a flibbertigibbet ... I get tangled up in stuff and all of those organizations, to some extent have some sort of relationship and I often use what I learn out of one about others,* example of Bush Heritage and Australian Wildlife Conservancy. Considerably volunteer work - *every week I would probably work two to three days a week on some form of volunteer work.*

Importance of STEP (Southern Tablelands Ecosystem Park) for the future *So more and more, we find groups of people coming to us and saying, "What can I grow in the area?" And so, that's a really important role for this site.* Engagement with local Aboriginal people.

Tours conducted by Trisha Dixon – most recently Morocco; post-conference tours and comments about New Zealand trip with Stuart Read and Bronwyn Blake; role of Patron of Society; discussion of garden history and the Society: *some gardens that you go to that are contemporary and they will be presumably part of future history. But there are also gardens that tell stories about people and about places and certainly about plants and I like the weaving together of those three things. I think the Society's mixture of what it does at the moment, of trying to pull those three ideas together as is good.*

The Society as a whole is not as activist as Max would like it to be – though the ACT Branch is – against monsterism with Sue Byrne's work in Reid; importance of role of local community in advocacy.

Status of the Society with its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year ahead - *the fact that it's still here after 40 years is impressive; likened to the endurance of ICOMOS. the fact that it's survived is important. That's a tribute to a level of commitment and interest that keeps it going.* Downturn in numbers and aging membership a consideration for voluntary organisations; innovation of two Chairs - *I can't see how you can get into leadership positions ... people who are both in the workforce like Stuart and Bronwyn are, without doing something like that, without saying, "Look, split the job," and they can do it. That's the only way if you want people who are still in the workforce.*



## POSTSCRIPT – ABOUT PROFESSOR EMERITUS DAVID YENCKEN AO

*I really only knew David intensively, if you can know someone intensively, for about six, seven or eight years. He was the person who hired me as the Founding Director of the Australian Heritage Commission ... I truly don't think there would have been an Australian Heritage Commission without David Yencken, because he was one of the most persuasive people I have ever seen.*

Further examples of his persuasion with Prime Ministers Fraser and Whitlam, Yencken's non-stop lobbying through his Melbourne network; amazing persistence – quiet, unflappable persistence.

Recollections about meeting with Joe Bjekle-Petersen and Malcolm Fraser; David Yencken's affability; and ability *to look at you and listen to you, and I'm sure he was listening to you, but he was pursuing his objective and he knew what he wanted to get and he would get it sooner or later.*

Discussion about his property developing – Merchant Buildings; Cluster Title Act – totally new style of building with communal spaces; *a really good negotiator with a vision about Australia; he hoped Australians would care about the bush and Australia as much as he did.*

Discussion about collapse of the Australian Heritage Commission; different era, different politicians, different conversations than those with Melbourne residents.

Max describes the best part of his *working life has been some of the extraordinary people I've worked for. I really have been blessed, you know, Nugget Coombs, David Yencken, Paul Keating, Gough Whitlam, even Malcolm Fraser, whom I got on well with.* Yencken's ability to dissect problems into segments: *quite extraordinary man to have as a mentor. I was 30, 31.*

Brief discussion of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration with Nugget Coombes Chair, when Max was Assistant Secretary, on secondment from the Department of Urban Regional Development, from Tom Uren's Department.

In recent years Max assisted David Yencken as he wrote his publication on heritage; and Max's frustration as David wrote himself out of the story. Professor Yencken's final publication is important to have and a monument to David Yencken AO.