AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE:	**DR PETER VALDER, OAM**
INTERVIEWER:	ROSLYN BURGE
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PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	AT HIS HOME DARLING POINT, SYDNEY
LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:	2 HRS 10 MINS NOTE – THERE IS SOME DISTORTION ON THE AUDIO FILE
RESTRICTIONS ON USE:	NIL
QUOTATIONS / EXTRACTS:	EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD.

Note: Reviewed and corrected by Dr Valder. Subsequently Dr Valder provided the following information about the early ownership of *Nooroo*.

Nooroo was built and, presumably, the garden planted by William Hay, a Scottish born pastoralist who was the member for Murray in the NSW Legislative Assembly 187282. The house was built on Portion 30, one of the 9 original lots which he bought at Mt Wilson in 1875.

I don't know for sure who named the property but it is likely, I imagine, that it was William Hay following the general practice at that time at Mt Wilson of giving properties Aboriginal names. In 1885 Hay sold it to Alexander Thomson of Mosman, about whom I know nothing other than that he was a friend of my grandfather who also lived in that suburb and from whom my grandfather bought it in 1919, transferring it to my father in 1920.

I suspect my grandfather stayed at Nooroo frequently before 1919 with or without the Thomsons, since he had bought land at Mount Wilson, a little towards Mount Irvine, in 1902 from its original owner John Donald Macansh of Hunters Hill who had bought it in 1878 but had done nothing with it.

My grandfather did nothing with it either and eventually, in 1917, sold part of it to Professor A.A. Lawson, the first professor of botany at Sydney University, and the remainder to Professor Mungo MacCallum.

0:00

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Sydney and Northern New South Wales Branch of the Australian Garden History Society. It is an interview with Dr Peter Valder at his home in Darling Point in Sydney on Tuesday 13 March 2007. The interviewer is Roslyn Burge.

Peter thank you for this interview this morning, could I ask you your date of birth?

Well I was born, as I often say I regret this but I am really rather grateful, on 10 June 1928.

You are almost seventy-nine.

Yes.

Your place of birth?

Well I was born in Sydney but my mother of course was living at Mount Wilson and she came to Sydney for that event.

What was your mother's name?

Her maiden name was Isa Wyatt Harrison Watson, pronounced 'Esa' not 'Isa' like Mount Isa.

Your father's name?

My father's name was George Ernest Valder.

There are stories written and in the research that your grandfather bought the property and your parents moved to Mount Wilson in 1943.

Well that isn't quite right. My grandfather (George Valder) was in the Department of Agriculture and he worked at various things and sort of climbed his way up, it was rather like Gilbert and Sullivan I don't know what training he'd had. He started off being in charge of an experimental vegetable garden at Summer Hill, where Trinity College now is, then he went to Wagga Experiment Farm where my father was born, and then he was the director or whatever it is of Hawkesbury College where the remainder of my uncles and aunts were born.

Some of his students were the first settlers at Mount Irvine in 1902 and he went to have a look at what they were doing and liked it and bought a piece of land at Mount Wilson, quite a big piece a little way out of Mount Wilson on the basalt soil, but he then went as some sort of trade commissioner or something for South Africa and didn't do anything about it until he came back. He became the Under Secretary for Agriculture and he must have gone to Mount Wilson quite frequently to stay with his friends the Thomsons[1] at *Nooroo*, which he bought from them everyone always said in 1917 but a survey of Land Titles shows it was actually in 1919, it shows how the things people say always need a little checking somewhere.

My father went there at the end of 1919 when he returned from the First World War and stayed there for the rest of his life. He had been trained prior to going to the war as an orchardist at the Bathurst Experiment Farm, which was a sort of agricultural college in those days, and he started an apple and pear orchard there, bought a bit more surrounding land so that it was theoretically a financial proposition. He married my mother in 1925 and she then of course joined him there in very simple circumstances which must have been quite a shock for her I think, no electricity, no proper running

[1] Alexander Thomson

water, everything done with wood and kerosene lamps, no radio, no car ~ just horses and things and that was that.

Where did they go for their provisions and their amusements?

Well it was quite interesting the whole thing really - that surprisingly things got delivered. People came from Mount Victoria and Lithgow, a butcher came round and things like that. I don't know when the Lithgow Co-operative Society was formed but a man used to come with a truck every Friday and you could buy absolutely everything from the Lithgow Co-operative Society, you could buy axes and spades and chaff, food for the chooks, and eggs and flour and all that.

4:51

My father actually grew most of what we ate, we had cows and chooks and horses and we had bees and pigs he had. Of course he was a great vegetable gardener as well as growing fruit so there was always a lot of seasonal vegetables, a thing that has disappeared from our world now. He used to grow huge amounts of carrots and turnips and parsnips and things and bury them in a heap of sawdust for the winter and extract them as required, all that sort of thing.

So that for me and my brother as children it was really, simple though it all was, was really quite wonderful because we grew up fully aware of where everything came from. The water came out of the sky, and the heat came out of chopping wood, and the food came out of the ground one way or another, it couldn't have been a better education in lots of ways which was quite extraordinary.

Did your mother work on the property as well?

Yes, she did to a certain extent but of course she had a full-time job cooking and washing and ironing and cleaning and looking after us, but she helped my father to a certain extent while we were children. She helped him much more when we were eventually sort of bundled off to boarding schools.

You said ' to make the property more profitable,' was the fruit from the orchard sold elsewhere?

Oh yes my father sent it to the market in Sydney and he made fruit cases out of sassafras timber that the local sawmill provided and did absolutely everything really, made the boxes, arranged for it to be taken to the railway at Bell and sent to the markets in Sydney and all of that. He started off, well he always grew potatoes as well, he started off growing potatoes in between the rows of fruit trees before they were bearing, and this is before I was born, but he continued to grow potatoes as a bit of a crop as well.

But it was never really a financial success, of course it was during a period when no one made much of a financial success of anything, but the fruit ripened a little later than in a lot of other districts so the prices tended to be at the lower end of their range by the time he sent his. I don't know whether I should go on about all this at this stage of the interview but he was greatly influenced in the end by (I'll diverge if that's allowed).

Another thing he sold were chestnuts because the original planter of the garden had put in - I suppose there must have been about twelve chestnut trees in the garden - and he and later my mother and me and my brother all picked up chestnuts and put them into sugar bags, sewed them up and sent them to the markets in Sydney and I often think that it is highly likely that my father was the first person in Australia to send chestnuts to a market.

You usually got about six pence a pound and we got pocket money for picking them up, I don't know what we got, we must have got a ha'penny a pound or something. It was an interesting occupation that continued really right until we left the place in 1992.

When the appearance of Mediterranean immigrants after the Second World War caused the price to rise dramatically and you got five or six dollars a kilogram, compared to what we had originally got, but that is a diversion, I can't remember what I was saying before that.

Well it is a nice diversion Peter but I am intrigued, were you still selling the chestnuts as late as the 1990s when you left?

Oh yes - but other people of course, particularly in Victoria and at Mount Irvine, had taken on chestnut growing on a bigger scale. But you didn't have to bother sending anything to market ever again because Italians and people from Croatia and so on are very keen on chestnuts and they would just arrive with large families looking like *Cavaliera Rusticana*, you know the grandmothers in black and little children dressed as meringues and dangerous looking middle-aged men who would peel notes off rolls that they got out of their pockets, I shouldn't be saying this I'll probably be killed, but it was really quite interesting.

10:05

My mother particularly used to enjoy sort of trying to control their influx– they sort of descended on everything and had to be sort of controlled a bit, it was really quite interesting.

But back to my father's earning a living. Next door to us were Patrick White's mother and father, Victor and Ruth White, who my father tended to sell things to like sucking pigs and vegetables and things. I mean they had their own there, I mean they lived in Sydney at Elizabeth Bay, and I remember my mother saying that they then went and played bridge with the Whites who won the money back and I don't know whether that is true or not.

Anyhow Mrs White used to ask my father sometimes to send down a large box of flowers out of the garden, rhododendrons, lilac and cool climate things like that, because she was having a big party or something in Sydney. She suggested that he might consider actually selling flowers to some of the flower shops in Sydney and she had been a great supporter of Beatrice Stewart's flower shop in Kings Street which was Sydney's best flower shop really. Two or three shops down Kings Street there was also Searles, which was a fashionable shop.

My father started doing that in a sort of small way and then that gradually grew and after the Second World War he pulled out the orchard and gave it up and mainly grew ... during the war he'd grown vegetables as well as the fruit and things, but they then really started a sort of flower farm that evolved out of the garden and he planted lots of rhododendrons and lilacs and hyacinths and daffodils and things in rows everywhere and that turned out to be much more satisfactory as a money-earner.

Then over the years ... of course my mother worked hard at that too and over the years they gradually...they ended up having a whole lot of flower shops that they sent things direct to on the train from Bell in Kings Cross and Parramatta, two or three in the City. I can't remember what ... there was a wonderful woman called Miss Lane (who was near Wynyard in a little shop that sold flowers that everybody went to). And there was another thing called 'Ann's Floral Service' that was upstairs somewhere in an arcade, I have forgotten where it was. Then there were the ones at Kings Cross. It was quite an interesting sort of era in a way.

But eventually the sort of mass production of flowers began in a way that it hadn't before and he started a small nursery really because people who came to see the garden sort of wanted plants that they saw there. That expanded really very considerably and that is what he did really until actually the night before he died, which in a way he was lucky that he got wiped out while he was still going and he was almost

eighty so you can't fuss can you, except that he did leave rather a mess to be dealt with.

Were you engaged in the flower production as well?

Well I was engaged in it to the extent that when I was there at weekends or holidays or anything that my brother and I were drummed into picking these things and helping tie them up in bunches and all that sort of thing, so we were but only as temporary hands.

Just a pedestrian question about the transportation of them, you mentioned they went by train but what did you put them in to?

14:43

It is interesting you should ask that because my father having spent all his years making fruit cases out of wood then simply asked the local timber-getting people to make different sorts of pieces of wood and he made large wooden boxes that were a bit like sort of coffins really only they were perfectly rectangular with a rope handle at either end and a wooden lid with leather hinges that he made which you put down on it. These things were about I suppose five or six feet long and two feet wide or something and you packed all the things tightly in there. He lined the boxes with newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* which was a good size for doing that sort of thing, then you put all the things in and put them very tightly because most of the things were picked of course when they were just opening and then you put wet newspaper on top and closed the lid down on them.

He'd actually taken to wheels of course at this stage and had a utility and they put a huge pile of these things tied with rope and we'd drive to Bell in the evening about six o'clock probably and pile all the things on the station at Bell addressed to these various people. Then the poor station master I suppose, or someone, had to put them on the train at Bell and they went to Sydney and then the whoever delivered them to the shops, it was all a system nowadays is hard to imagine, took the boxes back to the railway and the empty boxes were returned to Bell Station. So when you went with one load of boxes to go to Sydney you then piled the utility up with the ones that had been returned, very sort of labour intensive really. Now of course it is all cardboard boxes that I suppose get thrown away at once.

There is a smell about a wooden box too.

Oh, there is and I have a feeling that most of the boxes were coachwood, which does have a nice sort of smell, it is interesting, and the sassafras ones did too, I can smell it now.

The sound together was much more romantic than the sound of cardboard boxes.

It is. It was all one step up from sort of peasant life I suppose if you look at it that way. I sort of see my family's life and mine, as with everybody's lives I suppose, as a sort of step along the way in the plant world which has gone far beyond now, but I enjoyed all that.

When you say your father loaded up the utility how many boxes would he dispatch at a time?

I don't know it could be sort of eight or ten or something. The main shops often got two boxes full each time, I don't know how often they did it two or three times a week I suppose. There was also a big demand, as there is again now, there was a big demand for foliage particularly cherry laurel leaves for Anzac Day and Remembrance Day and things like that, all sorts of foliage and autumn foliage things for some unknown reason can't have lasted long but the shops liked it and asked for it. Of course they would ring because they had a special wedding and do you have something that is cream or pale pink or something, you know that sort of thing, it all happened in the flower-growing era.

Is that the career your father expected to have?

Oh no I'm quite sure it wasn't. I don't know what sort of career my father expected to have, he was a person, he was like the rest of his family, they were all very calm people, whereas my mother's family were far more sort of … I wasn't going to say vivacious but perhaps irritating.

A big leap from vivacious.

It's not a combination. *(laughter)* He never really said much about anything like that he just went ahead with it. But he was a person who was, I'm sure to a very considerable extent, content in looking after all the plants and animals and everything, I am sure he got a lot of satisfaction from it. I think he enjoyed the flower-growing ~ and later being a nurseryman because he had always been very interested in the garden.

19:50

Because the original gardens at Mount Wilson, including ours, had all been put in I suppose beginning about 1880 when the houses were built (although there is no record of exactly when that is) but by looking at old photographs of the size of the trees and the things as they were in the early part of the twentieth century I think they must have been planted pretty close to 1880.

There was a remarkable selection of plants in those gardens because the Sydney nurseries in those days had an amazing array of things in their catalogues, all sorts of rhododendron varieties and conifers, quite amazing, and of course the Botanic Gardens had a big nursery that I think you probably could get plants from and perhaps some of them came from there.

So that there were a lot of conifers and there was a lot of interesting deciduous trees, a lot of different kinds of oaks in those gardens and there was a big sugar maple at *Bebeah* in the middle of Mount Wilson and there were a lot of old rhododendron hybrids. The people there sort of tended to give each other plants and because my father was very keen on them the people in the other gardens allowed him to layer rhododendrons and things in their gardens and get different kinds that way.

He also bought plants and bulbs and things, not only locally but from (I remember he ordered some things from Japan and Holland) ~ you could buy things in those days without … the quarantine wasn't fussing you see, although there was a terrible acclimatisation problem of different seasons, but he did that to a certain extent. The number of small specialist growers in Australia in the 1930s was enormous. He used to buy the *Garden Lover*, a weekly magazine or a monthly magazine, and it was full of advertisements of dahlia growers and gladioli specialists and iris specialists and this, that and the other, orchid specialists and all this sort of thing. You could buy by mail order a remarkable array of things.

He was very keen on lilies and had quite a big collection of those and grew lots of different plants so I was brought up in a gardening environment is really what it amounts to because the other people were all very interested in that sort of thing too. People gave my father, because he was interested in gardening, books from time-to-time which of course tended to be English books. I remember because he was interested in lilies Mrs Wynne from *Wynstay* gave him somebody or other, and Cootes *Lilies of the World* or something, and he had Johnson's *Gardener's Dictionary* ~ he might have bought that himself. He had the Australian gardening books too, you know, Brunning'*s Australian Gardener* (and Yates *Garden Guide* and things, so I used to look at those and sort of found them interesting when I was still a child anyway.

Were there other books there in your household Peter, or just gardening books?

Oh no, well there weren't *many* books. There were a mixture of books: there were some old rather classical books that belonged to my mother's father and then there were popular novels by whoever wrote *Rebecca* and that sort of thing. Then there were of course children's books for us, which included wildflower books and things like that, because people were very interested. The district had had a long interest in the natural flora and fauna, the first settlers, particularly one of the Coxes and the original Mr Gregson, were amateur naturalists who made collections of plants and things and corresponded with the Botanic Gardens about all that sort of thing. That had aroused interest in the flora of the area because like Mount Tomah there were rain forests and tall eucalyptus forests and dry sclerophyll forests and heath lands. There was a wide range of vegetation types and this had eventually attracted Professor Lawson, who was the first Professor of Botany at Sydney University, and he and Professor McCallum I think it was, bought the land from my grandfather when he sold it before he bought *Nooroo*.

25:26

Professor Lawson was planning to have a sort of botanical field station there but he died of appendicitis I think, relatively young, and never got there, but he encouraged his students and the Botany Society, or whatever they had, to come to Mount Wilson (and the staff) over a period of several years in the 1920s to do a complete botanical and ecological survey of the area and it was, as far as I can see, the first ecological study of any sort done in Australia and what with the legacy of the original settlers, who were amateur naturalists, plus this ~ although it would happen before I was born ~ a great deal of it had rubbed off on everybody in the local population, most unusual really when you think of it. We were taken for walks in the bush and people would say, 'That's *Prostanthera* and would use the proper names of the plants and we all grew up fully aware of *Leptomeria* and *Tetratheca* and *Atkinsonia* which was a rare plant that occurred in the district, it sort of rubbed off on the local children as well as everybody else.

If I can diverge slightly again, in a very tiny community, which must have been about a hundred people I suppose, there was Mrs Wynne, who was English, who had married Colonel Wynne who had been educated in England but came from here and came to live there. Then there was the next generation, Mrs Gregson who was an American. For a while there was one of the Mann family who had originally owned Petty's Hotel and owned *Dennarque* at Mount Wilson had married a French woman from Aix-en-Provence. We were confronted with different sorts of attitudes to life and different sorts of food which is quite amazing really when you think of it in such a tiny place in Australia surrounded by snakes and gum bark and things that bit you, it all had a tremendous influence on everybody really.

You mentioned children, were there many children in the district?

Well there were. I went (and my brother did too) we went to the Mount Wilson Public School which at the time I attended it I think had fourteen children and some unfortunate person who was sent there at intervals to be school master. So we went in very simple conditions to that school and the poor school master, and if he had a wife, lived in very simple conditions too. There must have been quite a lot of children because there was a sort of generation of people there then who, whereas it had largely been a summer holiday place up to the First World War, after the First World War most people lived there permanently and either they had enough money to do so or they tried something ~ several people tried orcharding. The timber-getting people were still there and that had a big influence on us too. Because they were out in the bush all the time they knew all about animals and plants and things as well, it was quite odd.

Joe Webb, the road man, who lived there in a sort of hut and cleaned the gutters and things and filled pot holes in the dirt road and things and was very good about birds and everything too and taught my brother and me how to attract parrots by whistling like them and how to catch them also. So, we actually made … my brother and I made a lot of our money as children from selling birds, I know it sounds quite horrifying now doesn't it, but they came in vast swarms to try and eat my father's annual income in the orchard and we would be out shooting them with twenty-twos. Then in the winter when they were hungry, all these parrots and things, they were really quite easy to catch and my father knew how to make a figure four trap, I must really write it down before it dies with me, which is … it is a self-triggering version of the sieve on a stick that you pull. We used to catch crimson rosellas, for which we got one and six pence, and king parrots, for which we got five shillings.

30:22

I eventually … I had always wanted to catch gang-gangs, those cockatoos with the red combs that rarely ever hit the ground, I was riding through the bush on a horse one day and I passed a spring where the gang-gangs all landed and had a drink and I put some horse-hair snares there (having been taught how to make them by Joe Webb the road man), and I caught two and the gang-gangs never landed there again, but I got thirty shillings each for those from the little zoo at Mount Victoria and I felt I had made a fortune.

I was talking to someone the other day who breeds macaws and he said you would get a couple of thousand (dollars) for them now. So I have to laugh. I'm sorry for all this, we really aren't talking about gardening at all are we!

I think there are some wonderful vignettes here of a different world that has gone. Who did you sell the other birds to – the 1/6 rosellas

Well mainly to two Sydney bird shops. There was the Railway Bird Shop at Central under the arches where the buses now stop, in Pitt Street, and there was another bird shop at Circular Quay at the bottom of Pitt Street there and it used to buy them too. I mean we mainly again sent them on the train in a box to be delivered.

You see we got educated until we were about ten and then we got sent away to be incarcerated and beaten and forced to pray and everything at boarding school. After the school holidays we would bring a couple of boxes of birds back with us on the train and we would unload one of them onto the Railway Bird Shop when we arrived there and then we'd get the tram down to Circular Quay and unload the other one onto the Quay Bird Shop, and then we'd get the ferry across to Mosman and stay with my aunt for the night before we went back to school.

This is in your teenage years?

Yes.

So it wasn't so unusual then to be transporting all sorts of things on trams?

Well you had to put them down the end, the opposite end to where the driver was (there was space enough then) and you had to sit at the back outside or wherever to be near them. It probably was unusual, I don't really know, I remember people used to look most strangely at us when we had these boxes with paper over them so that the birds were in the dark, but when you went over junctions in the tram they would sometimes chortle and things up in the rack. (laughter)

It sounds so incredible from today.

It does to me now but of course it was a long while ago.

Peter one of the things that intrigues me you talk about the timber-getters were a big influence, what do you mean?

Well they … well of course there was a whole family, it was largely the Kirk family who had gone there when their father had gone there as a caretaker but they set up getting timber with bullock teams and all that sort of thing. Two of the brothers, there were a whole lot of them, had a sawmill and used to actually produce wood for things.

At Mount Wilson?

I remember the original weatherboard houses were built of timber sawn on site with pitsawing and things, and they of course…. that was sort of interesting when you were a child. One of them, Tom Kirk, became a world champion axeman and his brother Eric (who was called Peter for some reason), they used to go in the cross-cut sawing and win that. So there was …. when we went to the Royal Show in Sydney we always wanted to go to the wood chopping because we were connected to that. At the annual sports at Mount Wilson, if you can imagine, which were held on New Year's Day there was a big wood chopping and cross-cut sawing competition as well as all sorts of other things. I was only ever allowed to go in the mixed cross-cut sawing, if you can imagine such a thing, with my aunt who everyone cruelly said pulled me backwards and forwards. *(Laughter)* I would have chopped my foot off if I had gone in the chopping, but other people all went in the wood chopping but the Kirks, who didn't start 'til ten minutes after else had begun, sort of chopped through the block in a few seconds and always won of course. As you say it was another world. Anyhow in which gardening was a big deal.

I think the world of Mount Wilson now is very different.

Of course. Oh it is. I mean that era has totally gone. I mean everybody when I was a child ~ there were paddocks and everybody had cows and fowls and were sort of semi-self-contained units, large vegetable gardens and fruit trees and all of that. Now the land has got sub-divided a lot and the people who ~ a lot of them do live there permanently ~ but there is a larger proportion of people who come there. Also people have come who have had ... I mean it is different economic times isn't it. My memories are largely of that gardening era of the 1930s and 1940s and a bit afterwards when people didn't have a lot of money generally, but now there are people who have more money who can do more elaborate things. I mean I of course am old-fashioned and don't like that I don't see that the sort of places there are at Mount Wilson really need statues or Victorian fountains or things of that sort, but that's that. It is different now and different people naturally do different things.

Do you go back today?

Very rarely. I mean naturally it is like everybody's life it has sort of lost its magic for me. I find it interesting but it has become more closely settled, a lot of things have disappeared, there is very little sort of grazing land left or treated as such, so you don't get the plants and animals sort of thing. The clearing and everything that has taken place means that the birds are different. I mean when I was a child there were wedge-tailed eagles and all sorts of things, they've all gone, but perhaps that is for other causes I really don't know.

Where did the magic go, you said the magic was gone?

Well I suppose it went ... it probably didn't go for me 'til about 1990 or some time like that, but that is me it is not anything else I don't think. I always found it marvellously interesting from the very first moment when I started and my father made two little gardens beside the house edged with basalt rocks, one for me and one for my brother to grow things in, so he encouraged that.

What did you grow?

Oh well we grew things that I never really liked much because they grew fairly quickly. You know people always like children to grow radishes because they grow quickly and I never really have cared for those ordinary pink radishes much, but still it was quite interesting growing them. Virginia stock, I don't know whether anyone ever bothers with that now, that was always in rather washed-out colours I felt but that grew up and flowered quickly. But we also grew sweet peas up pieces of wire netting and we must have grown other things, I can't imagine what they were. My brother, who wasn't a gardener in the same way that I am at all, planted a lemon tree in his garden which gradually as the years went by overwhelmed it, it is still there, and it was outside the laundry door so it was easy to pick lemons if you needed them for anything.

39:29

I had an interesting education really because I started off going to a sort of a preschool but the Wynne family had a governess, Dorothy Moore, who was the sister of Tom Inglis Moore -- some sort of a writer or something in Canberra - I suppose she was in her twenties but she looked about ninety to us when we were four or three or something. The Wynne children were educated by her when they were young but they allowed other children in the district to come there too, you had to bring your own little table and chair. The Wynnes had built a big new sandstone house in about 1922 and had abandoned their old weatherboard house and we had this school there. So we .. .I was most anxious … I mean I'd largely learnt to read and write a bit before I got there, I don't know what age I would have been, but I was desperately anxious to be able to read and write properly to compete with the others who could, which is a good sign isn't it when I look back on it. It was a sort of privileged situation because there was painting and we did pottery. See it was in big garden and I was greatly impressed by things that I saw in that garden that we didn't have.

Such as?

Well there were some beautiful purple tree peonies that I used to walk past going there and there was a wisteria growing over a summer house and there was a pond with water lilies in it and I liked all that while I was there. Miss Moore gave me a water lily plant for my birthday you see and that encouraged my father to build a round pond in amongst the tree ferns at the back of our house for somewhere for it to go, then he made a sort of paved garden with lots of beds and things amongst the trees in the 1930s, it must have been the early 1930s. But at this school we did pottery, we made things, we acted in plays, I remember I was Pope Gregory and other things. On Wednesdays we were allowed to stay later and have a peculiar sort of high tea where you could have any sort of breakfast cereal, Puffed wheat and Grape Nuts and things that we didn't have at home, and bread and butter and jam, it was very English there you see. But Mrs Wynne, who was a cultivated woman, would often read to us as well.

While you were eating?

Yes or just … sometimes just after school, we'd be invited and she'd get some book and read it over a few days, we'd have the next episode and things. We learnt about all sorts of worrying things like the last days of Pompeii, when you think of it out there in the Australian bush, which caused me to worry very greatly about mountains like Mount Banks and Mount Hay that looked a bit like volcanoes and everybody always said, 'You have this lovely volcanic soil,' and everything. As well as that we were all taken to Blackheath occasionally to the pictures, we were taken to a matinee, to go to see something, Shirley Temple was in but they'd made a mistake about the program and what we saw was San Francisco and Jeanette McDonald and the earthquake, so this heightened fear of volcanic eruptions and things of this sort with huge crevices appearing in the ground, but we got over it it seems.

But being able to have that sort of pre-school era, I don't know what age I went to the Mount Wilson Public School, I mightn't have gone there until I was six I am not sure. I probably can tell from photograph books if I look at them.

In spite of being in this remote situation the eyes of the local children, including myself, were opened to an amazing array of things about the world … far better than what happened to the city children really. Extraordinary because it sort of encouraged enthusiasms and inquiring minds and things at a very early stage without any pressure applied to do so because we were given things to do that we enjoyed.

You also mentioned, I read in one piece Peter, about the Australian flora that was used in novels - such as the banksia man he was much more appreciated than the other fairies and delicate things. I read your comments which taps into that idea.

Well it does really. Well we had these books, *Flower Fairies of the Seasons* and things that were English had all these blackberry fairies and things, which were charming little girls with bare feet who looked as if they ought to have been looked after better I always thought. There were all sorts of plants that we heard about but we didn't really see much, although we saw plenty of blackberries. But we were more intrigued by the Australian ones, the May Gibbs gum nut babies and things and banksia man and things because they were visible to us in the bush.

Ida Rentoul Outhwaite wrote a book on flower fairies – I've forgotten what she called it - and I think I said at the time that my favourites were the sort of green hood orchids which were little sort of elves that were rather and she had written these rather dreadful poems on the opposite page, but now those books sell for a fortune. We had that influence too as well as....

Some audio distortion side 2

So although the plant side of the influence that was brought to bear on us … the plant growing side was a very English and European one it developed in parallel with this interest in the bush and the native flora that was outside the fence. Most people put a waratah or two in their gardens and that was that, but Miss Helen Gregson, who was the daughter of the original Gregson who settled at *Yengo* in Mount Wilson, had actually brought into her garden a whole lot of native plants in one section of the garden of her house. I mean she had rhododendrons and maples and everything to but she was very interested in the native flora, as they all were, and so she transplanted *pultinaeas* and *prostantheras* and things - she must have dug them up from the bush I suppose, but she was an early native gardener.

Hearing you talk about this childhood Peter and these wonderful gardens that you grew up in it sounds like … you are almost growing up in a picture book yourself.

Well you are in a way. We didn't … I don't know that I was happy as a child, I don't think children are happy because they are controlled by everybody, but we didn't need … toys and things much because there were so many interesting things to do outside so we were always sort of occupied. There was no electricity, there was nothing, so there were endless community activities as well. There were fancy dress parties you can imagine and fetes and things that people had that you all looked forward to. Bonfires for Empire Day, as it was then called, and for special occasions like the coronation in 1937, so there were things to look forward to that were going to happen that when you are child you look forward … that is going to be next week and that sort of thing. It was really, when I look back on it, although it was in a way very simple it was really rather wonderful. When I, at the age of ten got dressed up in a uniform and was put on a train and sent to a boarding school, I wondered what had hit me.

Before we leave Nooroo and come to your schooling, how big was the acreage?

49:24

Well my father had about eighty acres of land but the garden was probably, it expanded, I should … the block that the house was on was eleven acres so it would have been about five acres of garden I suppose eventually, but the original garden would only have been about two really because my father expanded it considerably. The original garden was all on the front side of the house. The houses were all built facing south to avoid the heat which was a terrible mistake because then everyone had to live at the back of their houses where it was warmer. The original garden was all planted on the south side of the house and my father then expanded it to the other side and out in other directions a bit too. In fact he expanded it a whole lot more and after he died I contracted it again a bit, but we were mad plant collectors and so we needed more and more space so that we could have every plant in the world, a serious error.

You are very blessed to have the space to move to.

I know, I know but then you've got to look after it.

We haven't moved past your education yet but I am just thinking as you talk about maintaining the garden were you living there at the time you were working at the university?

No. People always associate me with it because I had such a lot to do with it but I never lived permanently at Mount Wilson after 1939 when I went to boarding school and I then went to the university and then I worked here. I went back for weekends, I went back for holidays for the rest of the time that we owned the place.

After my father died I went there virtually every weekend because my mother was alone there and no longer young of course. Before my father had died we realised that my parents simply had to have some sort of help and we tended to have a series of married couples. We built a cottage on land on the opposite side of the road that we owned because you had to have somewhere for people to live to be able to do anything like that, so that they were able to do the basic grass cutting. Of course, what they really did was work in my father's nursery.

When did that wind up?

Well that didn't wind up until we left because I kept a bit of it going and because we employed someone you could get it watered and everything and I did most of the propagation of things then. But that was a tremendous problem … my father had expanded that and expanded it and it was really quite big and then he had a stroke and died quite suddenly and it was essential for me, because I was working at the university, and for my mother, to reduce everything dramatically as quickly as possible.

We sold off most of the plants in the nursery to other nurseries in the Blue Mountains at bargain prices if they would come and take them away. I gave away the fowls to somebody else so my mother wouldn't have to look after them, although she was quite capable of looking after them she was very tough, but we had to downsize that part of it very rapidly.

We overcame the financial problem by opening the garden as a financial concern for a period each spring and autumn and I propagated plants, the sort of things that people might like, that we then had for sale at the same time as we had the garden opening and that miraculously raised enough money to pay the people we employed. Then I did a tremendous lot of work in the garden but so did Allan McNeish who used to come with me. Because we would come at the weekends, which was when we had the garden open, and the people who worked for us didn't work at the weekends so my mother, we often took my mother's elder sister up there as well, and they sat there and collected

the money in old biscuit tins and things, wore old hats that were really quite dreadful, but they enjoyed that because - my mother complained about it all the time but she actually had a wonderful time because there were people to talk to and all that sort of thing and it enlivened the situation as well as that.

When I arrived first thing this morning Peter you showed me that wonderful article from the Women's Weekly *of 1 October 1958 which was a great advertisement in a sense for the garden opening later that month, what was your reaction seeing those people come, thousands you said?*

Well we weren't horrified like you can be now about this sort of thing because we were so delighted that all this money had been raised. What I remember about a lot about that weekend was dust because none of the roads were sealed or anything and all of these people came and drove along and clouds of dust blew into the air. I mean we didn't know whether anybody would come at all and I had said to the policeman, the nearest policeman was at Mount Victoria, that there might be a lot of people and perhaps he should have a look at it and he laughed it off as a ludicrous suggestion but he actually had to come on the Sunday to try and aim the traffic about a bit and find places for them to park and everything.

My mother had formed ... five gardens we had so we got five people involved and we decided that we would buy big rolls of theatre tickets and that people could buy ... you'd give them five which would enable them to go to five gardens which was a good way of making money because you usually don't, you know, you usually go to two or three. I forget what we charged, perhaps it was five shillings I don't know, that even seems a lot to me, some small amount anyway you got the five tickets.

This was all five gardens open at the same time together?

Yes together for the weekend as this fund-raising thing for the district. As I say unfortunately I can't remember but I remember there was terrible concern about having to wait until Monday for someone to take the cash to the bank in case we were robbed or something as a result of this, having dealt with all of this.

Was one garden more popular than another?

I don't know that that was so really, I have really sort of no idea about that. I think it was all six of one and half a dozen of the other really.

So thereafter every year you opened it twice a year?

Well I can't remember what happened but there were various ... we didn't have a big thing like that ever again but garden opening then became quite popular in the district, people began opening gardens and often for various charities. But after a while, it is like economic times anywhere, everybody found that it was a way of keeping large old gardens going, which of course it is. That caused us to think a great deal more about their appearance and generally people started (I don't necessarily say improving) - fixing them up a bit so that they were easier to visit.

How did they do that?

Well just by cutting things back and one thing and another. I suppose I ought to diverge onto what happened to us. I mean we'd planted all these things everywhere and everything had grown so that it was really rather difficult to walk round from one side of the house to the other. I had had advice from Richard Clough, who I had met I suppose sometime around Christmas 1956 or 1957, and he suggested a few things we might do. He must have been appalled at what he saw. And he then continued to have a very considerable influence. We didn't do a great deal until 1965 when there was a tremendous snow storm that broke down trees and the most frightful damage absolutely everywhere and a terrible business clearing it all up afterwards. I mean it demolished

my father's bush houses, flattened to the ground, and the trees of course had never been exposed to a snow fall of that ... there were a couple of feet of snow and there was no wind and even broke wires between the electric light poles and things, quite extraordinary. Anyhow this most terrible mess but when that was cleaned up of course it revealed ... it made spaces and openings and things that Richard then said, 'Well you must keep them – we'll exploit them.' So that gradually following his advice we sort of opened the garden up a bit again so that you got quite lengthy views across it and things and that began to work reasonably well. He also … the gardens at Mount Wilson had always been very inward looking, not open to views or anything, and he suggested that we make a few openings in the edge of the garden so you looked out into the paddocks.

How did you feel about those changes?

Oh I was absolutely delighted because I could see immediately that you got an effect. He was very good at organising, we had to do it, so that it wasn't a sort of random thing, so that you got a sort of axis this way and that way. Gradually he just persuaded me to put a few things in the garden to attract people and act as a focus and because it was such a simple weatherboard house and everything we only wanted things made of the local stone or wood and because of the landform it didn't lend itself to stone work or walls or anything, except in the immediate vicinity of the house just for levelling reasons, so there were virtually no steps. He sort of arranged … I mean without greatly altering the garden, simply by removing some things, you just had *lawn* in inverted commas which was mowing whatever grew there, sort of flowing like a wall-to-wall carpet from one space to another which made it pleasant to walk round.

Then he said that if you put seats you need to anchor them down with something, if they are just sitting there under a tree they need to fit in somehow, so he ensured that … we just did a couple of those but made a sort of flat platform of stones and had planting around it so that the seat sort of sat into the vegetation and wasn't just sitting there so that it was much more part of the ... I mean it was very rough and tumble. Then finally in 1980, when I decided that we ought to do something for the centenary of the house and garden, I suggested we have a summer house, a gazebo, or something somewhere and I was going to put it on the flat part outside the house on the flat ground so that we could go out there and have a gin and tonic and feed the mosquitoes in the evening. But he then said on no you've got to put it where it now is and then it will look down and when people come they will then see it and want to go and sit in it and when they sit in it they'll see down here and it will all sort of be much better. So I did exactly what he said.

I mean we had the additional awkwardness that the house was back to front because there wasn't a road in the back originally, it was set aside as road but it wasn't made but then it got made as road in the 1930s - and the house was miles from the front gate - so everyone came to the back. So he fixed up the back a lot and suggested a design for a sort of picket gate that was wooden and wasn't pretentious and he very cleverly arranged for the ends of the pickets to disappear into bushes and things so you didn't know where that began or ended. When you looked from inside the house at it you sort of felt enclosed but he said have it low so that people could see over it, so that was a great success too. I owed him a great deal for suggesting a retrieval of the situation and when you are landed with a lot of plants and a lot of very old trees you have to work round them and he was very good at that. I mean it was no great marvel but it brought a sort of plants-person's garden into the world of some design and it also meant that you could see out and you saw gum trees and things beyond. And we had sheep that ate down the paddocks and they provided - I mean I like them – they added a sort of bucolic note to the scene and everybody who came liked that.

We often used to remark that people would arrive looking agitated and things when they came to see the garden - then later on you'd see them holding hands looking at the sheep. It's interesting isn't it? They'd sort of settle down and enjoy themselves. Children liked to sort of run out into the paddock where the sheep were and frighten them and all that. And of course, we liked it as well wandering around it, it gave us considerable pleasure to be in a sort of … a sort of calming environment was the way I look at it.

How did you feel about the crowds flocking in?

Well they tended not to be too immense but one tended in view of the financial view of the situation to be sort of pleased. I mean I suppose the most we ever had in a day would be five hundred people, but you know that is between nine a.m. and five p.m.

Did the garden suffer?

Well in certain places where people walked a lot wore the grass away and I never fully overcame that. But you see that would be a Sunday when it was fine at the height of spring or the height of autumn or something, on the other days it would be just dribs and drabs so that didn't cause a lot of problem. You then have to ... it is like gardens in Europe and everything have had to modify the paths and all that sort of thing to deal with people.

We largely overcame out that by putting a few places where we embedded flat pieces of basalt in the grass so that it took some of the wear of those little bits without looking without looking too much of a contrast with anything else and that seemed to work pretty well. I ended up quite liking the principal views that got created within the original planting that was very formal. The trees had been planted in straight lines, presumably by William Hay who was the person who built the house and owned the land originally, but it didn't look as if they were because Richard Clough sort of arranged things sort of diagonally to them, and there was a sort of round part in front of the house that we got rid of a lot of it because it sort of had a bed of something right in the middle that was a Victorian left-over.

I mean none of these gardens there are sort of the original things that the Garden History Society goes overboard about, they were gardens that were largely based on the existing landform without much stone work or steps or anything. Then you were at the mercy of the planting as far as the design is concerned because when big trees die or blow over or something the garden has to be different afterwards and you have to change as you go. And of course they all reflect the influences of the series of owners and I don't think it matters.

What doesn't matter?

1:10:17

That the thing has changed as time goes on.

Rather than keep them static?

Rather than keep them static. I mean it is difficult to ... if it is an Italian garden from the Renaissance or something you can keep it pretty static because it was a series of terraces and stone work and flights of steps and things that you've got, the planting probably has varied quite a lot in those. But when you have the garden the form of which is largely dictated by the planting, banks of trees and shrubs and things like that, it is difficult to keep it the same.

You've also spoken elsewhere, in writing rather than spoken, about your aunt's garden in Mosman, the vegetable gardens.

What marvellous the things that you remember. Well that was my great-aunts' you see. My grandmother had fourteen brothers and sisters and there were three unmarried great-aunts who lived together in a house in Mosman and they had a typical suburban garden which is the garden I remember most. They had one of those late Victorian houses that had a tiled path - sort of patterns or terra cotta and dark green and something, I don't know.

Where was the garden, what was the address do you remember?

They lived in Harbour Street ,Mosman and the house is now a sub-station, it was all swept away eventually. They had two squares of buffalo lawn in front of the house and I think they had a Kentia palm on one side and a Christmas bush on the other. Then there was a path down the southern side of the house where there was a big bed of shade-loving things, they had tree ferns and aspidistras and bird-nest ferns and things like that along and those bamboo cane begonias and things like that all lived along there and hydrangeas. Then at the back of the house there was central path that ran the full length of the land and it had a wooden arch over the entrance to that with a rose on it, it was one of those ones with a politically incorrect name, I think it was probably 'Black Boy' that was a popular rose at the time, and it had beds of azaleas and gardenias on either side and then there was more buffalo lawn.

But there were beds against both natural fences that got filled, they had mountains of sweet peas that went up the fence on one side and they grew gladioli and dahlias and cinerarias, they did all the seasonal thing that everybody did in those days of having things for the spring and things for the summer and things for the autumn and they rushed out and swept up manure from horses that dragged carts around before the others got it and things that used to happen in the suburbs. Then at the end of that they had a vegetable garden and then they had a fowl yard. They had a sort of self-sufficiency on a small scale and in fact lots of people did. Remember of course a lot of Italians and people here now have the same don't they - which is nice.

Peter what sort of influence were your aunts upon you?

Oh I don't think they had much of an influence on me. I don't think the Sydney scene sort of influenced me much at all. I enjoyed seeing what they did and everything but I don't think that influenced me much at all. My Sydney relations as far as gardening is concerned, although they all gardened, didn't have much of an influence.

My grandfather, who had retired long before I was born, presumably had some pronounced influence on my father and his other children but practically none on me. I was the first grandchild and everyone thought I was wonderful, quite wrongly, and I used to be given to my grandfather when I was a little boy to be taken to the Show, because my grandfather was one of the trustees or something, and I used to have to go and have lunch with all those sort of people in suits with watch chains who prodded me and called me Sonny Jim and things and said, 'My how you've grown' and my brother and I always used to feel like saying, 'Well what do you expect us to do, shrink?'

He actually judged the large white pigs which was a singularly disagreeable experience being taken to view them, when those enormous sows lying there all pink with a few white hairs on them and about a thousand nipples all arranged in rows, but I was fond of him. And he was keen on gardening but it was really my father and the other people at Mount Wilson who were the influences on me. And the other great influences of course came from my own reading in due course and my explorations of the other gardens at Mount Wilson, finding things that were there that even their owners hadn't noticed sometimes.

Such as?

Well one of my great discoveries was *Rhododendron arboreum* … I have never known how to pronounce it, which is the commonest Himalayan bright red rhododendron which is not grown much as a garden plant, but at *Sefton Hall* next door to us there was a huge overgrown group of rhododendrons near their front gate and I noticed one day something absolutely - I mean all the rhododendrons were red ones but it was always red with a bit of blue. But I noticed sticking right out of the top there was a bright red rhododendron quite unlike anything I had seen before. And I was young of course and I climbed right up this rhododendron somehow, got over their fence, and broke a bit off and decided that was what it was and that was interesting and I collected seeds and raised some from it afterwards.

Did you do that when you were a young child?

No I didn't do that until I would have been a teenager.

We have skipped your schooling but just cutting straight to university you studied agriculture.

Yes I did agriculture and I became a plant pathologist. But of course in other ways that influenced my gardening because I'd earlier made contact with the world of libraries when I was at school because occasionally when were let out for one reason or another, I was quite good at nicking out illegally, I'd get a tram across the Bridge and go to town and go to bookshops and look at the few book sections of those. I also found my way to the State Library and found that they had marvellous things like Hooker's *Rhododendrons of the Sikkim Himalaya*, which they have now put away of course in the rare book area, but in those days things were less carefully looked after. And I also found the books about the plant explorers and books by other people on groups of plants and gardens and things, so I developed a bit of interest in looking at those things while I was still at school. The school itself had a poor library, which most schools had then.

It is interesting that you sought out the library not some other wild activities that young boys might have done, was there a teacher there who influenced you?

No, no, no there was nothing there. Very little that influenced me there at all.

What is the school Peter?

I went to Shore North Sydney where my father had gone and my uncle. I was poorly suited to it in many ways but I have to be eternally grateful that it got me a secondary education and launched me which if it hadn't happened … but I hated being at boarding school for the first few years anyway but at least Sydney had other things to offer that you occasionally got out to see. Of course once I got to the university I was able to get more actively into the library world and as well as doing the work that I had to do for the course and things, that sort of trained me to find things in libraries better, so that written things about gardens had a very big influence on me. It was of course a sort of European influence and people often say about gardens like people had at Mount Wilson the people in some cases were born in England or their parents were … were trying to recreate home and things like that. I always think that is a lot of rubbish, they were just doing what they knew how to do, what they had been brought up to, the way everyone sort of looked at it, you just did it. You bought what the nurseries had that was suited to your climate and you just did it. I have always reacted against the sort of thing that people settling in Australia reacted against the bush and everything when actually a lot of them saw as it being quite nice and painted it and drew the plants and collected them and things.

Is that something that attitude is that something you've utilised in your own teaching?

Well I tend to think ... I mean I have nothing to do with garden designing or anything but people often say, 'What should I do,' and things like that and very often what I say is 'Why do anything to what you've got?' You know if you are enjoying doing it like this why fuss because gardening, like everything else in this world, has become an industry and that worries me a bit now, it is another thing that is marketed and corporatised.

Peter you did your degree at the University of Sydney, what did you think of doing when you left?

Well I didn't think of doing anything. I actually had been a trainee of the Department of Agriculture who paid my fees. In those days, like a lot of now, at university you had to pay to go to it and my family would probably have managed but I was fortunate that I got ... I didn't know what I wanted to be really except that I was interested in the sort of plant world and I applied for and got a Department of Agriculture traineeship which paid my fees and I think it paid me three hundred and fifty pounds a year which was enough to enable me, one way and another, to be in a college at the university so I had

somewhere to live when I did the degree. But, you were then obliged, like teachers' training, to work for five years for the Department of Agriculture which I didn't see as any great burden because you have to do something don't you and you had the job assured. What I'd done, I'd become a plant pathologist, I was not anxious to be a sort of agronomist or anything like that and have to go away to western New South Wales permanently, I felt I was more suited to the sort of urban life and the laboratory and things. I did an honours year in plant pathology and I found that all very interesting and that kept me going quite nicely.

You also graduated with the University Medal.

I know it is unimaginable isn't it, I can't imagine how. But I was lucky really because I had a couple of honours projects but one of them was a mysterious condition in wheat where in damp seasons the grains become discoloured when they are harvested and it was to find out what fungi caused that. Anyhow I kept isolating a mysterious thing that was highly impossible to identify and I tested it on wheat plants and found that it actually infected them. And then I went off to the north west and found that this disease actually existed but no one had noticed it and I was able to identify the cause and one thing and another. So that I … in a way I was lucky that I did something that was sort of significant and I think that is why I got given the University Medal really.

What was the disease, just for the tape?

Oh it's … I think it was called yellow spot or something. Isn't it terrible I can't remember its popular name, it was a species of *Helminthosporium*, but they have two sort of phases, fortunately I was able to identify it and prove its pathogenicity and detect its occurrence in the field. And I had also found one or two other diseases that no one had noticed beforehand. So it was all … in its day it was all right but it is simple stuff if you look at it now.

Anyhow I did that and I was very lucky a few years later to apply for a scholarship, the Sir Benjamin Fuller Scholarship - he was the person who built the Princess Theatre in the Melbourne and the Tivoli and was a theatrical entrepreneur. Why he had given money for a scholarship for people in agriculture I will never know, but I applied for this and I often wonder whether anyone else did, anyhow I got it. Somebody else I know had had it before and it was a *lot* of money for someone like me, it was a thousand pounds a year. And I was having to work on root disease of wheat and things like that and at the time the most advanced person in the world who knew about the ecology of soil fungi was a man called Dennis Garrett, who worked at the Botany Department in Cambridge, and so I wrote to him and said, 'Can I come?' and he wrote back and said, 'Please do.'

So I went and miraculously as the Department of Agriculture paid me a portion of my salary while I was there, provided I worked for them for another five years afterwards, that enabled me afford to go there and live in a college and work there which was wonderful really. I mean that was 1954 to 1956, so that is a long while ago too, and England and Europe generally were still reviving from the Second World War.

1:27:04

I trekked around in my spare time and looked at gardens in England and things which gave me the greatest pleasure and interest and it was really a very nice time to do that because they were sort of also reviving and on the whole the people who owned them were absolutely charming to me.

I mean I did do a few tours and things of a minor nature with the Royal Horticultural Society and I went on a National Trust tour to Scotland, but other than that I had an old car that I shared with somebody and I'd ring people up and say can I come and see the garden and they always said (I think they were so astonished that someone from Australia should be so interested, I don't know) and nine times out of ten when I went to those places the people said, 'Do come in and have a cup of tea,' or 'Stay and have dinner with us,' I mean it was extraordinary. But I suppose because I had such a genuine interest in their gardens and their plants that we then had something in common.

So I mean I really had (in my spare time when I wasn't worrying myself sick about finishing a PhD) I had a wonderful time looking at gardens. And In the summer vacation I went with a friend of mine across to Europe and looked at gardens there, in Italy and France and everywhere. So it was a wonderful experience all round in lots of ways. I went to all the Royal Horticultural Society flower shows and things that you could go to on the half-day train excursion from Cambridge, which was easy.

Talking about visiting gardens in Europe with a friend was that something that other people were doing as well or was that uncommon at that time?

Not very common at all. We just went on a tour of Europe to see everything but because of my interest we went to gardens here and there as we went so that was interesting too. Well I saw a representative sample of the things I had read about, so all that happened to me.

I suppose that had some influence on my sort of garden feelings, but I was very much influenced by the mood that there was in England in the 1930s that spilled over to after the Second World War when the people had financed the plant collectors who went to China and India and everywhere and their plants had grown to maturity and were flowering and everything so that I was very much influenced by the Asian rhododendrons and magnolias and camellias and things in that way and I wasn't so much influenced in the way of garden design although the thing that affected me most really I suppose, in a way, was the exact opposite of that.

It was that I was greatly impressed by the sort of landscapes that Capability Brown and other people had made, the sort of simple countryside sort of views. The whole thing of what had happened to England in the eighteenth century when it had virtually been denuded of trees and it was replanted so that much of the English countryside has that landscaped garden look about it.

It was that made me sort of notice when I came back to Australia that in a way the countryside in a lot of Australia looked much the same in a dry sort of way, but it had been achieved in the opposite way -- not by planting clumps of trees but by leaving them and clearing back up into the hillsides a bit and odd gum trees about and everything -- in many ways was extraordinarily similar. So I had a sort of 'landscapey' feeling about me and I'd been greatly influenced by formulaic landscape painting,

Claude and Poussin and people like that that I'd read about, that sort of lurked in my mind as well. So all that had a complex influence on me but I was extremely fortunate that at that stage of my life I was able to do that.

How were you able to do a PhD in two years?

It was a terrible worry! Well I was let off a year because I'd been working on something very similar before I went there, so I was excused a year. And of course, because I only had money for two years you either did it or you didn't and that part of course was very stressful but I managed it apparently. I was actually working on a strange fungus that occurs here that affects sugar beet because they wanted someone to look at this because East Anglia was big sugar beet producing area at the time.

So that is what I did and I survived it and I was able to fit in a few trips. Then I was able to do another career around Europe on my own in the period after I submitted my thesis before it was ... you had to have a *viva* and all sorts of frightful things in the end and that was that. But my brother was working for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in New York and so I came across the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, I ask you, to New York and stayed with my brother for a while and had a look at some American things and then we went to Washington and then I came across America on the train and went to a few places and came back across the Pacific.

So I really had, for those days - now everyone treks off everywhere all the time - but in those days when it was sea transport largely and everything that I managed to do all that and be paid for largely it was most fortunate.

So you came back to Sydney, did you work in the Department of Agriculture then?

Yes I did and that tempts me to say how I stopped doing it, which now you can't prevent my saying! Our laboratory got moved to Rydalmere from the city which was more inconvenient to go to but I got used to it. I was thinking if I could get something nearer home it would be quite nice but I never really did anything about it until I went with my brother to the *Sound of Music* with June Bronhill in it at Sydney's Tivoli Theatre in, it must have been, 1962. It was terribly hot and a man came in and sat near us with simply appalling body odour, that was like throwing a stone into a pond a sort of discontent sort of spread out, people all looked, and it was quite interesting. My brother, who is a terrible person like me, got up at interval and said to the whole of the stalls at the top of his voice, 'Let's go out for a breath of fresh air.' *(laughter)*

So we go out onto the footpath and somebody comes up to me, and I am just horrified that I can't remember who it was it was somebody that I knew, who said, 'Did you see that advertisement for a job at Sydney University in today's *Herald*?' and I said, 'No I didn't see it.' And they said, 'Oh it might just suit you, it is for a mycologist in the Botany Department.' So I went home and looked in the paper and found the advertisement and applied and again I suppose nobody else did and I got that. I mean I probably would have found out about that job subsequently but that event drew my attention to it so that was, I suppose, fortunate. I then had to learn how to teach as well as everything else, but nobody seemed to bother about that, I seemed to get on quite well and I was actually very happy there for twenty-five years.

It is a long period of time. and inevitably we have access to things like Google and I have found that there are three people who really have claimed you as their most inspirational teacher, including Yvonne Kenny.

Good God. She did microbiology or something. I used to do the microbiology part of Biology I, I had to try to make viruses and bacteria and fungi and things friendly and understandable and that was, of course, what I was best at really because that is what I knew about from my plant pathology days and everything so that I enjoyed that. I liked those classes because they had ... now people sort of get terrified and they soak it all

up and everything but back in those days people still behaved badly like I did when I was a student so that you had considerable resistance from the class which is very wearing but it is also rather nice, it is sort of you against them a bit at times.

A positive challenge.

1:37:21

Yes well it is. It is sort of like being on stage, you've got to somehow try to keep the audience with you and I quite liked all that.

Speaking of the stage you had a different audience once you retired Peter and you had a much more public profile, how did that happen?

Well it is like all the things that have happened to me - and I suppose it has happened to most people - it is another lot of accidents and everything. Because I'd got...because the Macleay Museum was on the floor above where I worked in the Botany Department of Sydney University and I think it was Peter Stanbury who was in charge of the university's Open Day or something (1983) and he said would I to channel whatever it was, because they had arranged a spot on the Mike Walsh show to publicise the Open Day. And so, of course, I was terrible because naturally of course when you work at the university you are not an *afficionado* of day-time television I wasn't sure who Mike Walsh was. And so I went and I thought whatever can I do and so I go there and the audience, this is true, is the Kirrawee Ladies Bowling Club and I could see fairly quickly when I was sitting there in a plastic chair that the Kirrawee Ladies Bowling Club didn't even care if there was a university, let alone an Open Day, and the home viewers must be somewhat similar and I became a bit hysterical because I had planned to do a sort of quick spot on the inheritance of baldness - being a bald person and showing how it is genetic and relating it to my parents and grandparents - but they said you can't do that because Mike's had a hair transplant and will be upset. So that had cut that ground from under my feet. I have forgotten what I did, you know I did how to tell the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool and made it a bit sort of ambiguous and the Kirrawee Ladies Bowling Club all laughed.

So that was that and I came home from that shocked and worn out and everything and they rang up, channel whatever it was rang up again, and said, 'Would you come and do the same thing on Friday night for an evening show? It's the Dave Allen Show,' they said and I didn't know who Dave Allen was or anything, so I go. I didn't realise that Dave Allen was actually a very clever person, I thought he was going to be Don Lane, it shows you how confused I was about all this.

So, I have to do these *double entendre* botanical things and looked shocked when it is wrongly interpreted and the audience all laughed and everything and I thought oh dear this is terribly worrying, but it sort of went on from there. People said, 'Do you know what you are saying?' and I said, 'Well it only took a week to think it up,' because I was the sort of fall guy to the person who says these things that then get wrongly interpreted. It reached a climax when Dave Allen, who wanted me to come again, I thought whatever can I do - so I thought if I do the history of bananas he can misinterpret bananas as he feels fit and because there were bananas growing at the back of the Chemistry Department at the university and I sawed off a whole banana plant with a bunch of bananas on it when no one was looking, put it in the back of my station wagon and drove to channel whatever it was and I all I had to do was walk on with this thing and everybody laughed, it was extraordinary.

So, I put down the bunch of bananas in front of Dave Allen, who looked at me shocked and everything and I had to look shocked and I didn't know what was going to happen but I was going to tell the story about how when I'd been travelling in Indonesia I'd seen this street theatre about how to eat a banana without bending your elbow, which is

terrible - it involves co-operation … you have to hand it … it is too awful it doesn't bear thinking about.

But all of this happened as a sort of accident from the university's Open Day. That subsides and then Don Burke, who worked at the time in the Accounts Department at Sydney University, and used to be on the opposite side of the road and used to come and talk to me and Jan Jacobs, who I worked with, about plants and things like that, he was principally interested in horticulture and birds and things but he had a job there for the money I suppose for the time-being. But he left and he made a career for himself and when he was making a pilot program for television, no one would take him on as a television program for a while, but he made a pilot and said would I make a segment for it so I said okay - I did a rather boring thing about banksias. Anyhow so that is what happened and then after a while he said to me, 'Well why don't you just come and make a thing occasionally,' for that.

I felt a bit embarrassed about that in a way because you had to do it in a sort of knock-about fashion but I rationalised it in the end by thinking to myself well if you can get a bit of information across to an audience of one and a half million people you shouldn't turn your nose up at it. I mean there wasn't money in it that really mattered but you do - it is the only way where you get a really big audience and if you can just get a few little facts into something, even in a comic way at times, it is worth a try.

That was a lot of fun really because of the young people involved in the television industry who were quite unlike me or anything I'd encountered before so that was good for me. In the same way as teaching at the university was, that you deal with young people who keep you a bit up-to-date. I mean it is a terrible world the television world really, you know, you can be here today and gone tomorrow and everything, but the fact that they kept me on in this very minor role was interesting, there was a market for it obviously and I suppose some proportion of the audience must have liked it, I don't know.

That realm of gardening instruction and make-over, not just make-over gardens, has really become quite an industry as you prefaced before, how do you feel about that today?

Well I don't really care for it, isn't it awful. It is sort of sold to you in the same way as ice-cream is and breakfast cereals, that's what worries me about it a bit. It has become sort of too professional and the make-overs I hate because if I came out of the back my house after I had been away from the weekend and saw what they had done I'd be furious instead of bursting into tears and sobbing with gratitude. But it's the sort of instant gratification world and ~ I don't know ~ I'm just old-fashioned I suppose but I do find the whole media sort of thing that has overwhelmed all our lives is a bit of a nuisance.

Gardens have gone from being something of quite a private pursuit to now being a public pursuit and something everybody has to do and has to have it scripted it so to say.

Well that is a bit like it. I think the gardening shows on the whole are scripted but the things in *Burke's Backyard* weren't scripted. I mean there was no make-up, there was no script, there was sort of nothing, you know you just squatted down by a plant and started talking about it or whatever you were doing, which I think is a good way to do it. I mean I always thought I looked frightful and behaved in a strange manner and all on it but at least I was just being a real person which is not what I see other people do. It is like when you go to films when they seem to be about real people it is quite nice instead of people that must be imaginary, I hope.

Peter, the university's Open Day I think was in the 1980s so this happened before you retired and continued after your retirement?

Yes it did. When was the Open Day I wonder, I probably didn't actually apart from making the pilot thing I probably didn't actually do it until after I retired. We had the show for seventeen years and I did it for twelve and I think it went on about a year after I stopped, so it probably ran for three or four years before I appeared on it regularly.

160 At the same time in your retirement you were travelling overseas extensively.

Well I travelled quite a lot while I worked at the university when I had holidays. I was interested at that time of going to South-East Asia a bit to look … just to travel but also to look at the vegetation because the European and North American plant collectors had all gone to high altitudes where conditions were cold enough for the plants they introduced to be suitable for Europe or North America and people seem to have neglected the intermediate zone a bit lower down.

I used to go to the university library and look up old railway guides and things to Indonesia and Burma and places like that and find where the hill stations were and then incorporate those in going and seeing what happens if you went there. I also found that when you looked at the plant collectors in Indonesia and Thailand and Burma and places you find that their collections are mainly along roads or above hill stations or places that are reached by the railway, it was quite interesting.

So without actually having to go and sleep in a tent or anything I found that you could get to various places quite easily and the instructions from these guides from early in the twentieth century still worked perfectly well, the places are still there and things were much the same. So I went and looked for rhododendrons and things in Burma and Thailand.

When were you doing this Peter?

In the 1970s mainly. I went to Indonesia and Malaya and Sumatra and briefly Burma and in 1980 I went to China for the first time in a group of ten people who had gone to look at camellias, we went to western China and looked at various things. I persuaded the chief Chinese guide to allow us to go to Mount Emei which is now a great tourist attraction, but a lot of people had collected plants there because it had been a famous Buddhist pilgrimage for hundreds of years and there was a flight of stone steps up to some preposterous height. They let us go there and stay at a monastery and do a bit of wandering round there so that was another great adventure relatively early in the Chinese piece.

Did you bring plants back?

Well I did bring a few seeds and things. There were quarantine problems and things that you had to be careful about but I also did terrible things like posting packets of cuttings to my father and telling him to graft them as soon as they arrived and things, so there was a little bit of that.

Did they work?

Oh yes, some of it did yes. That was a bit of fun too, but I mainly collected seeds and I distributed those around the world really. I sent packets of things to Kew and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Edinburgh and people who I had corresponded with in America and things as well so, just to make sure that they got into cultivation, so I had that little bit of a modest plant collecting era too that didn't get terrible far but it was very interesting and I introduced a few interesting plants.

You have also given plants to the Botanic Gardens here I notice.

Well I have. I had a bit anyway but then when we sold the place at Mount Wilson I had a lot of rare plants, most of which I'd never got round to putting in the garden because I was always thinking one day I'd find room for these things. So I gave quite a lot of them to the Botanic Gardens at Mount Tomah and the Botanic Gardens in Sydney and I gave them to other gardeners round about so that things would be kept going. I was a bit concerned that they get looked after by somebody who was interested in them so I dispersed quite a lot of things at that time.

Peter, one of the things that I have come to talk to you about today is also the Garden History Society which we haven't touched upon.

I know it has been a rave instead.

As I mentioned earlier I was intrigued again when looking into your material that the International Botanical Congress was held in Sydney in 1981, which was the year after the Garden History Society came into being. These congresses take a long time to plan and I am curious to know whether that had any input into the development as well of the Garden History Society?

I shouldn't think so. That conference was very extraordinary because I got involved by the CSIRO in sort of making a film about the Australian flora and it was a pretty uninteresting film really because it was very difficult for me as a sort of presenter to control it and it didn't seem to have any particularly clear aim of the tactic it should take. I managed to impose a sort of form on it in the end and at least it was a film about the Australian flora and its history and everything. I was also involved in the organisation of that conference with Marylyn Abbott who had some sort of public relations company and was the sort of paid conference organiser. She and I got on well at doing that and it is libellous of me to say it but she ran up against high up CSIRO officials and university professors and everything and as those sorts of people often do feel that they know all about how to run a conference and I used to tell her take no notice. You know, 'Don't worry, you've just got to go ahead,' which was rather dreadful of me to say that. She, of course, went on to be a big noise in the gardening world with her garden at Mittagong and also in England. I don't see it really have any connection, if there was one I don't know where that was.

Do you remember the development of the Society early on?

Well I only remember ... I mean I presume it evolved in Victoria, I don't know, and I joined it. Then I remember going to an early conference in Tasmania, I think it was at Ross or somewhere like that, somewhere in the countryside, we sort of stayed at bed and breakfasts in strange places and all gathered in a hall and I must have given some sort of talk at that. Although I have belonged to it ever since about its history I know appallingly little.

Why have you maintained your membership?

Oh just because I am interested in what happens and the fact that there is an Australian Garden History Society which is fundamentally a good thing. I had also belonged, which I still do for some reason, the English Garden History Society that takes things very seriously. I mean I really belong to that because of their journal which has things that periodically interest me, and likewise the Australian Garden History Society's magazine I like keeping up with. I mean the Australian Garden History Society has difficulties, I can see it sort of waxes and wanes a bit, and I'll be interested to see where it goes.

How do you see where it has gone thus far? How do you view where it has gone?

Well - at least it is recording a lot of things which is nice and of course it has touristy things and I sometimes think with a lot of the places it expresses an interest in it makes a mountain out of a molehill. Because of Australia's history most of the earlier gardens

were, like the gardens at Mount Wilson were, in a way were pretty inconsequential but because they were there and they were then people take an interest in them.

A larger interest than they deserve?

1:57:38

In some cases I think that is probably true, I don't know - again I'm probably being a heretic. I mean Australia didn't have garden designers, well much in the way of them, for a very long time. I mean people now get gardens designed by people but apart from Edna Walling and a few people like Sorenson who get elevated to sainthood because they are what is available to elevate to sainthood, but at least they were people who did design gardens and introduced ideas into people's repertoire of gardening. And of course there were quite a lot of other people as well.

One of the early roles of the Society was to have a role of advocacy, do you see that important in the Society?

Well I do. I don't know what it has done in that regard, I don't suppose it has got all that far. It is very hard advocacy altogether with anything to do with plants and gardens, it is extremely difficult because of the general attitude that the public as a whole have about that sort of thing. Their attitude to all of that, which I hoped would change in my lifetime but which doesn't seem to, is that everything to do with plants and gardens and all of that should be free and <u>they</u> should do it, it is one of those things. It is an uphill battle I reckon.

The time the Garden History Society began people like Chris Betteridge in Sydney was working in the Heritage Office and supporting surveying of gardens and so on, so I wonder whether there has been a retrograde shift since then?

Again, I simply don't know because I haven't followed it, but it doesn't seem to have gone ahead much. Well I don't notice that it has gone ahead particularly. I mean the councils everywhere have got heritage officers who can get carried away and make every second thing a heritage item.

I mean what happened at Mount Wilson was singularly stupid, I can't imagine who did it but some heritage officer from the Blue Mountains Council you know put something like twenty sites or something at Mount Wilson recorded as heritage items, I mean it is too silly. This is what tends to happen a lot in Australia is that things of minor heritage interest often end up getting some sort of order slapped on them where it makes it terribly difficult for whoever owns them to put in the bathroom and it is not as if they are really ... there is a bit of an attitude that things should be kept exactly as they were whereas in the past nobody kept things exactly as they were, they kept altering their houses, even if they are hundreds of years old things happened to them.

You can run into trouble with the attitude of setting things in aspic and keeping them as exactly as they were (and I am glad that some of it happens), but you do get the sort of thing in Australia where you go to visit the house and it has got all these things in it but it is not really like it was in 1830 at all, it has had all these things brought from all over the shop and popped about in it and everything and was probably much more of a mess when people actually lived there. Terrible aren't I.

485 No these are your views. What do you see as the role for the Society today?

Well I suppose it is to document things that are worth documenting and of course to agitate for the preservation of outstanding examples of gardens and I suppose the houses go with it don't they in most cases.

I suppose that is what it is and I suppose that is sort of what it does. Isn't it terrible I haven't really paid it the attention that perhaps I should.

Perhaps you have living it in your own house and garden.

Well I suppose that is true. But I have been a bit agitated by the over-doing of the heritage thing, I mean by all means things should be kept, some things, but the trouble with it is that the country can only keep what it can afford to keep so that the heritage situation tends to try and shift the expense of the preservation onto the private individual for the benefit of all and that is a bit of an awkward one. With a country the size of Australia and with its population and with its relatively, as far as touring gardens and houses is concerned, it is a very minor market in the world, whereas in France or Italy or England, and even there they have to go to tremendous lengths, you can generate a major tourist flow to get money to keep something going. But you've got to have tea rooms and lavatories and parking areas and every imaginable gift shop, all this frightful stuff has to be attached to keep it on the road. I mean I really don't know what to think but that is what it amounts to but it is very hard on Australia to make any sort of heritage thing self-supporting.

So, is the Garden History Society important at all?

Oh well of course it is, if there wasn't a Garden History Society no one would look out these various places and record them and people do take an interest in them and people look up ... manage to find … some of these places do have reasonably good records of their past and people look up planting schemes and revive the garden and things of that sort so I am sure it plays an important role but I have to confess there is a certain degree of ignorance about the whole thing which is quite dreadful.

Peter just as we wind up today, you have been very generous with your time, I'd like to come back to Nooroo and your garden and just to finish up on that theme.

Well I think finally what one what might say is that having had that very long association with that garden, which in a way was no great shakes to begin with, it just gave me enormous pleasure. I had tremendous pleasure out of that from the moment I recognised that it was a garden as a child I suppose until I was quite old.

First of all, I had the enormous pleasure of raising seeds from all over the world and growing plants and seeing them mature and one thing and another. Then in my later stages, when I became more interested in the design, I was marvellously helped by Richard Clough who encouraged me to impose some sort of a circulation pattern on the garden and vistas and so forth, and opening it up so that you saw out a bit and generally tidying it up. That did give me enormous pleasure because you saw these wonderful results immediately. The wonderful thing about taking things out is that the result is there by lunch time, whereas if you plant something and wait for it grow it takes years and years. So that when you are opening up vistas and things, which involved the most frightful business of digging up big things and moving them, moving taps and things so that they are out of sight and all sorts of things like that, it was what I call my "chainsaw gardening" era, you get these wonderful results at once. You then have to keep that up of course by cutting things back and removing branches from time-to-time as things slightly alter, but imposing a sort of slightly 'landscapey' look on the garden gave me absolutely immense pleasure in the end.

I sort of saw my family's gardening as a sort of step along the way, for better or worse we influenced garden opening at least in the region for a start and with the plants that we imported from various places in the world and which my father sold from his little nursery in a major way altered the gardens of the Blue Mountains, of the Southern Highlands, where these things were bought and established, so it had an influence in that way.

I mean curiously enough the summer house we built was seized on by the magazines and things and it seemed to introduce a new era in firms selling these things and people

having one. Because it was so strategically placed by Richard Clough that it became the main focus in the garden wherever you were really although it was only small and quite modest. So, in all sorts of ways we had a bit of an effect for better or worse and often without expecting that there would be an effect. But it was a most interesting era and it gave all my family really, my parents and to a small extent my grandfather, who took an interest in it early in the piece, and me and my brother and everybody all have had the enormous pleasure from it.

As I say we see ourselves as having been a step along the way, things have moved on and we don't own it any more but it has been a wonderful part of my life.

You were talking of people you met.

Another wonderful thing of being interested in gardens and plants has been in my life the very large number of interesting and charming people who I have met as a result of this interest and in the people, even if I haven't met them, that I have corresponded with in various parts of the world and exchanged seeds with and cuttings with and have visited and so on. So it has a wonderful sort of social effect on me in that way too.

Your network must not only be amongst all the students you have taught but amongst those people internationally in groups and organisations.

Oh yes because I've belonged to lots of plant societies and garden societies, both English and American as well as Australian, so that has been an interest. People who have an interest in the things I've had an interest in often correspond with me and now I get occasional e-mails from people asking something or telling me something, it goes on even though I no longer have a garden.

Well Peter thank you very much for your contribution.

Interview concludes 2 hours 10 minutes 12 seconds