

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

ROBYN MAYO HAWKINS



Photographer: Sarah Rhodes 2021

Interviewee: **ROBYN MAYO HAWKINS**
Interviewer: Jean Elder
Date of interview: 26 May 2021
Place of interview: at her home
1519 Mole Creek Road, Chudleigh, Tasmania 7304
Length of interview: 1hour 5minutes
Restrictions on use: Nil
Transcriber: Pauline Schindler
Quotations: Extracts from the interview should be verified
against the original spoken word.
Acknowledgement: All uses of this interview should acknowledge the
interviewee and the Society:
Robyn Mayo Hawkins, Australian Garden History
Society, National Oral History Collection,
interviewed 26 May 2021 by Jean Elder.

[JE] This is an interview with Robyn Mayo Hawkins recorded for the Australian Garden History's National Oral History Collection. Robyn, a gardener and artist, is speaking about her life as a gardener and artist and her involvement with the Australian Garden History Society. The interview is taking place on Wednesday 26 May 2021 at Chudleigh, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder.

Robyn, this is an orientation question – can you please tell me your full name and date of birth?

[RH] It's Robyn Anne Hawkins or Mayo Hawkins. My date of birth is the 25th of the tenth, forty-three. 1943.

Thank you. And your early life, you were born in Goulburn in New South Wales, what was it like growing up in a rural town in the 1940s?

Well it was very much a place – Goulburn was very much a railway town, it had big railway workshops there. And there was a complete distinction between Protestant and Catholic, which was very dominant in the town. And if you were applying for a job you didn't ever let on that you were a Catholic because they weren't appreciated.

It was cold, very cold in winter. In fact I think the railway station was the coldest station in the world it was just so freezing – roaring winds.

There was a large wall area and there were various companies that had large storage facilities there. [I had a free and unsupervised childhood and rode my bike everywhere].

What were your parents doing at that time in Goulburn?

My father had a sports store, he was a very renowned tennis player and opened up a sports store much to his parent's questioning. (Laughs) But he made a great success of it.

[There have been Mayo's in the Goulburn district since 1840 and in the small, early cemetery there are a series of large tombstones listing their children and young adults. The cemetery is bounded by Rigor and Mortis streets and now adjoins the goal].

Your mother?

My mother she worked as well but more helping him than anything else. And it was a time when mothers didn't really work – it was unusual for – [my mother was born at Downside, Wagga Wagga. Her aunt was Dame Mary Gilmore, she met my father when he came to play tennis from Goulburn].

For her to be working?

Yes.

You've spoken about your grandmother's love of gardening and that was also in Goulburn, and that as being an influence on your life as a gardener and perhaps as an artist as well. Why was this?

Well because my parents were working I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. And she was a wonderful cook and very involved in the – she was a very strong Methodist, and involved in the small Methodist church, and so I often went to church with her. They had at Breadalbane days of cooking and fairs, and displaying garden plants on tables with butcher paper, and I was allowed to take the prizes although I hadn't really grown the plant.

But her plants were, her garden was really beautiful. I remember two huge daphne which were always a very perfumed arrival to the garden. And the large black lily that really smelt dreadful, but the flies loved it outside the kitchen window. And a large fernery that was always dripping with water that kept the whole house cool when you walked in the back door. It was a way of conditioning the house in the very extreme temperatures they had there.

But she was just very much a home person. I remember her washing on Monday, hanging them out, and then ironing on Tuesday, cooking on Wednesday. It was all very much a routine of that period. No freezers or anything.

And did she involve you in the garden? Actual gardening. Did you work alongside her?

I think I was more a hindrance than anything, (laughs) because I loved being out there, but I didn't. My grandfather I remember he had a lot of that onion weed, they had lovely fruit trees, and he spent ages digging up all this onion weed and sieving it through a sieve, thinking that it would get rid of it. And it made it even worse the next year. I felt so sorry for him. (Laughter)

And of course, it was very soon after that that people weren't using drays and horses, but he still had his old dray where he hung all his onions in the yard where they used to cut the head off the chicken for Christmas and things like that.

And you did your high school at Goulburn?

Yes, I went to PLC there.

And then went on to do some work at –

The year after I left school, I went into the country at [Bowning, north of Yass in NSW] with a family friend who had two children, [and a son at boarding school] I was sort of a governess there. I looked after them. Her name was June Weir, and she was the most wonderful gardener. And we used to go out and collect rocks to build a fountain in her garden. So again, I was in a gardening environment. It was very much

a country garden, but we worked together and did everything in the garden. And that was another cold difficult place to garden.

And then the year after that is when I went down to Sydney.

That's 1961?

Yes, I went down to North Sydney Art School and East Sydney – they were joined together.

And those years at art school, how were they?

Well I was staying at Tremayne [in Kirribilli] which was a building where all country girls came down and had somewhere to stay, and that was in Kirribilli. And I would go to this art school. But my parents were very much against it because they said I'd become a beatnik if I wasn't careful. And so although I did very well the first year, my father said, "No you can't go back." So I'm quite stubborn.

And so I went down to Sydney and I got a job working for a commercial artist and then for Lintas. And went to art school at night. I couldn't do etching at that stage because only could you start etching in third year, and because I was not there all day I couldn't, I wasn't allowed to. I had to do wait until a long time later because I'd always wanted to do etching.

And how did you move from Sydney to be able to go travelling in Europe? Was that money you earned enough, or how did that happen? You went travelling in Europe in '64.

Yes I did. Well strangely enough I was going to a picnic race meeting in Cowra and the mother of my friend didn't like the boy I'd asked to drive me home, he lived near me, but she said he'd been drinking all night so she said, "No, no you can't go with him, I'll get my sister to drive you." And she was the worst possible driver.

At Gunning there was this cutting going down and – there was a transport in front and – she said, "I think he's waving me on." And so she took him over and there was a transport coming the other way, and we had nowhere to go but either into the wall and the transport as well. So I was given quite a large compensation because the driving, they said it was such dreadful driving, that I was given money.

8:30 That allowed you to go travelling.

Yes, allowed me to travel.

Tell us about those years, '64, '66. It sounded a very exciting time in your life.

In Europe.

In Europe.

Yes. Well I tried to make the most of it, of course I had to work. So the first place I went to was Geneva because – although I'm dyslexic – I had this dream that I'd be able to learn to speak French, but of course it was very difficult for me. But I lived in Genthod it was called, on the lake's edge, with a family and went to the art school, the Beaux-Arts there in Geneva. But I was very unhappy with the family.

And there was this organisation called Universal Arts so I rang them and said I was very unhappy. And I was going down to Paris to meet a friend and they organised for me to be interviewed by a family in France. I went there for a year, and all I had to do was pick the children up after school, and so the whole day I could walk, I could draw, and visit galleries and absorb everything. And of course I'd be going to gardens, and I could go to the Louvre any time I wanted to see Picasso's work. So it was just absorbing everything for a whole year. It was wonderful.

And then coming back to Australia?

No, from there I went back to England after the year, and I was able to sell some of my drawings to magazines like *House and Garden* and things like that. And I did some cooking. I did a course in cooking there. And I was always doing things like walking dogs or something just to keep my head above water. And then I shared house with two South Africans and an English girl – and she lived in Kent which is where John came from – and she invited me to lunch, and he was at lunch too. And that's how I met John.

So then – I can't remember how long it was after that – he was in Ireland, so I had to go over to Ireland, but I came home soon after that. And I was back here, well it was a good year before he came out – it might have been even longer – and so during that time I got a job working with people. At that stage there was a large exploration and mineral boom, and so I got a job working for a firm that drew maps. I didn't want to work for advertising any more because I didn't particularly like it – the scene – and so that's what I got a job doing.

In Sydney?

In Sydney. Drawing geological maps when they were going out exploring, they would take these maps and then you'd have to plot everything on it. It was very interesting because it was exacting but interesting. And probably that's where I got my interest in calligraphy.

Mm, I was wondering. And some of your other artistic endeavours.

Then for the next few years when John joined you, was that the starting a family –

We started a family. Unfortunately one of my children died, my youngest baby, and I was of course in a terrible state and so I said I have to go back to art school.

So I enrolled over at Woollahra/Waverley and that was where I was able to continue my etching. I could take it with Rick Badger and Elizabeth Rooney who were noted etchers at that time, and she taught at Woollahra/Waverley, so I'd go to both to do the etching. And Susan Cadby was doing a watercolour class. I wanted to go out and work in the environment, but it was quite difficult for one person just sitting out there. So I used to go with her and that started me getting more confident, and then I persuaded my mother to come. She hated it of course sitting for hours while I was drawing, asking me every five minutes if I'd finished. (Laughter) But I kept back one of my first works of Vacluse House and the garden.

So that was in the early 1970s?

Was it? I think so.

Something around there, yes, when you were –

We were married in '67, and then my daughter died, so it was probably the early 70s all this was happening. And eventually I kept working – oh, I used to use the Willoughby, Max Miller's press opposite Wenona, the girls were at Wenona, and I'd book his press. But then I'd arrive and the person who'd been using it before hadn't cleaned up. So by the time I cleaned it all up it was time to go.

Eventually I bought my press from Hilldav, Charles Hilldav, and had that at home so I could do my plates at home. And I work on zinc not copper. So I've used that press and it's moved with us wherever we've gone and I've now given it to the – there's a new print workshop opening up at Queenstown with Raymond Arnold, and I've given that to him to help. For me it takes about a year and a half to get one plate ready. At least someone's using the press, and he says I can go and use it up there.

Wonderful. I'm going to move around between your art and garden because it's so intertwined in your life. But you've described your first garden, 'Tarella'?

At 'Tarella'.

'Tarella'. Describe that to us. That was in the early 80s when you and John moved.

Yes, was it – it was.

Oh no, even earlier.

Early. It was, oh there's a form down here with all the dates on it.
(*Talking whilst looking for notes*)

We moved to 'Tarella' in 1970.

1970?

Yes.

15:45 Great.

And what happened was John managed to sell one of his father's clocks so that meant we could buy the house. And it was a boarding house, it had probably about fifteen people living there including someone called Bob right down in the cellar. It took us ages to get rid of Bob (laughs), he didn't really want to leave. And I found him really frightening so I was very pleased when he left.

We were down in Morden Street in this small house, and I used to go up at night when the babies were asleep and do the painting. But there was a huge plague of cockroaches, and I could hear – the first night I went up I could hear (*makes clicking noises*) and I said to John, "What's that?" And he didn't say anything, he opened the door and the whole floor was a mass of cockroaches. (Laughs) It was just dreadful. But the house itself, well it was dreadful because the electricity – if I put the washing machine, the stove and the bath on at the same time it all fused. You know that sort of thing. So it took us a long time to get the house in order.

But the garden had been totally neglected, and obviously from that early photograph I showed you, a lot of it had been taken over. First of all on this left-hand side by the PMG Department, so I had to block that out and I used cypress to do that. I was amazed at how quickly they grew which was great. Fortunately there were two lovely frangipanis in the front. The huge palms, [*Phoenix dactylifera*] were a great worry because they had these huge fronds and it was very easy to get them stuck in your feet if you weren't careful. But I concentrated – because of my grandmother's influence, it was mostly roses.

Some hydrangeas and things like that so it was very much establishing the garden, and of course I loved iris, they were around the pond that we put in the middle of the garden. We found this fence because there was no fence when we moved, there was nothing. So that went on. And obviously the children grew up to a certain age there. And although it was simple I kept – I was interested in roses, ground covers, lilliums, so nothing too adventurous.

That really was your first attempt at creating a garden.

And then you've described the move, John started getting in to –

Then John became interested in horses. 'Tarella' was as you know the home of Sir Joseph Palmer Abbott, and he was the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. That's quite important I think to know that.

And then we moved – oh well, John became interested in driving, driving four in hand, and he had a little vehicle that went behind a single animal. And she was called Emma, the pony, and she lived round, just on this little small bit around the side of the house. And when the

children were doing their homework she used to stick her head through into the room.

But he wanted to get into it far more so we used to go up to Harden and Mary Willsallen up there, and she was a wonderful horse woman. And she had Bryson who used to help her. And he was teaching John using an old crate driving the horses round, so this was our holiday. For ten days we had to sit and watch him going round and round. And eventually she said we could have a swim in the pool, and the water was so hard, it was just dreadful. Like rocks.

But because the children were really interested in riding, we'd go up to the Southern Highlands virtually every holiday. And we were driving around and – this is what happens, John saw this house called 'Whitley'. And he went in and the lady said they were thinking at some stage of selling it. So we used to visit all the time and eventually they did sell it. And it was built by Sir William Owen, he was the Sydney judge in the Supreme Court of New South Wales and he lived there.

And that was in 1982 when you finally moved to 'Whitley'?

Wait a minute. *(Talking whilst looking through notes)*

I think it's around 1982. Now can you describe to us – I know we've seen some wonderful photographs

Well it was a huge job.

Just describe the whole garden when you arrived –

When we arrived obviously, the lady who'd been living there was very elderly so nothing much had happened at all in the garden. And it was just a complete shambles, in fact it was a case of getting rid of undergrowth to find out what actually was there.

And the fact that we had a pump down near the river that could pump water up to the dam near the house, and that would feed the whole water system. Well as I said we didn't find it until the horse fell in it. What I had to then do was get correct filters because the water was full of iron, a huge amount of iron and calcium. And the people down the end of the road at Oldbury Farm had terrible trouble because all around where their sprinklers went was all orange from the iron.

So I found out we had to get a filter cut like that in half. The first lot of water went through the filter, then I had a big sand filter there where every week I had to back spray to clean the sand out so that the water that was going on to the garden was clean, and into the house was clean.

And describe what influenced your ideas for developing the garden at 'Whitley'. You've talked about there was a European section, and then later in the development you got very interested in Australian natives.

Well there were established trees there but they weren't in any particular format. And I decided, because I just had Jimmy James to help and me, and everything else to do, that I would keep the garden structured rather than a massive planting that needed daily work. And so I chose things like *Berberis [vulgaris]* and English box [*Buxus sempervirens*]. And I started off with roses, I established a rose garden down there and put in a hedge around of elms, not elms, yews [*Taxus baccata*].

So it was really getting – I started off getting the bones of the garden ready so that as I went on you could add to it without interruption. And I remember planting, I had to take them out – Manchurian pears [*Pyrus ussuriensis*], had to come out – because they just broke in the wind. There were Crab apple floribunda [*Malus floribunda*] going down, and I did yew [*Taxus baccata*] forms down to an orchard. So the orchard was at the end of the garden, and then over to the right we put an obelisk for our animals that had died there. And I had a studio up on the hill so I'd come down to do the cooking. Then we took down the old timber stable yard and built the stables, because John of course had gone right into horses now and was driving, four in hand. He did two trips from Melbourne to Sydney and one from Sydney to Brisbane for the bicentennial.

So all that manure was going on to the garden and I planted, and we had these hawthorn hedges [*Crataegus rosaceae*] along the road – very dilapidated, and that was when Mark Fowles came out [from Shropshire England] and he laid the hedges with old equipment. The old saws shaped rather like a disc, rather than the chainsaws that they use today. He laid all the hedges, and we restored the wall. Basically everything was very simple, I did plant some conifers [*Abies alba*, the European fir] up the hill to the studio.

But then over the other side of the hill, facing more into the rural landscape, I started my native garden because I wanted it to be a totally different environment to the other. And I planted dicksonias [*Dicksonia antarctica*], a lot of dicksonias, and blackwoods [*Acacia melanoxylon*], as well as down the bottom [*Eucalyptus pauciflora* and [*sideroxylon*, *Eucalyptus sideroxylon*] – because they had very dark furrowed trunks and they're a wonderful contrast. And there was a wonderful sculpture there by May Barrie but unfortunately I wasn't allowed to bring that down here because I would have loved to have it in the native garden, but anyway.

And so we lived there – oh when did we move down here? We lived there until I think it was 2002 we came here.

25:35 You lived there nearly twenty years.

Oh yes, we moved –

At 'Whitley' you were in '82 through to – nearly twenty years at 'Whitley'

We moved there in 1980 we moved there, and we came here in 2002.

So twenty-two years. Wow. Can I come back to this time at 'Whitley' when you were developing the garden you've described? You also had your studio up the hill and you were working on your art. And this led to your first solo exhibition in 1986 which you called 'Artistic Reflections on the Garden', and then that was followed in 1990 by 'Artistic Reflections on the Tree'.

They were both at the Blaxland Gallery. Unfortunately it was in Sydney and the Blaxland Gallery was going to continue after it was bought out by – it was Grace Bros I think went there. But they said they were going to move it, and they had all the next years artists lined up and they decided no, they weren't going to. So unfortunately it closed down.

There was still the Macquarie Gallery and the Australian Gallery. The Macquarie, yes I think it was the Australian Gallery that was in Sydney. But the Australian Gallery was then moved over to Paddington, and the other gallery was moved into Rushcutters Bay, so there's not really a good gallery in Sydney anymore.

Yes. I was just wondering if you could tell us a little, the exhibitions at that time. Were they very much influenced by your gardening at 'Whitley'? Were they sort of artistic expressions?

Yes. Yes there were several from there and I did a waratah in the landscape. But a lot of them were also based on early colonial houses and the gardens around them such as Elizabeth Bay House, Vaucluse. Oh I'll have to look at my catalogue.

28:00 No, that's interesting. So they were both of the gardens and the –

It was all the things that I'd been working on, all the time, every time John went down to Sydney I'd go and I'd have a day working in Sydney and so gradually I got this collection together. And also there were etchings and they're all in the catalogue.

Wonderful. And then in 1989 you started, you visited the Kimberley region of WA and that began your whole, a different journey.

Yes, that's right. In Northbridge there was a woman called Beth Hamilton and she had a gallery there and she asked if I could come and put some of my etchings there. And I went up, and on the floor she had a painting of very dark, very red hills. I just said, "Oh those colours are wonderful." She said, "Oh that's the Osmond Valley. I'm going with a group", in I think it was a month's time, "why don't you come?" And I said, "Oh well I've never been camping before." And she said, "Oh well you can share a tent with me." And after that, the week before she was meant to come they asked her to move her gallery so she couldn't come. So I thought, well I've got all my equipment I'll have to go by myself. And I arrived up there in Kununurra and it was so hot when we got off the plane, very late at night. And we were taken to this old bus

shed with a tiny little loo in the corner. I thought it was horrific. So, I lay there thinking –

What have I done?

What can I say in the morning so that I have to go home? Can I develop pneumonia or something overnight? (Laughs)

Then in the morning the sun came up on this wonderful ridge behind the bus camp, and it was so beautiful. And this beautiful *Eucalyptus miniata* was hanging over with these beautiful buds that went down, hung down this way, away from the sun which is a protection for them. And I thought, oh I can put up with anything if it's going to be like this. And that meant many more trips.

Yes. And you describe this as being a pivotal time where your art practice expanded from garden to landscape.

Landscape and plants in it. And what happened on the first camp we had there at Cajeput Gorge, [really Cajeput Hole near Diamond Bridge on Mornington Station]. I walked right up to the top of – the [cajeput is a genus of melaleuca native to Australia that surrounds the waterhole] Gorge had a big waterfall coming down, I climbed up to the top and looked over the landscape. And I thought, how did the Aboriginal women – how did they keep their families alive on this land? How did they, how did they use these plants?

So that's been my guide ever since. I just wanted to know – the plants that I'm looking at I like to know about their history, what they're used for and what medicinal and domestic purposes they serve. And so that whole – my 'Kimberley Odyssey' exhibition, which was work over a ten year period concentrated on that, and it had watercolours, landscapes and plant studies.

And that is sort of almost the format that my work seems to follow. And then of course after the Kimberley – we used to fly through Alice Springs and stop, and you know there's all the fans going and there was hardly anything there, and then they built the new airport. And that was when I started going

More regularly.

I think we might pause for a minute.

(Interview recommences.)

Now Robyn, we've talked about your exploration in your work and the exhibition that came out of being in the Kimberley. During this time, I think in 2002, you moved to 'Bentley'. Tell us about that. How did that move come about?

Well we came down during the Olympics I think it was on a garden history tour. And John said, "Oh this is a lovely place, I think we should really think about moving down here." And someone on the bus that

we were on said, “Well you might be ready for Tasmania, but is Tasmania ready for you?” (Laughs) Because he’s quite outspoken.

We came down, we were going to sell our house and then nothing happened, so I had a whole lot of new stationery made. And the minute it came back from the printer – and I was going down across the Simpson Desert and I had ten minutes to ring John at the phone box near the – I think it’s called the Oodnadatta Pub. But anyway, there was a phone box there and I thought I’d put my money in and ring him, and I just got through before we had to move on. And he said, “Oh someone’s come to the house and they’re quite interested, and you’ll have to vet them when you come home.” (Laughs)

When I got home I had to meet these people who were going to buy the house. And I could see that his wife was very, very interested in the garden and the other, the husband, was interested in reading and the library, so I thought they’d be very good. That’s how we sold the house.

And so John said, “Well why don’t we just stay up here and fly down and look.” And I said, “No, you’ve got to go down there and be on the ground to look around.” And so we stayed at a motel in at – with the two dogs – at Rutherglen, and we’d go out each day and I wanted to find a house that, because ‘Whitley’ was, every third year you had to paint, and the same as ‘Tarella’, and I wanted to find a house we didn’t have to paint.

34:05

But of course all the stone buildings were in areas where you didn’t have any control over the landscape, and so we eventually – I said to John, “I can’t go every day, you’ll have to go by yourself one day.” And he came into the Chudleigh Valley and found it. And we were going to see Michael Warren the next day and he brought us here, and the Cramps had only asked him the day before to find someone, they didn’t want any advertising. And we came and of course John said, “Well we’re not buying really the house, we’re buying the landscape.” (Laughs)

And then it was a work getting the landscape.

Like every house we’ve been in, it was a huge work.

Yeah.

And so as far as the land, as far as the landscape I decided it was so beautiful that we didn’t need a fiddly garden, it could have – I was trying to establish a landscape. And so initially we got rid of all the willows, the forty willows going down the back creek, and I got grants to fence all the creeks up, going up the top, and planting. And the people that helped me were NRM North and Stewart, Stewart Riley – he was from Council.

And I'd apply – as long as you had water that was feeding into an important river, which the Lobster is and it goes into the Mersey River, and that feeds into the major water supplies. And at that stage we had someone, the Cramps, who had their son here using a dairy and all the effluent was going down into the creeks, which I thought was just dreadful. So eventually Nick Cramp left and I was able to plant it all out and pick up all of the little bits of willow so it doesn't shoot. I've got bird corridors, animal corridors – they all give shade to all the stock now.

And the second year we were here, 2003, that was when Mr Philpott came and asked if we were interested. And over in Mr Philpott's there were I think something like eight wrecked cars. So we put those in the dam wall. Oh we put the dams in too, they were important.

Describe that as your landscape, and the development of the landscape and the hedges. The dam was positioned –

Well the hedges had been here, they'd been here a long time, but they were in an appalling state. And so we had, we had Karl Leibscher come out from, again from Shropshire like Mark Fowles. He was another wonderful hedge layer but he informed us that he could also do stone walling. And I said to John, "I'd love to have a stone wall in the landscape and keep it very simple." And I'd seen a lot of the farmers around here have piles of stone, and so we approached them and they were delighted when we said we'd take them away. And so we brought them all here.

And when you're doing a stone wall you have to pile the stones up in lines, and you've got the base, base stone, then you have the middle stones, then you have the through stones and the capping stones. They all have to be laid out. And I think it took years really to finish these walls because they are quite hard.

And at the same time he instructed on laying the hedges, which have to be cut and pleached and laid. The top of the – it has to be plaited, and when I had to try and find some plaiting [material] for Mark Fowles, I took him down to an area which I thought would be useful. But they're so particular they have to be just right, and he couldn't find anything much that he particularly wanted. So they just used the [plaited thin stems found] at the top of the long hawthorns [as is correct].

So the final effect of an amazing landscape is that when you're looking across the lawn, the wall and then the hedging, and then it would appear that the water's right beside – in fact it's an artefact, the water's actually quite a way away. But it's, yes.

So it's very simple but I think it shows very much the hills around which are often covered in snow. The large elms, we've just had surgery on those, they were all here, but the garden underneath them was very busy. It had lots of rhododendrons and azaleas and things; the trees were struggling because there was too much water going on. The

rhododendrons and the azaleas were struggling because they were getting too much shade.

But there were a lot of iceberg roses and things, and having had all those gardens at 'Whitley' I made up my mind I wasn't having any more, so I gave all the roses and the fountain that was in the middle of the lawn to the local village, because it's called the Village of Roses. And they've used the arbours that we had here to make the park where everyone goes now – all the children play.

So really outside there's no, apart from – with the driveway you've probably noticed that there are half eucalyptus and banksia, and then the other half are tilias [the Linden limes] are John's choice. The [*Eucalyptus*] *dalrympleana* eucalypts down the drive, and the [*Banksia*] *marginata* which is the banksia that you find mostly all over Tasmania. I have got one, *Banksia serrata*, I managed to grow out here. And the grasses, I got most of the grasses in the garden near the verandah from Wychwood. I've got, which would probably horrify most of the farmers, I've got some of the *Gahnia* [*sieberiana*] here which has those lovely big brown seeds. I like it because it's a contrast to the colour of the house. But most farmers would be horrified.

40:30 So your artistic influence on the grass – choosing the plants –

Isn't perhaps what they'd like to see.

Then you've started to develop the arboretum. Can you tell us the background to that? It's all Tasmanian trees, eucalypts and other Tasmanian –

Well initially as I said it had all these car wrecks so we put those in [the dam wall], and then I used to go over probably for two hours or three hours a day, and I'd go over – because it was virtually all covered in gorse, and I would cut the gorse and then just spray the top. I didn't do great major spraying.

And Herbert [from Habitat Horticultural Services] wanted, Herbert Staubmann where I got most of my plants from at Liffey Falls Nursery, wanted me to plough it all up and I said, "No" because I had that experience in the Southern Highlands and if you do that all you get are thistles. So I said I'll put three plants where I might only put one – and then one of them might survive. And so that's how we started. I'd clear a part and then I put some put planting, and next year I'd clear the next part and planting, and so on.

And so it's now got to the stage this year I'm doing a lot of fill in planting because a lot of the plants needed protection and I'm now getting protection.

Describe to us how you did that planting in terms of the smaller plants being protected by the bigger plants.

Well obviously they're all tube stock and so it gives me great satisfaction now to see how large they are becoming, because particularly the *Eucalyptus ovata* and the *Eucalyptus rodwayi* are growing really well. But it's very depressing when I think about what has been cut down, because the trunk sizes aren't that huge, I can probably still put my arms around some of them. And when I see a lot of the log trucks full of very large old growth forests I get very upset about that.

But the eucalypts – I planted the hakeas because that gave the bandicoots and the small marsupials cover, and they grew up with the trees so that the smaller birds could grow with the eucalypts in a way. And now they can hide in the banksias and the melaleucas and the leptospermum and that's the way for them getting on to the trunks of the other trees without creating too much fuss. And too much problem for the butcher birds – I don't want the small birds attacked.

Mm, mm.

My biggest problem are cats. Just in the last two weeks we've caught six huge, big black feral cats. And it's so upsetting. They're one of my major problems.

And how, when you started the idea of wanting an arboretum, did you have a plan and planting notes and diaries?

Well what I initially did was to make paths so you could get through, because there's no point planting it all out so you can't move. And so we did paths, and then at that stage I was still learning about Tasmanian plants and Herbert would say, "This would grow there. That would grow there." And in my mind I kept visualising how it would look when it was mature.

And over the last, well it's been nearly twenty years now, I now know all the species and what they will do. And things like *Eucalyptus rubida* that Herbert says won't grow in the wet, and in the huge eucalyptus book that I have they're actually standing beside this little swamp. I knew in my heart that I could really try them then. So I'd try things where perhaps I shouldn't have, but often it's been very successful.

It's just the amount of birdlife I'm now getting, and I've got the striped backed bandicoot, the green and gold frog – the things that are all endangered – so I feel it's sort of like my very, very small contribution to trying to keep the world noticing what we're missing.

But it was while I was here that I went to the – I spent more time in Central Australia and that was where I did my – well first of all the 'Specimens from New Holland' were a collection of etchings that I did at the bicentenary in 2000, and I was still writing – because I like to write the history on a lot of the botany – and that was really concentrating on the navigators who came here. Cook and Solander and Banks and Baudin and William Dampier. And so the three plates, the plants of

William Dampier – he was here well before Cook, and they're over in the herbarium in Western Australia. I flew over there when they had an exhibition, and then they went to the herbarium at Oxford now.

And the plants from Banks and Solander I drew those both here at the natural history museum and the Natural History Museum in London. And they were plants that all went back with Banks but the curator of the gardens in Sydney asked if they could have a duplicate set, so I used those. And the Baudin was in the French Botanical Gardens.

And the platypus that I did drawings of, and an echidna, are the only two specimens that they can actually verify from the trip. So that was important to them.

And then the exhibition that I did which was called 'Vast' is mostly the Central Australian work I did after I then started instead of going on to the Kimberley, I concentrated in Central Australia, and I went with someone called Jerry and Corinne. And they're not doing it anymore because they, I think they've done it for so long that they're over it. Corinne was wonderful and she would use a camp oven to do the cooking, and Jerry would drive. And if we broke down he'd change the tyre. So you could work all day and come back into camp. You would leave – well not everyone, but I would leave early in the morning and work all day and come back just enough time to wash my socks and things like that.

(Laughs) And was it this work that finally led to your major, major exhibition 'Vast' in 2000?

Yes it was all, that was all part of 'Vast'. Because there are landscape and plants, and again following my format from the Kimberley, and then I found out what I could about the plants and the landscape and how they influenced Aboriginal life really.

The garden and nature have obviously been major influences on your artwork, haven't they?

Totally, yes, because my favourite thing when I was at North Sydney for that year was the botanical – we had a botanical section that we studied, and I love that. It was my favourite part of biology too at school, I just loved it. So it was obviously –

48:05 Meant to be.

It was meant to be. My grandmother was a great pusher-along there.

I wanted to also talk with you Robyn about your involvement with the Australian [Garden] History Society, because you've had a long involvement starting with when you were at 'Whitley' in the Southern Highlands.

No it started actually when – well I don't know I'd moved there or not, but virtually when we moved there in – oh, when did the Society start?

There was a bookshop in Sydney called Tim and Anne McCormack who sold antiquarian books, and we always used to buy. And I said to Anne how sad it was because I was at that stage doing the work out at Cooper Park I think, and I said – “I worry that they’re looking as if they’re going to develop more of Cooper Park, I wish we had someone to stand up for the early gardens and gardeners. And she said, “Oh well strangely enough Peter Watts and” – oh, the architect, Peter Watts and – oh I’ll think of it in a minute – “came and said that –.” She said, “Oh they’re thinking of starting a Garden History Society and you might be interested in going.

Oh so that’s right back in 1980. The Garden History’s been going forty years.

Yes. Right back then. And so Howard Tanner was the other person. So Anne came on the first thing when we went up to Mount Wilson, that was the first Garden History thing that we went on. And Peter [Valder] a very good gardener who wrote about camellias.

Was he? Were you then on the first committee?

No well then I joined – the first committee? Well I was on – oh, I was on the committee in the Southern Highlands, so I must have been at ‘Whitley’ at that stage. I don’t think I was on – I helped in Sydney when they had a conference, but I think I went on to the first committee in the Southern Highlands and that’s why they keep sending me all their notes and everything. And then I had to leave that when we came down here.

So I helped with the conference. I think we had actually two conferences while I was there. And Tim and Keva North used to write the journal up for that because there wasn’t actually a Garden History journal. Then when they – I think they decided that, I think it was called – I can’t remember what it was called but it was – I’ve got them all in there.

Is that the one that’s called ‘Inflorescence’?

No that was their new one when they decided they needed also to have some sort of –

And you did that most –

I’ve got all the ones that Keva and Tim North did in there in the library all bound up, if they’re ever of interest to anyone. And that had a lot of the Garden History notes in it. And then I came down here, we were living in that little cottage because we couldn’t live in the house, in that little cottage I showed you (*indistinct*). And then I was asked to go to the first meeting here that I’ve been to at the museum, and they asked if I’d – I’d only just arrived and they asked if I’d like to take on the job of president. And I hesitated, anyway I think I was pushed into it. And so

that's when I took over the presidency and started doing the 'Blue Gum'.

The 'Blue Gum'.

Warwick Oakman suggested 'Blue Gum' as the name, and he did some wonderful articles. And so there has been, there's quite a lot of articles written about the garden at Government House, plus Government House itself. And Warwick – anyway you'll see all the different things. But then it was decided that people preferred to do it online, so they haven't been doing it. Since I stopped, that stopped.

The 'Blue Gum' is still – oh yes, it is mainly online.

It's online.

I was going to ask you, with the Garden History, yes you were deeply involved in the 'Blue Gum' and the conferences in 2010 I think, but what was your – what's your thought that the Garden History achieved in that period of time: this 2005 to 2010? What would you see is –

Well I'd say that it's very difficult because there was this big divide between north and south. I felt that my prime, my prime job was to make people from the south come to the north and the north come to the south, and to organise things that they could be interested in. I had an idea of helping – part of the conference was that very large house [Eskleigh] in Perth. And I was very keen to restore the drive and have all the trees done surgically and fix it up.

But when you're organising anything you have a committee, and you have to have a committee agreeing with things. And a lot of my push ahead ideas (laughs) weren't terribly – well you know so the people, I tried to give them the concept of the garden – oh the gardens that weren't open so that they could see what was happening and get an idea of gardens that should be looked after and preserved. That's basically what I tried to do.

And organising a conference takes two and a half years at least, and especially doing that booklet that I did for the conference. It took over two years because I had to go and see the people, ask them if they would be prepared to write something. And a lot of them address the conference. And talked about the people and places that are now not even open, private, privately owned.

And who are the key people at that time involved with the Garden History? You talked about Warwick Oakman.

Well Warwick was a great contributor; John didn't do anything. Um, well for a long time John's secretary used to do work, all the treasury and everything. And then I think [Liz Kerry, Ivan Saltmarsh, all committee members are listed in the opening pages of Blue Gum] was on the committee.

I remember people – Ivan Pearson, was he?

Oh yes, no, Deirdre.

Deirdre, that's right.

Deirdre was the one before me you know. I used to go down to those meetings before I was asked, she wasn't on the committee.

There was Rex Bean I think he was the treasurer then. Oh, I'd have to look at the notes – it will tell me. You'll be able to see it on that.

You've talked about the importance of sharing gardens and protecting gardens, but what do you think the Garden History Society – are they still the key roles to the future? What should the Garden History, or should we be taking on more of an advocacy role?

I think it's really important first of all to have a committee that is on the same wavelength, that has a project, and that they all contributed to that. And even if there's a slight hesitancy on some parts it's best to have a goal and a project and achieve it, and then show what you can do. Rather than – I mean it's important to see gardens, but I think it's important that there are projects – aren't you doing something up at Stanley?

56:25 Yes, protecting Home Hill and –

That sort of thing.

And also some work on the East Coast Cambria, trying to argue against the major development.

I think that's so important. And Gwenda Sheridan was a great help to me, and she gave a wonderful lecture at the conference, and she's very, very knowledgeable. And they're the sort of people that I think perhaps should be involved in some of the meetings to give inspiration to people so they've got more of an idea of the goal, and what is required, and what the aim is at the end.

We're nearly getting towards the end, other thoughts Robyn you want to add? We've covered a lot of gardens, a lot of art. What else would you really like to report?

Well I've done work here in Tasmania. I've tried again to, while I'm here, to concentrate on plants in Tasmania. And I've done a large work up at Rocky Cape because that's the one area in Tasmania where the *Banksia serrata* grows with the *Xanthorrhoea [arenaria]* endemic to Tasmania]. It's the most beautiful place, and I did that. I did the Liffey Falls; I was following the Mersey which is looking at the plants going down to the Mersey River, and that covered allocasuarinas and eucalypts. And the fact that when I got to the bottom of the falls it was full of European wasps. Which I put in my painting to draw everyone's attention to the fact that it was just full of European wasps.

And the other painting I did was up at Devil's Gullet, and there's wonderful [waratahs *Telopea truncata* endemic to Tasmania] up there that they really only grow above the frost line. I'm trying to grow some over here but in the protected area. They only grow above the frost line. So I put those in with that wonderful rock formation behind. And then recently I've done the plateau up here, and it's called 'Mourning for the Central Plateau' because of the native pines [*Athrotaxis cupressoides*] up there that I drew. I'd just started to finish the drawings and I'd done all the butterflies, and then those dreadful fires started. And all those, a lot of those pines are fifteen hundred years old – they won't grow again.

I could just see all the butterflies being flicked and burnt. And all the roots of the native pine protect all the alpine plants, and of course they were all burnt as well. I felt it was devastating. And unfortunately someone from Singapore bought that so I can't have it to look at, which is sad. But the other two are still here.

My latest work is on – I've done about four or five trips up to Cradle Mountain and gone down to Crater Lake, and so I've just finished a work called 'Don't forget the Fungi', because there's so much fungi up there. And the difficulty, and of course I did the pandani [*Richea pandanifolia*] which is so important, and a lot of the lichen live on the not sunny side of the pandani. They're the tallest heath in the world and they're so important.

So that is a painting that I'm trying to show that inside all these landscapes there is these delicate things like the fungi that feed the plants roots and are so important to us all. And now I've finished that so now I'm going back up to the Devil's Gullet because I want to – it's been burnt, and I want to show how hopefully some of the plants are surviving after the fire.

1:00:30 Regenerating.

The thing about working in Tasmania, it's twice as hard to work here than it is in the desert because you can go up to Cradle Mountain for five days and you might only get one day you can work because of the weather. And the same even just going from here up to Devil's Gullet, it's wonderful here and then you get up there and it's freezing. And a couple of times up at the Pine Lake I had whiteouts and you can only just see that far. And my husband doesn't like it because there's no phone access, you don't want to have an accident or anything.

(Laughs) I'm wanting to quote; somebody gave it to me and I think I've read about it in an article about another artist. In some ways you've answered it already. William Blake said, "Nature shows its power in minute particulars." How do you respond to this? What are your minute particulars? And you described about the fungi.

I mean even if you, even if you look at the largest tree and the trunk, there's always – what I find is you can plonk yourself down and it looks so barren and uninteresting, and the longer you sit the more you see. And I always remember written outside the Botanical Gardens in Sydney is 'Plants Equal Life'. And I think that's true. Plants equal life, and without them.

And so I often do a landscape but then I do studies of a particular plant. Such as in my last exhibition I had, well the [desert] bloodwoods [*Corymbia opaca* endemic to northern Australia] are very important because they have these galls. They're a wonderful food plant for the Aboriginals. And they have sap [that is edible]. Then there's the blue mallee and that has a different shaped nut. In fact everything you look at, when you look into them, they're interesting. Even the smallest things are spectacular.

Insects in the landscape are really important. That was why I put the butterflies in my lake. Because first of all when you're out working another thing in Tasmania that makes it really difficult are the big black mosquitoes that come out, and so you have to wear your raincoat because they don't bite through that. And then you get boiling hot and then the March flies come out. In New South Wales there'd be one or two, here it's like this bombardment coming down – and they really sting. And so it's such a joy when the butterflies appear, but then I could think of them up there in the fires and it was dreadful.

But the insects, in Central Australia – the insects as they are here, as they are everywhere – are very important as pollinators and fertilising – the ants fertilise the soil when they come out of their nests. And the wasps pollinate the figs and all this sort of thing. It's all inter-twined.

Yes, the garden and nature and art. The inter-connections have obviously been central to your life.

And the sad thing is that – I shouldn't be political, but when Keating was in he chose National Treasures and supported them for two years to either write a book, create a beautiful piece of pottery, just work in their artistic endeavour. But then since Howard came in and the Conservatives have been in, all artistic endeavour and anything creative has been pushed to the bottom. And I think that is a big, big shame.

A disappointment, yes.

A disappointment and shame for everybody. Because I think everyone has it in their soul and to bring it out is important, but not only that for people to look at beautiful things is such a wonderful thing to do. And when the world is so upside down.

Mm, so not only with your art but also with the arboretum hopefully people will go on getting joy drawing some inspiration.

I hope so. I hope so

I think on that note we might finish the interview.

END OF RECORDING.

1:05:00