

Between the Leaves
Stories of Australian Women, Writing and Gardens
Katie Holmes



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In memoriam

HAL HOLMES
1925–2009

and

RHYS ISAAC
1937–2010

Introduction:
Writing the Garden

History without gardens would be a wasteland.
A garden severed from history would be superfluous.

Robert Pogue Harrison, 2008¹

In August 1950 the Australian writer Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote to her son Ric Throssell from her garden at Greenmount in the hills on the outskirts of Perth. Her wisteria, she worried, showed no sign of budding. The summer of that year had been long and hot, and in May Katharine had been absent from her garden. On returning she found it dry and neglected: ‘All the plants I’d managed to keep alive through the long, dry summer, dead. & just one month’s watering would have saved them, but evidently they didn’t get it.’ It was not until spring however that she realised the extent of her loss. The wisteria had failed to bud, its vines hung ‘grey and eyeless. No hope now that it will survive.’ Remembering the ‘lovely lavender lace’ that used to fall beside her window, Katharine grieved ‘for so much beauty departed’.

Ric, who had been receiving weekly instalments about the fate of the wisteria, wrote to Katharine suggesting that her letters about this ‘graceful creeper’ had literary quality. Katharine exclaimed

‘Just fancy you thinking my writing about it had literary virtue! I’m sure, really, that my letters have no literary airs and graces. I haven’t time to make them literary items.’ But Katharine did not need to work hard to give her letters literary virtue. As an accomplished writer she instinctively knew how to use words for effect, how to shape a story, sketch a character, build anticipation. In her letters to Ric her vivid descriptions of the garden prompted his memory and imagination; they evoked a vision connecting him to her world and to herself. The writing and the gardening were intermingling acts of work and pleasure. The letters, for many years the lifeblood of their relationship, fused her love, her labour and her passion.

Between the Leaves is a book about gardens, and the signatures left – letters, diaries, articles, and the gardens themselves – by women who wrote about them.² It presents the results of my quest as an historian to discover and interpret those signatures, to understand the different relationships the garden might reveal, and the meanings it might hold for a varied set of twentieth-century white Australian women who wrote about this fertile ground. In their most personal experience of the garden, it provides a refuge for memories, a shelter for their dreaming and a domain for intimacy.³ But the garden has other, more public meanings and *Between the Leaves* is also a book about the ways women, through gardening, engaged in a much broader process of transforming the Australian landscape and cultivating a sense of place and belonging. In this they were involved in an activity with implications extending beyond the boundary of the garden, to the ways in which non-indigenous Australians came to think of the land as their own.⁴ This happened literally as women gardened, but it was also a literary process, whereby the place of the garden was transformed by ‘words, phrases and ways of telling’.⁵ Through gardening and writing women deepened their attachment to place,

they made and inscribed their home, and reshaped the world around them.

Katharine Susannah Prichard's letters are now housed at the National Library in Canberra. I was following a lead from a friend when I called up the four boxes listed as containing letters to Ric. In my quest to find traceable records of women's gardens, particularly in the form of personal writings such as letters or diaries, I'd searched library catalogues, talked to librarians and sought out other researchers who might have come across such material. It was John Thompson, co-editor with Brenda Niall of *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters* (1998), and a former Curator of Manuscripts at the National Library, who put me onto Katharine's letters: 'They would be worth looking at.' I was not prepared for the volume of material that awaited me: some 1300 letters spanning 25 years of her life. Some of the earlier letters run to eight or ten pages; later in her life they are more likely half that length. That's a lot of letters; a lot of time spent writing – and reading – them. I don't know where Ric read them but I was within the almost hallowed walls of the Manuscript Reading Room at the National Library, where voices are hushed and the excitement of discovery must be exchanged in whispers. The letters are handwritten; most are carefully dated and organised chronologically. Each has been given a number and some now carry margin markings of a faint blue pencil, indicating passages Ric used in his biography of Katharine, *Wild Weeds and Windflowers*, which in its title alludes to the garden, and draws heavily on her correspondence. They have been well read these words, and the blue pencil markings remind us of Ric's own relationship to them, his presence not only as the one to whom they were addressed, their first reader, but the man who would later apply a more critical eye, identifying passages that would work for his narrative purposes and capture the interest of an

anonymous reader. My task was different, though no less daunting: to find a woman, her relationships and her garden within those boxed quarto sheets. It became a task spread over ten years as the demands of young children made trips to Canberra challenging to organise. Reading and taking notes from such letters cannot be hurried.

I was particularly taken by the story of Katharine's wisteria. The house in which I spent most of my childhood was surrounded by land that my parents spent decades transforming from an oxalis-infested mess into a beautiful garden. The wisteria, which grew from the front door and had been lovingly trained to follow the verandah around three sides of the house, was my mother's joy. Not purple but white, each spring it would delight with its soft falling funnels of blossom. In the 1990s, in the middle of a long drought, the wisteria began to die. Its loss could not be contemplated and my parents cut it back, made a grate in the slate path so its roots could be directly watered, and hoped. The wisteria survived. Today it once again graces the verandah of the home to which I have returned, with my own family, to live.

If the story of Katharine's wisteria resonated with my own garden's history, there were other garden stories to be found, and many more letters to read. At the National Library John Thompson reminded me of Judith Wright's letters to her good friend and botanical illustrator, Kathleen McArthur. Both women were keen gardeners, and Judith's gardens, first at Tamborine in south-east Queensland and later at Braidwood outside Canberra, feature regularly in her accounts of her days. Judith typed her letters – a blessing for the researcher – and while not as numerous as Katharine's letters to Ric, they are rich in detail and in their appreciation of the world around her. The quarto paper is similar to that which Katharine used but the relationships we encounter on its pages, with both her garden and her friend, are very different

from those of Katharine's letters. For Katharine the garden carried a heavy emotional weight and the letters provide a path into some of the most intense and often veiled emotions of her adult life. Judith's garden letters reflect more of her broader passion for the land, the source of inspiration for so much of her work. But both poet and novelist had a way with words.

I found other garden letters on my quest. The State Library of Victoria can count amongst its treasures the correspondence between the twenty-one-year-old Jean Galbraith and the elderly John Inglis Lothian. The eager young woman rivals Katharine for the voluminous nature of her letter writing. With a near complete set of letters from both sides existing – Jean's written in her neat, controlled hand and Lothian's in the increasingly spindly script of a very old man – we catch a wonderful glimpse of the centrality of the garden in the lives of two people, and the loving, supportive nature of her friendship with the man she called 'Grandfather'. It is also, less consciously, a chronicle of a growing intimacy, unexpressed emotion, and – for Lothian – the pain of ageing.

Very different relationships come to the fore in the letters of Eva Kirk and Wendy O'Dowd. Eva's letters are held at the Fryer Library in the University of Queensland. She wrote to her aunt in the early years of the twentieth century from her home at Esk, a small town west of Brisbane. Eva wrote about her young family, her husband, Hague, who was so often away at the pastoral station where he worked, and her plans for her garden. Gardening was a passion she shared with her aunt and they exchanged cuttings and seeds along with their letters. Wendy O'Dowd (not her real name) was another Queensland woman writing to her aunt, some fifty years after Eva. Her letters are in the manuscripts section of the State Library of Queensland, in a collection described as 'letters from family members'. As women tend to be the family correspondents, it seemed worth a look. Wendy's letters initially

give no hint of the dramas unfolding in her life, one in which the garden became the backdrop to a turbulent marriage where alcohol and abuse eventually drove her from her home, her husband and her beloved garden.

Intimacy and the pain of separation are themes that come to the fore in the letters between Winifred Stephensen and her husband, Inky. John Thompson had led me to these as well, held as they are at the State Library of New South Wales. Inky was a well-known literary figure who became the leader of the ultra-nationalist Australia First Movement and the letters cover the years of his internment during the Second World War while he was held, without charge, on the suspicion of treason. Winifred was ill with tuberculosis and struggling with both wartime conditions and the humiliation and injustice of Inky's incarceration. The correspondence provides a powerful example of the ways in which writing about a much-loved garden can enable the expression of difficult emotions, and forge links when distance and conflict would otherwise work to divide.

In my initial search for women's garden writings I was interested in the ways women wrote and the relationships I might discern between women and their gardens. The more I read, the more I began to ask: why are they writing? The American author Michael Pollan has observed of the two activities, writing and gardening, that 'these two ways of rendering the world in rows, have a great deal in common.'⁶ But Pollan does not elaborate on what that common ground might be, leaving me to ask: what is happening when a woman digs in her garden or prunes her roses and then writes about that activity in a letter? And what does the result, a 'garden letter', tell us about the woman, the garden and the writing? How might I understand these in relation to each other? Both gardening and writing are means of controlling the sometimes chaotic elements of language and landscape; of imposing order and

structure. As the activities of a day, a week or a month are condensed into letter form, so they take on some coherence: a narrative is created, a story told. We might consider planning and planting a garden as akin to planning and drafting a written piece, watering and tending like creating and shaping, weeding and pruning like cutting and editing. If a writer begins with a blank page – or screen – the gardener can face an empty block, or the remains of someone else’s creation. Both have immediate and long-term results. Writers can erase one sentence and immediately replace it with another; gardeners can remove a plant and immediately plant another. But a book and a garden take time to mature and develop. In each case, the end result will often bear little or no resemblance to those naïve initial plans, with everything in proportion and place! Disappointment, failure and frustration are common to both, as are joy, delight and satisfaction.⁷ Both gardens and writing also need an audience, someone to experience the garden, its feel and scent, or receive and read the letter.⁸ And then there is the almost meditative space gardening invites, where you can either think very hard about what you’re doing, or in which, more likely, the routine activities of digging, planting, weeding, pruning free you to think about other things, including the larger problems of garden design or, for the writer, rhetorical strategy. For the women in this book who wrote about their gardens, in the activity of digging, pruning, planting and tending, they could anticipate their writing, and in writing take renewed pleasure in their gardening. For professional writers such as Katharine, Judith and Jean, the relationship between their published writing and their letters is certainly closer than Katharine was ready to admit.

I have come to see that there are other ways that the activities of writing and gardening entwine. For women, both have traditionally offered a space to develop their artistic and creative skills in forms that do not overtly challenge conventional understandings of

appropriate feminine behaviour. Through gardening and through writing, women's hands could shape their world. Gardening and writing can offer intellectual challenge, artistic endeavour and public recognition.⁹ Both strive for visual, literary or metaphorical effect, and each can, in some contexts, have subversive intent. (The nom-de-plume Germaine Greer uses for her garden writing – Rose Blight – suggests as much.) They each seek to make an impression as well as making sense of life's experiences. The tree planted in memory of a lost child may grow into a beautiful specimen, providing solace and giving shape to a grief and a life. We might also think of gardens, like letter and diary writing, as individual acts of autobiography. They are, or can be, expressions of self: involving memory, place and attachment. Gardening is about producing a certain vision of landscape, but it is also a kind of performance: the gardens we create say something about ourselves, about who we are and where we've come from. So do letters and diaries. We can 'read' the autobiographical impulse, that desire to say something about ourselves, in both writing and gardens. When the gardener writes about her garden, that impulse becomes doubly enacted. *Between the Leaves* seeks to interpret those performances.

If garden letters are in part a way of drawing the (known) reader into the world of the writer, how was I to understand the 'garden diary'? A few such diaries surfaced on my journey towards this book, with entries as varied as the single word 'gardened' or extending to paragraphs. It was a simple catalogue entry in The Archives Office of Tasmania that took me to the diary of Mildred Hood, an eighteen-year-old Tasmanian woman who began writing her diary in 1908. My previous work on women's diaries taught me to follow up every mention of the word 'diary' in a catalogue, but nothing prepared me for Mildred's.¹⁰ Carefully transcribed and typed by a descendent, its twenty-four foolscap pages provide an extraordinary insight into the hopes and dreams of a poor, and

poorly educated, young woman who hoped to earn enough money from the produce of her garden to put herself through medical school. She dreamed that one day she would ‘rescue the perishing and care for the dying’. But why was she writing, and what was the relationship between her nightly diary writing and her garden? And what happened to her dream?

For Mildred, the garden and her diary were intimately related: within its pages she recorded her ambitions, successes and failures. In the case of the diarist Gertrude Bell, the brevity of her entries – often just a simple word or phrase to record her activities – belie the investment she had in her garden. Indeed I discovered Gertrude and her garden at Coochin Coochin in south-east Queensland not through her diary, but through a typed copy of a talk her daughter Enid gave about her mother and her garden. This ‘Show Week Lecturette’, delivered in 1955, tells the story of the garden’s creation. Through the eyes of her daughter we encounter the garden, in a narrative tribute to her mother and her mother’s dream. To this picture, and this relationship, the diary itself, found in an old trunk on the Coochin Coochin property, offers brief accounts of the daily toil which over time realised the vision of the garden.

As Gertrude gardened, entertained and conducted an increasing number of dignitaries on tours of her garden, all the while noting these activities in her diary, another Queensland woman was creating her own vision of paradise in the west of that state. Ann Tully told the story of ‘Terachy’ for the journal *Australian Home Beautiful* in 1954. ‘My Outback Garden’ recounts the struggle she had to recreate the garden of her Brisbane childhood in the dry, red earth of south-west Queensland. The article is written as an account of an ongoing battle against the natural world, one in which hard work and the pioneer spirit triumphs. Subsequent memoirs by one of Ann’s daughters reveal how short-lived was that triumph: the enduring legacy in the landscape was a ghost garden of dead trees.

If Ann and Gertrude ever met, indeed if any of the women gathered here ever met – and which historian doesn't dream of such serendipitous encounters? – no records tell of the meeting. Had it occurred, they would have found in their mutual love of gardens much to discuss. Although the women who appear between the pages of this book did not know each other, as a group they shared a love of gardens and were joint inheritors of a rich heritage of female garden writing. This shared literary tradition had initially been conducted by countless women in private letters, but its public airing began in earnest in the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century with the publication in 1846 of Mrs Loudon's *The Ladies Companion to the Flower Garden*. Many followed Mrs Loudon's lead. Most notable amongst the English writers were the likes of Gertrude Jekyll, Margery Fish and Vita Sackville-West. In Australia, Mrs Boldrewood began the trend with her small 1893 volume *The Flower Garden in Australia*. Others soon followed. The death toll of the First World War opened space for women horticulturalists to both train in and practise their craft, and then (inevitably) to write about it. Edna Walling is a household name amongst gardening Australians now, but there have been others: Olive Mellor, Millie Gibson, Jocelyn Brown, Betty Begg and Molly Shannon, and later Thistle Harris and, not least, Jean Galbraith. Such writers have shaped the tradition of garden writing in Australia, but other forms of garden writing contributed to the language, forms, and ideas available to the women in *Between the Leaves* when they came to translate their gardening into a written form: seed catalogues, gardening columns, gardening books all nourished the literary inheritance of my garden writers. Even if they did not read these writings, and chances are that most of them, at some point or other, did, they were part of a shared culture of gardens and gardening.

As I came to write this book, I became acutely aware of another aspect of the culture we all share: the extent to which gardening

and horticultural metaphors pervade our language. A friend, on reading a chapter, cautioned me to be restrained in my use of garden images. Some had slipped in unnoticed, so effectively have they infiltrated my writing. Observe how we can plant ideas: these take root, sprout, bear fruit, blossom. The soil of course is fertile, and we keep the borders in check. We've done our ground work, tending carefully, pruning a little around the edges. The ideas become entwined, entangled, we spring into action, and so on. As the Antiguan-born American writer Jamaica Kincaid notes, the garden is 'bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves'.¹¹ The relationship between gardening and writing is inherent within the English language itself. Indeed, given that the Judaeo-Christian tradition would place the beginning of human life with all its vicissitudes within a garden, the cultural traditions my garden writers shared may be just as influential as the differences that time, place, age and class impose.

Letters, diaries, a published article, a talk: these signatures remain on the page – preserved, archived, unaltered – long after the fleeting, changing space of the garden has gone. These are the sources I have drawn on to piece together my stories about women's writing of their gardens. They have been chosen for their richness and variety and the ways they illuminate the garden as a creative place for women's labour and literary endeavours, and in quoting from them I have retained the original spellings, punctuation and shorthand. The stories I tell are both intimate and communal. While each chapter focuses on a specific woman, they are all located in particular places and historical periods, and they speak to broader themes in the Australian social and cultural landscape. As a historian I have always been drawn to the ways an individual's story can illuminate a bigger picture. The stories told here show the kinds of relationships women had with their gardens, their families and the land, but they also reveal the ways

their lives were shaped by access – or lack of it – to money and education, by being female and white, and by their age. And we see also how these broader historical conditions changed over the twentieth century.

These archives remind us of other things as well. In using the garden, and women's writing about gardens, as a source for writing history, I am also implicitly challenging an understanding of history that privileges public stories and grand narratives about the past. By insisting that the stories we find in the garden can lead us to intimate understandings of women's lives as well as to broader questions about how Australia was, and continues to be 'settled', *Between the Leaves* insists that the sites of women's stories are also the places where the nation's stories can be found. Within this book, women's home and garden belong *in* history, rather than as a mere adjunct to it.¹²

At different times, in different places and for different purposes, the women gathered here took the time to write about their gardens. Their writings are rich and diverse, eloquent and awkward. For some, the garden seems the *raison d'être* for the writing, while for others, accounts of their gardening form part of a letter or diary whose purpose lies beyond recording the garden's life. The writing provides a way of connecting the reader to the writer's world. The garden, both written and actual, can become a place where women's personal stories, fantasies and longing find expression. As the women in *Between the Leaves* wrote about their gardens, so they dealt with themes that touch us all: grief, hope, friendship, separation, family, ageing, creativity, identity, the importance of tending new growth and creating beauty, and the now-consuming question of how we live, and garden, in a changing climate.

Gertrude Bell: A Garden's Beginning

December 1907

Dec 25. On to the train afterwards, Dick + Bert rode down. Very hot day - they were all tired.
Dec 26. Tom + Bert out after fats. Bert Prior drove Miss Du Cane back after four - + took Dick + back with him. Miss Miss Du C. B. + Dick played tennis.
Wed 27. Ernst down trucking. Average £ 9 - 11. Miss + Bert + Miss Du Cane rode to the farm. In the morning + Miss + Miss Du Cane drove up to W. Reservoir after four. Mrs Prior + Phyllis came for the night. Hot day - Fred, Willie + Walter came for dinner.
Thurs 28. Rain in night + during morning. 14 pts. Mrs P + Phyl left. Ernst + Miss Du Cane went to town. Quite cool day - wind cold from South.
Fri 29. Lovely day. Place looks beautiful now. Bert out after cattle - dipping etc with Jimmy. Miss + I went to the garden.
Sat 30. Miss Gray came for the afternoon. Ernst came home, watered the garden with the hose for first time. Walter came to dinner. Perfect day.
Jan 1. Walter came for day. Lovely weather. We all walked to the garden.

The road to the Coochin Coochin homestead passes through open country. They call it the 'Scenic Rim', nestled as it is at the junction of the Great Divide and the MacPherson Range in south-east Queensland. Cattle graze on the hills while crops grow on some of the flats. I drove it on my way to meet Tim and Jane Bell, the current owners of the Coochin property and careful tenders of the garden that Gertrude Bell, Tim's great-grandmother, first began in the 1880s. It was June when I visited, and cool, but there had been little rain. The grass was brown and, like so many Australian gardeners coping with the effect of long years of drought, Jane and Tim worried and wondered about the fate of the garden. But it is one thing to worry over a garden you have planted and nurtured, another to care for a garden with a reputation as established as that of Coochin Coochin. This garden has already survived many vicissitudes, and borne witness to much change. When Gertrude first travelled the road to Coochin

Coochin in 1883, 'great trees' spread over the track and the 'virgin scrub' was alive to the song of birds. Her husband, James, or Jim as he was known, had purchased the property in partnership with Colville Hyde. It ran to 22,000 acres (8903 hectares) and they paid 30 shillings (about AUD\$3.00) per acre for it. Gertrude rejoiced at the acquisition. Born in Sydney, Gertrude had found life hard at their previous home, Camboon, in central Queensland. Her health suffered. Coochin Coochin, named after the black swans which live in the valley, promised a milder climate and the chance to build a garden.

Gertrude was the daughter of the successful New South Wales parliamentarian, James Norton. She grew up in Sydney and was carefully tutored in the art of gardening by her father. Marriage to Jim Bell at the age of twenty took Gertrude away from the comforts and gardens of city life to the very different environment of rural Queensland, its hardships only moderately tempered by the comforts money could then buy. Jim, fourteen years her senior, owed his success to his grazing endeavours and it was this success which enabled Gertrude to pursue her passion for gardens. Not only was there the money with which to purchase plants for the garden, but more importantly, staff could be employed to carry out much of the domestic work involved in running a household, performing any heavy outdoor work and to look after no fewer than eight children. This freed Gertrude's time considerably, enabling her to concentrate her energies where she most desired.

Unlike most of the other gardens in this book, the stories we have of Coochin Coochin come less from the private jottings of letters or diary entries than from memoir sources. It was in the Bell family papers, in the State Library of Queensland's John Oxley Library, that I first 'discovered' Gertrude and her garden. Included in those papers is a typescript copy of a 'Lecturette' Enid Bell, Gertrude's daughter, gave for Show Week in August 1955.

She chose the 'History of Coochin Coochin' as her subject. Enid told of Gertrude and Jim's move to Coochin Coochin in 1883, and how Gertrude set about transforming her new home and the 'few flower beds' which comprised the garden.¹ My desire to see the garden for myself took me to Coochin Coochin. Once there, and ever curious to know more of the woman whose garden I had been admiring, I asked Jane and Tim if Gertrude had kept diaries. Yes, came the answer, and they had not been destroyed. I was led to a large disused section of the homestead, a room now used for storing things, but which had once contained the laundry. Tim retrieved a large old trunk, and stacked neatly within it were numerous black exercise books – the diaries – along with some letters and other family papers. They were all still in excellent condition. For me, it was as exciting as discovering gold. Gertrude had apparently burned her early diaries before her death, perhaps concerned that they may have revealed more than she desired about her married life. The remaining ones, covering the very last years of her marriage and the years of her widowhood, 1899–1942, had been carefully numbered and dated by one of her daughters. There was a gardening notebook too. Recognising my delight, and the task ahead of me if I was to read them all, Jane and Tim suggested I take them away to read over the few days I had left in Brisbane. How fortunate was I? Libraries never allow such liberties with their manuscripts, and for good reason. But I would take great care, and return them prior to heading home. I spent the next few days reading them.

The diaries are filled with brief daily accounts of the family and farming activities, a record of the weather and any rainfall. Often the only information Gertrude provided about her own activities is the simple statement, 'Gardened.' Some entries are more expansive in detail. On 11 September 1899, she wrote, 'Watered & planted ferns under the tank. Made pyjamas.' The following month the

ferns rated another mention: ‘Sharp frost last night, all the ferns & pumpkins cut.’ Occasionally Gertrude offered a little more insight into her gardening activities and their unintended consequences: ‘Bert and I walked to the garden to get vegetables to send to Mrs Mackensie, my drawers fell off & I went into the mud over my shoes’ (29 September 1899). Gertrude clearly realised the humour of the situation. But she also took care to record the charitable nature of her excursion; her intention in going to collect the vegetables had been altruistic. Lady bountiful with her pants down!

Gertrude’s frequent, if brief, diary entries reveal the importance of the garden in shaping her days. Reading over the years of her diary provides an idea of the amount of labour involved, and also illuminates significant moments in the carrying on of the work. In August 1901 she wrote, ‘Planted out young trees with Nester & cut grass’, and then a few days later recorded, ‘Planted out silky oaks.’ The structure of her garden was taking shape. The trees she planted and the smoothly cut grass moved her garden beyond the prettiness of the pre-existing flowers. Gertrude was seeking to transform the broader landscape as well. The following day she ‘walked down with Jim after 4 to look at ground for a garden. 5 pts of rain.’ In 1901 Jim Bell bought out his partner Colville Hyde and so now owned Coochin Coochin freehold. Gertrude could extend her garden without risk that the property might be sold against the Bells’ wishes. Expanding the land under her cultivation, Gertrude was also extending her influence around the Coochin Coochin homestead, transforming the ‘long grass and weeds’ into a sight of beauty. ‘Lovely day, garden looks lovely with Cannas & chrysanthemums – only 24 of the latter left’ (25 April 1903), she commented in a rare moment of reflection on her handiwork.

If Gertrude’s diary writings lack expansiveness, the regularity with which the statement ‘gardened’ appears alerts us to how much time she spent there. It was her abiding passion. It is clear from the

diaries that there are two main gardens under her care: the garden surrounding the house; and the vegetable garden, a walk away from its decorative counterpart. On Thursday 4 June 1902 she notes, 'Children & I & Miss Little walked to the garden, it looks very well.' The health of the garden was registered almost as one would the health of a visiting friend or relative. It provided food for the family, and the possibility of gifts for friends. The position of the vegetable garden some distance from the house suggests a desire to keep the productive work involved in its maintenance separate from the house garden and even the gaze of those who would come to admire. But the vegetable garden was also planted closer to the creek, ensuring an adequate and accessible water supply. One day she would be able to drive over to check its health. At the age of sixty-three, and still intent on expanding the area under her cultivation despite the lack of rain, she recorded in March 1918, 'Rushed around hard & posted letters etc, & went to see new garden & walked & motored to & from old one for vegetables not much now & dry dry again' (4 March 1918).

Although Gertrude's diary entries are brief, they still manage to convey some of the challenges she faced in creating her garden and transforming the landscape surrounding it. The dry years the Bells were experiencing when I visited Coochin Coochin were just the latest in a long list. Given how all-important rainfall was to Gertrude's garden and the health of the station more generally, it's not surprising that she kept a detailed ledger of all rainfall at the back of the diary, with daily, monthly and yearly falls carefully calculated and recorded. It was a hot, dry year in 1902. In February she notes, 'six of the tanks empty now, drought continues something awful' (18 February 1902). Two days later the district had a 'Day of humiliation and prayer for rain in Boonah. Storm after tea 60 pts.' But the relief was temporary. In April they received news that half the stock on the central Queensland Camboon property was dead

while at Coochin they were carting water. These were difficult conditions for a gardener.

We gain a little more insight into Gertrude's gardening through the exercise book named 'Gardening Notes'. It appears to have been begun in the 1930s and is what we would now recognise as a gardener's calendar. Divided into months, Gertrude listed jobs to be done, particular plants that were out or needed attention, and the names of flowers she wanted to remember. The monthly section of the book is followed by a number of alphabetical sections where, under separate letters, Gertrude wrote the names of plants and information about the soil they like and their particular growing habits. Into these sections she also pasted newspaper cuttings containing gardening hints, often adding her own comments to the written instructions. There are clippings on plants such as azaleas, strawberries, gerberas, 'superb gladioli' and articles on handy hints or Do's and Don'ts: 'Don't get dry weather worry' reads one such article. While the book is not extensive, it provides yet another example of her signature on the page, and reflects the seriousness with which she undertook her horticultural pursuits.

Where Gertrude left only brief written records of her gardening endeavours, her daughter Enid was far more expansive and we learn a great deal more about the Coochin Coochin garden from her retrospective accounts. Enid told the story of the garden's creation as a narrative with a successful trajectory. It is a sharp contrast to the concise, halting, almost reticent account which emerges from Gertrude's diaries:

Her first act...was to have the trees which obscured the view of the mountains cut down. She engaged old Toby, known as Moolpajo to the Ugarapul tribe, of which he was the last chief, to fell the trees. She marked some of the most shapely which she wished to be left standing, and by the time the dead and unsightly

GERTRUDE BELL: A GARDEN'S BEGINNING

trees had been removed [a dense mass of ragged iron bark²] the home paddock assumed an almost parklike appearance.

The garden, when she arrived, consisted merely of a few flower beds in front of the house, beyond which was a wilderness of long grass and weeds. Soon she was planting trees and shrubs and endeavouring to create smooth lawns after the pattern of the 'Eccelsbourne' garden.³

In her endeavour to make the garden of Coochin Coochin in the image of her childhood garden, Gertrude was also drawing on ways of thinking about landscape which can be traced back to eighteenth-century understandings about land. Gertrude



1.2 *The Coochin Coochin garden beds in flower, circa 1920. Note the formality of the design. Behind the house on the left stands the Hoop Pine.*

sought to create the ‘parklike appearance’ and ‘smooth lawns’ of the eighteenth-century British pastoral tradition, and in keeping with that tradition, manipulated the landscape to produce ‘views’. Similarly, the trees she chose to save were those whose shape and symmetry made them almost architectural features in themselves, forms which fitted a European aesthetic sensitivity.⁴ But the presence of Moolpajo in this landscape reveals other imperial connections involved in the creation of rural oases. The landscape Gertrude Bell sought to create was the antithesis of what had been there for aeons; it was a cultural form, a European vision fashioned from the ‘country’ of Moolpajo. Just what he thought of the destruction he was called upon to implement we can only surmise, but his alleged status as the ‘last chief’ of his ‘tribe’ reveals the destruction which had already been borne by his people.

Gertrude initially planted trees familiar to her, the oaks and birches of her childhood, seedlings sent to her by her father, the wealthy the Hon. Dr James Norton of Ecclesbourne of Sydney’s Double Bay. ‘Renowned for the beautiful garden he had created there’,⁵ he was a passionate horticulturalist, president of the Horticultural Society of New South Wales, and very proud of the ‘trees and shrubs, especially those of indigenous species, which he cultivated in his fine old garden’.⁶ He clearly took considerable interest in the development of Gertrude’s garden, sharing with her some of the successes from his own endeavours. In a rare surviving letter from him (found enclosed in one of the diaries), and with drought affecting them both, he wrote of the seeds he included:

In the hope that you will some day have rain I send you some seeds. *Hunnemannia* which will not stand much cold, *Carthamus tinctorius* an annual well worth growing, *Cosmos klondyke* (yellow) which is not only a handsome flower but makes a handsome plant.

The use of botanical names for all the seeds reveals the seriousness of her father's horticultural interest presumed to be matched in his daughter; but he also had an eye for the impression his plants would create. He continued:

Sparaxus tricolor a cape bulb which has taken possession of my lawn and is the admiration of every one who has seen it and a grass (*Eragrostis Mowui*) which Willie found in New England and which is charming for decorating the table and rooms and will last a long while.⁷

Many of the seedlings James Norton sent his daughter failed to thrive in the soil and climate of the Coochin garden. Gertrude's attempts to recreate the nostalgic landscape of her childhood were doomed. She replaced the English trees with natives. Her source for these trees was particularly knowledgeable, as Enid Bell's lecturette made clear:

Bunjoe, or Susan (as she was known in the district) made her permanent home at Coochin homestead when she was not away on one of her long walkabouts. She became deeply attached to Mrs Bell and she would return from her walkabouts with gifts of ferns and orchids and young trees from the rain forests and the ranges, for Mrs Bell's garden. The big Morton Bay fig and the Hoop pine which tower above the homestead now, were brought from the range by Susan.⁸

Together, it seems, Bunjoe and Gertrude worked to transform the land surrounding the Coochin Coochin homestead. The trees Bunjoe chose would take decades to mature; planting them was an act of optimism about their, and maybe even her own, future. Through them she ensured that her own inscription would be left

on the garden, making possible a personal investment of meanings and associations. She wove the foliage of her dreams in with those of Gertrude's but, unlike Gertrude, she knew which plants would grow and, it appears, freely transmitted her knowledge in the form of gifts.

Bunjoey's contribution to her garden is not mentioned in Gertrude's diary. It's possible that in the entry quoted above, when Gertrude notes, 'planted out young trees', that these trees were provided by Bunjoey. Enid Bell certainly suggests that silky oaks were among those she gave to Gertrude. Enid's inclusion of Bunjoey in the story of Coochin Coochin is significant, for she is aware both of the Ugarapuls' prior ownership of the land, and their intimate understanding of it.

More than just giving recognition where it was due, Enid was affirming Bunjoey's knowledge of her country, and celebrating her success in selecting trees that would succeed where those of Gertrude's choosing had failed. It is also clear that Bunjoey knew the kinds of trees which would accord with Gertrude's aesthetic sensibility, perhaps reflecting Bunjoey's artistic knowledge as well as familiarity with the local. As Enid puts it, 'She [Gertrude] wanted big leafy trees to shade the house & garden & bring the birds which she so loved. When she found that the English trees would not thrive in the semi-tropical climate she replaced them with native trees which Susan brought her from the scrubs, Morton Bay figs, Silky oaks & Hoop & Bunya pines'.⁹ Enid's audience and, later, her readers would know, if they visited the Coochin garden, that the huge trees which still tower over the homestead were chosen by an Aboriginal woman. Gertrude's diary would have left us none the wiser.

Bunjoey's work in the garden, her willingness to share her knowledge and provide plants which would grow and thrive,



1.3 *The Coochin Coochin garden looking away from the house, circa 1920. The arch visible here is today covered with a mass of bouganvillia. The 'Wallaby Walk' was planted on the other side of the arch.*

provides an example of the ways Aboriginal people adapted to their changed circumstances and learned to coexist with Europeans.¹⁰ In another narrative about the Bell family, a detailed two-volume typescript titled 'The Power to Serve' and also held in the John Oxley Library, Enid Bell provides greater detail about varieties of plants provided to Gertrude: Bunjoey 'brought her the big cream orchids & the staghorns that grew on the trees in the scrubs. She also brought her the miniature mountain palms & the big leafed cunjevois which she planted in her rockeries. Every spare moment she could find was spent in her garden which she continued to enlarge, in spite of [husband] Jim's protests'.¹¹ The 'she' referred

to in the last sentence is Gertrude Bell, but we might read the ambiguity to suggest that Bunjoey gained as much pleasure and spent as much time in the garden as Gertrude. The garden became a place of exchange, but also a place of relationship, where a shared love of plants and interest in their nature and form allowed a white mistress and her Aboriginal servant to relate on terms which involved an exchange of knowledge and a more complex balance of power than the dynamics of race and class might otherwise have suggested. This story of native–settler collaboration in the garden’s making speaks of the possibilities of harmony within the new order. The terms of this relationship, however, remained colonial, and we might also see it as Gertrude Bell’s appropriation of indigenous knowledge and foliage. Her failure to mention Bunjoey in her diary would support such a reading. For her part, Bunjoey was shaping the landscape but from a position of servitude. However we choose to interpret the roles the two women performed, the garden was a site of relationship and negotiation: of power, of knowledge, of collaboration.

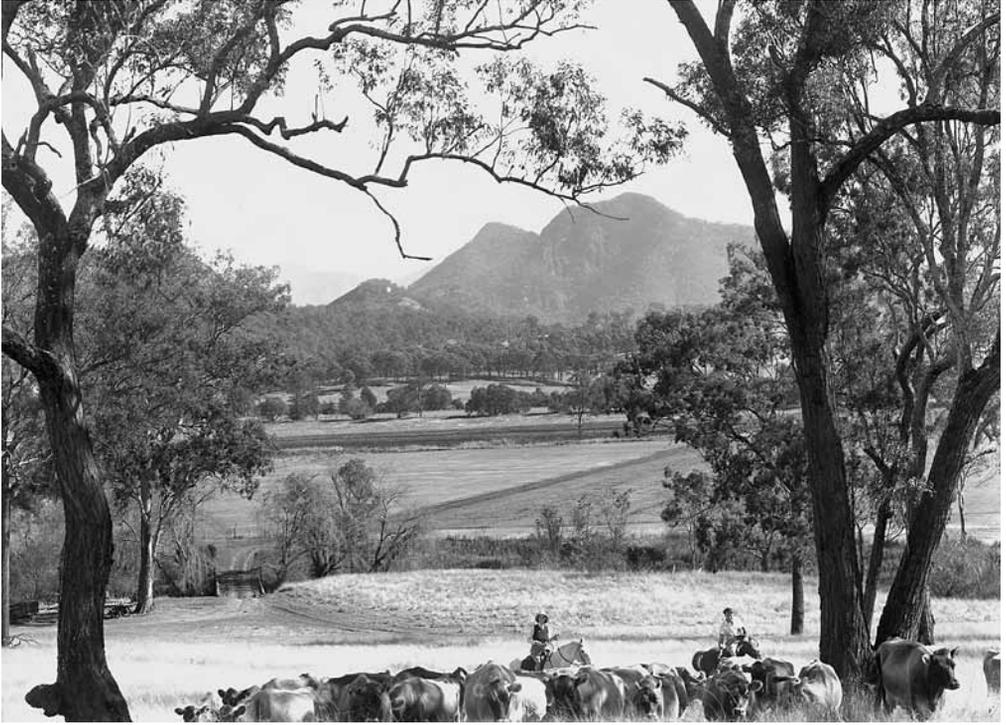
From Enid Bell’s narrative about her mother and the Coochin garden, we gain a picture of a woman who was intent on creating her own vision of beauty in the space around her. Jim Bell was less than keen on Gertrude’s expanding garden, but she persisted. He, in turn, persisted with additions to the homestead, extensions which interrupted his wife’s garden plans. Enid Bell comments, ‘Mrs Bell thought sadly of her discarded design but she at once commenced to turn the spaces between the various buildings into attractive court yards with lawns & trees & shrubs & rockeries.’¹² It’s possible that the garden was an ongoing source of conflict between Gertrude and Jim Bell, a place which created its own tensions and perhaps a focus for other differences between them. When Jim died in May 1903 aged sixty-three, Gertrude recorded his passing in her diary, noting in an unusual expression of emotion and regret,

'All very sad and wretched. Poor dear old man. I do wish I had been kinder & more sympathetic to him. It is so terribly lonely' (7 May 1903). The comment provides a clue that the relationship between them had been less than warm, a reading endorsed by the Bell family and Gertrude's destruction of the diaries of most of her married years. In the remaining diary she described the week following Jim's death as 'a nightmare', and twenty days passed before she again recorded the familiar 'Gardened' in her entries.

The garden Gertrude created reflected her own dreams and fantasies, and indeed, told of her own coming to terms with her environment. It was Gertrude's estate, if you like – a demarcation point between the domestic and the commercial activities of the Coochin property – but dependent on its success for the wealth which enabled the garden to grow and to be worked by servants and family members alike. In other, important ways, the garden was related to the surrounding landscape, as the early clearance of trees had made apparent: Gertrude wished to open up the view to the nearby mountain. In true pastoral landscape tradition, gardens needed a vista, but the beauty to which this one opened and which Gertrude recognised, was Australian. Enid Bell reflected on the nature of the dreams and aspirations driving her mother:

The trees provided shade and brought the birds which Mrs Bell so dearly loved. She bore six more children at Coochin and attained the ambition of her girlhood – a big family and a happy home to bring them up in. From their earliest years she taught her children to look out to the mountain and watch the changing lights upon them.¹³

As her own identity as a mother, homemaker and gardener took shape, so Gertrude Bell actively shaped the identities of her children, developing in them a clear association with their surrounding



1.4 This undated Frank Hurley photograph of cattle grazing in the Coochin Coochin paddocks shows the view to the mountains which Gertrude opened up.

landscape. The gaze of the children shared her colonial eye. The trees, the birds, the changing light all reflect Gertrude's knowledge of and adaptation to her Queensland landscape. In Gertrude's vision, the family, home, garden and landscape – a created landscape – were one, each related to the other. Each spoke of fertility, of plenty and of harmony. This contrasted, however, with the development Gertrude saw around her as modern transportation came to the local township of Boonah:

Mrs Bell was sad to see the great trees she had admired so much lying in stacks beside the railway line with the lovely hoyo vines with their masses of cream waxen flowers wilting on the fallen

tree trunks. She wondered where all the birds had fled to as she remembered that first enchanted drive through the virgin scrub with the great trees spreading over the track & the heavy scent of the Hoya flowers & the call of the unseen birds which rang so clearly in the still air which had never been disturbed by the sound of an axe.¹⁴

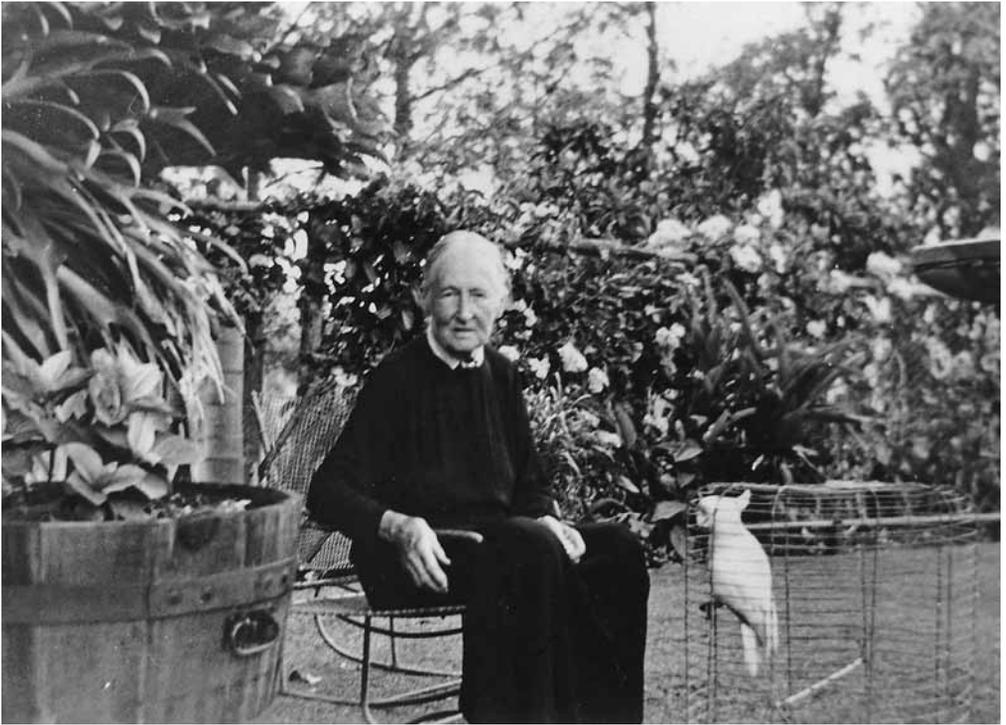
Gertrude's puzzlement over the fate of the birds, and sadness at the destruction wrought by the development of Boonah, shows an interesting contradiction: her failure to recognise her own role in slowly but irrevocably changing the surrounding landscape. Perhaps she distinguished between change created for her idea of beauty, and that geared toward generating wealth.¹⁵ Other changes too may have disturbed her. In a pastoral landscape, land that is used for grazing forms part of the *landscape*, unlike land used for roads or railways. In Gertrude's worldview, both the garden and the landscape reflect the social, economic and political power of its owners.¹⁶ When Gertrude looked out over her garden to the land beyond, she saw the land on which the Bells' prosperity was based. The developments around Boonah brought the arrival of people with different values and interests, and Gertrude's grief at such change perhaps hints at the loss of a certain exclusivity over the land, the end of a particular pastoral order.¹⁷

Gertrude was inclined to be circumspect about the beauty of her garden, but the erection of a water pump in 1905 to bring water from the creek below enabled Gertrude to extend the area under her cultivation, and she began to hold annual garden parties in aid of various charities. The reputation of the Coochin Coochin garden grew to the extent that when the Prince of Wales visited in 1920, a stay at the homestead was part of his official itinerary. The palm tree he planted still stands, sharing the garden space with the trees bought by Bunjoey, but also those planted by later dignitaries

who visited Coochin Coochin: state governors, a number of governor-generals, Agatha Christie, Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh, and a sprinkling of English royalty, including the Queen Mother. Such a list reflects the social standing of the Bell family, and their use of the garden to confirm and enhance this status. The plantings create what is now known as the 'Wallaby Walk', an extension of the original garden, through which the visitor can stroll. The walk not only provides a kind of strolling narrative, a 'who's who' in Australia and Queensland, but a spatial reminder of the Bell family's eminence.

Gertrude created a garden of renown and just occasionally allowed herself to reflect on it. A fair held to raise money for the local church was one such occasion: 'Crowds of people came for the Bazaar everyone worked hard & everybody seemed to enjoy it. The garden was immensely admired & it did look beautiful. We made £130 for the church debt, will probably be more' (23 October 1920). After nearly forty years of work in the garden, creating it from the remnants of some flower beds, long grass and weeds, Gertrude could reflect on her life's work. She had learned to adapt her vision to suit the land and the environment around her, and through her own hands, and that of family and servants, had created a garden in which she took great pleasure and satisfaction.

If Gertrude was dubious of her achievement, when Enid wrote about the Coochin garden she had every reason to celebrate her mother's success. In telling the story of the garden's creation retrospectively, Enid was able to place it in a much broader context – the story of the Coochin Coochin property and the whole Bell family. Gertrude's garden becomes part of the larger narrative about the Bells' settlement of the area; it transcends the personal, and indeed works as a parallel to the broader story of colonial settlement of the land. The dimension it adds to this story is also highly significant: when Enid notes that Gertrude achieved the



1.5 Gertrude Bell as an elderly woman sitting in her garden.

ambition of her girlhood, ‘a big family and a happy home to bring them up in’, she registers the importance of the domestic in that larger story. There is a place here for the intimate activities of homemaking, for maternal nurture, and the highly emotional but also practical, tangible activities involved in such labour. When Gertrude ‘taught her children to look out to the mountain’ she was instilling in them a strong sense of attachment and belonging, nurturing them to later have ‘the power [and desire] to serve’ as citizens of their country. When Enid stood to deliver her Show Week Lecturette, and chose to include the story of the Coochin Coochin garden and her mother’s vision and work in creating it, she was confirming Gertrude’s success as a gardener and a mother, a woman who had played her part in the successful settlement

of the country.¹⁸ She was also registering her own place in that narrative: as Gertrude's daughter she could share in her mother's success, and in the social standing of the whole Bell family.

The garden at Coochin Coochin has been nurtured by successive generations of the Bell family. Although no trees have been planted in the Wallaby Walk since 1992, the local historical society, realising its public significance, have restored the plaques accompanying each tree. This is a garden laden with public and private meanings and memories. Tim and Jane Bell now open both the garden and homestead – reportedly the oldest surviving



1.6 The Coochin Coochin garden when I visited in 2007. The formal flower beds have been removed, but the Hoop Pine still stands and the Morton Bay fig can be seen on the right, still towering over the homestead.

homestead in Queensland – to visitors, enabling others to share in some of its history and heritage. The view Gertrude opened out to the mountains remains, and I photographed it on my visit. Along with the garden, it reminds us of Gertrude's legacy and her vision, and the care and investment of succeeding generations.

The signatures Gertrude left upon the land and on the page have enabled us to trace some of the meanings of her garden through words, images and plants. Gertrude had more than a personal vision: she drew on cultural understandings of the importance of gardens, of cultivating beauty, of softening the landscape and mediating that space between the home and the world beyond, of providing shelter and sanctuary. As she planted and tended, her vision took root, transforming the landscape and its associated meanings.