This is the second interview with Dr Greg I. Johnson, who is being interviewed for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection, and the ACT Monaro Riverina Branch. The interview is taking place on 1 February 2023. Greg is at home on Ngunnawal land and the interviewer, Roslyn Burge, is in Lilyfield in Sydney on Wangal / Gadigal lands.

BRIEF SUMMARY

PLANT PATHOLOGISTS - IT'S LIKE A LIFE TASK

Brief summary of Dr Johnson's second interview which sought to expand on some of the elements in Greg's first interview.

- family and importance of family around which all else evolves for him.
- the principal role of scientists – interaction with farmers – and his achievements in working on mangoes.
- importance of working as part of a team with diverse expertise and skills.
- Role of ACIAR working with other countries and market-oriented care of tropical fruits
- Postharvest work with ACIAR and collaborative projects – cocoa – peanuts
- Travelling throughout Asia
- Establishing his own business – professional links and connections established over a career – the work of Australian scientists working in ACIAR
- Impact on human health of philanthropy could be greater if funding for agricultural research was as great as that for medical issues.
- Discussion of Australasian and international plant pathology societies and his role.
- Garden History Society conferences and comparison to work of international plant pathology conferences.
- Food security discussions at conferences.
- Bursary for Ukraine and Greg's work during his period as President of the International Society for Plant Pathology
- Membership of Australasian Plan Pathologists Society and the International Society for Plant Pathology
- Only Australian who has been President of the International Society
- Talks about his garden - *I'm not a neat and trim gardener and living where I live, of course, we had many mature trees, and the garden, are more than 50 years old and so there's a legacy*
- Interest in growing bulbs – fritillaries and primulas
- Australian Landscape Conference – Christopher Lloyd + Cedric Bryant
- Australian Garden History Society – state of the Society now – need to engage younger people – potential for more scope if some government funding received – comparison to sport and health for gardening and health – live streaming garden shows such as Chelsea Garden Show as sport is live-streamed
- Advocacy role of the Society – impact of COVID – visit to the garden of Parliament House
- Role of the oral history interviews in recording the Society's and individual's history.

Greg, good morning, and it's nice to see you again.

Good morning Roslyn.

I'll just introduce the interview as we did before, just for time and place. So this is the second part of the interview with Dr Greg Johnson, who's being interviewed for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection, and the ACT Monaro Riverina Branch. The interview is taking place on Thursday, 1 February 2024. Greg is at home on Ngunnawal land, and the interviewer, Roslyn Burge, is in Lilyfield in Sydney, on Wangal / Gadigal lands. We're much more conscious of incorporating those indigenous landscapes into our conversations.

Yes

Greg, it was intriguing as I finished up your transcript from your previous interview, there seem to be some elements of our conversation and your interview that could have been expanded. One element I know is particularly important to you at the outset, is family; perhaps you'd like to just talk a little bit about that.

Yes well, you know, family is important and I think that everything I do nestles within the warmth and the love of family. In the interview we have talked about some of my ancestral connections, and that's one aspect of the importance of family and it's something that I guess you learn about a little bit more as you go through your life. But it's sort of like memes plus genes – you know, it's the memories, plus what you've inherited genetically. And, you know, when I reflect on my own life and the lives of others, I think that I've been fortunate to have had supportive, encouraging parents but not interfering parents. And also, of course, my wife … we've been married for 42 years and together for about 46 years and we have both synergies of interest, philosophical values and love. You know, and there's always those elements of companionship that sort of accompany you through whatever you're doing and I guess that adds to the enjoyment. And we're also fortunate to have two sons and they're enjoying both thoughtful and conscientious lives.

And as a child I moved around a lot. You know, some people have sort of grown up in the same place - lived in the same place - and so my friends always seemed to be somewhere else. But they're still important to me and I value the warmth and those connections, even though they're sometimes very distant, particularly from working a lot overseas, some of my friends are in different parts of the world. But there's always the sort of waking up that comes with real conversation, and I think the sort of formative experiences like going to university, when you leave home, you begin to discover yourself much more.

Did your parents go to university?

No. My mother probably left school at the end of primary school this was in the depression years. My father was fortunate because he grew up in Maryborough and the Grammar schools became state high schools just when he was finishing Primary School and so my uncle were both able to go to high school (to what we call grade 10 – I forget what it's called in other states), until he was about 15. … they probably had more education than any previous ancestors, at least back a couple of generations anyway.

And when we met - again, I don't want to go too much into this on this interview - but your connections to your ancestors from different very different parts of the world, you spoke about your Chinese connection, and a little about your Scottish connection which also seems to be important to you.

5.00 Well, yes, I guess it's you know, when you have an interest in gardening and you discover you've got a whole host of gardeners in your inheritance, and the ones in Scotland of course have very good records and so you can find lots of references to them in the press and on maps

and other places, then we're going to Aberdeen in May/ June and I hope to explore some of those things.

Just to Aberdeen, are you going elsewhere?

We are going to Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness, and of course, we'll also be in London for the Chelsea Flower Show. Aberdeen and Edinburgh are sort of “looking at ancestral places”.

A very productive trip for you.

Yes, that’s right – it should be fun.

Your career, Greg, covered extensive overseas travel as well, but what for you is the principal role of scientists, that's a very big part of your life.

Well, I think that scientists, the principal role of course, is to expand knowledge and understanding of the world and the universe that we live in, and in my case, of course, it's understanding more about plant diseases. And you know, and the science that sits behind that and sometimes progress can be incremental, compared to say the nineteenth century, early twentieth century, when it was just such a whole wide open field. And we do make progress by standing on the shoulders of giants but also, you know, of course, since the late 80s, the whole field of molecular biology and understandings of genetics, it's just enabled a much greater depth of understanding of science. Certainly not something to be feared, it certainly is just the framework on which we can build, I hope better futures.

And your work, particularly one of the roles that you said you were very proud of your achievements was in your work on mangoes?

Well, yes, I guess, you know, the focus came into mangoes because that was a particular task I was given. But the elements of that work … I know, I gave a talk once where I said that, to every 50 papers, scientific papers published on wheat is the only one published on mango. That means that the knowledge about mango as compared to wheat is expanding at a much slower rate. And yet, the problems for the individual farmer are just the same. And if so, it means that the work that, say it's been done on mango, it's really important that there is great synergy and coordination. So that the work that's been done in any part of the world, dovetails in and you’re not wasting effort and time doing the same things. And you know, that's the importance of collaboration. And it's not a matter of, oh, they're going to steal our results because our results often have built on their results anyway. And because modern agriculture is in ways, it's a little bit disconnected from nature. It's also important to get a better understanding of the ecology of the systems we work with that includes both the plant pathogens and the hosts in order to make the best effort we can to reduce problems.

Most of us living in cities now in Australia, particularly, you say it's separated from nature ... are we also separated from where all these things come from. I think people can relate more to a mango than a grain of wheat.

10.00 Yes, that's right. We are separated ... but of course, you know, I guess modern farming systems are trying to place more emphasis on having a greater systems approach; having more living soil; many of the things that are important and also in relation to plant pathogens and insects, going back and understanding - well, what were the natural controls of those problems in the places where those plants came from. And of course, we've seen a lot of progress in that insects - where they bring in biological control agents, and the best example in Australia, of course, is controlling the prickly pear by bringing in a cactus[1] that ate the prickly pear, but there's been many, many approaches to that and we see it also in human health where there is

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[1] Cactoblastus insect

the understanding of the microbiome, that micro flora inside people's bodies can be imbalanced and therefore affect their health.

Yes much more part of general conversation today. Also, throughout the, the interview before Greg, and throughout the notes that you've provided, there's a there's a strong discussion of teamwork - of collaboration and you've mentioned colleagues who you worked with proudly and perhaps you could touch on that for me.

Yes, because I think teamwork is important and particularly I guess that was my experience in the early days. and even in studying at university where you learned a little bit about many different things including geology, soil science, biochemistry, entomology, and then when it comes to working on a crop, there's a team of people because it's no good for the plant pathologists to say - spray with this chemical, when that chemical kills the predators of that insect and so working as a team and it would work as a team with extension officers in working on mangoes and other fruit you also have to understand the whole change in storage environments because how the product is stored can determine how quickly it ripens.

Because in nature, if you take a mango for example, mangoes have a sap and that sap basically stops fruit flies from attacking the mangoes, stops plant pathogens from invading the fruit until the fruit ripen and when the fruit ripen both systems begin to deteriorate and insects and the diseases invade.

But what research has shown is that there's ways of subtly managing that system so that you have just a bit more edge to reduce the disease while the fruit ripens and of course, the classic example, we know of is avocados where ... they're not ripe ... they're not ripe ... they're not ripe ... they're ripe ... and then they're rotten and we have to get that tiny little window when they're soft and ready to eat and if we leave another day it's decayed. And some of my research in that team with plant physiologists, fruit storage experts was really about understanding what is the optimums for all those processes to delay ripening, delay disease development, but also maximise flavour and quality of the product. And that's, I think, very enjoyable working in teams like that. There's a lot of trust involved, there's a lot of sharing and in one way it's impossible to understand and achieve the result you want unless you work in a team. But it's like in surgery you need more than just the person doing the cutting, you need a whole host of people doing all sorts of jobs in order to achieve success.

True true, but I must say I can't look at mangoes in quite the same way ever again after this interview thinking of the mechanics - not only of the science but the mechanics of delivering it to my dining table. But also through your work with ACIAR, could you tell me about that the Australian Centre?

Well, I think that in the 80s, when it was established, there was the idea of working with partner countries, helping them to improve their agricultural systems but also solving problems that were existing for Australian farmers and that whole idea of well, knowledge occurs in increments and let's work together with our partner countries to solve the problems together. Sometimes we have been able also to work on a problem in another country (which we don't have in Australia) and one of the most serious diseases) of citrus, which is called Huanglongbing, which is Chinese for yellow dragon disease (it's also called citrus greening), we don't have that disease in Australia but we have been able to work in other countries to try and get a better understanding of how can we manage that disease if it comes here.

Do countries come to you with issues or you go out seeking them?

Well the way in which ACIAR has worked is they have a policy advisory council which consists of representatives from partner countries. And of course, being a government authority it's also, I guess, aligned with political systems of our country and those partner countries and ACIAR would have priority setting meetings with most partner countries, so that there was an agreed

agenda. Because it's no good for - well a country may say, oh, we'd like you to work on this thing or that thing but if we don't have any body of expertise in Australia to work on that particular problem, then it's not one that we can really address and it may not be a priority for us.

In the case of mangoes and tropical fruit all of the research in the 80s/90s occurred when our own industries were beginning to expand and partner countries were also beginning to be more market-oriented. So we can work on ... we worked on mangoes, we worked on lychees, longan, durian, many different tropical fruit developing just the basic understanding of well, what are the problems in those crops? And how can we manage them? And how can we store them better?

Is there one field of endeavour that you were more favourable about or more keen to return to … in those overseas ventures?

Well, of course, my work with ACIAR began as a researcher in a collaborative project and moved on to leading a project on behalf of the agency, the Queensland department that I work for, to then subsequently working with ACIAR. And so there were two phases: there was a phase in which I had that big focus on mangoes and tropical fruit; but then when I started to work for ACIAR I worked more broadly in both promoting the importance of postharvest research and coordinating research in the broader range of topics. Because often there isn't an understanding, particularly amongst many scientists, the scientists are very production-orientated, they just want to work on better production, plant breeding, whatever, not recognising that maybe 30% of loss occurs after harvest. And so, sure, we can have great systems to produce wonderful products but then if 30% of that product is damaged or destroyed all of that effort in producing it is wasted. And so from when I started working in that postharvest area, part of my time was spent educating and encouraging both my agency and the funding groups of the importance of postharvest research and to explain and give them a basic understanding of why it was important.

How was that received?

20.13 Sometimes it was difficult. It was a bit energy sapping because sometimes people don't have the ears to listen, they're very focused on their own other agenda and, you know, an international agricultural research generally is very focused in production areas in production systems, less emphasis on that postharvest. Another example, for ACIAR, we had a program started by my predecessor, Dr Bruce Champ, in the 80s, on stored grain management and pest control and that whole area of stored grain management is so important in in Asia where food, of course, is important.

The Chinese … the Indonesians adopted many of those management systems to do with well, how do you dry the grain better so it doesn't rot? How do you control the pests without using too many chemicals and food security is so critical for them that, you know, I think one of the lasting legacies of that whole period with ACIAR was that improvement in stored grain management.

In my own time with ACIAR, I was also able to encourage investment in research on cocoa and coffee, both the whole process of cocoa fermentation - cocoa disease management -cocoa drying, working particularly with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. In the case of Indonesia we also had partnership with the Mars Company and Mars of course, an international American company, and when it comes to cocoa, chocolate, you have two types, you have the bulk cocoa, which provides the bulk of the body and then you have the flavour of cocoa, which is partly produced by the fermentation process, and a lot of the cocoa that comes from Papua New Guinea of particular varieties and management processes has wonderful flavour. And similarly with coffee - those of us who love coffee, know that, you know where the coffee comes

from the environment, the climate, how it's handled, can influence its flavour. And, of course, these are important commercial factors but there's a lot of public research that needs to go on to improve those systems.

You mentioned listening … I'm sorry, Greg, you're continuing.

One other thing I want to talk about was in the case of peanuts where from, you know, from the 1970s there was very close attention in Australia to managing the aflatoxins which are toxin … aflatoxins are a type of toxin produced by fungi and many mycotoxins or fungal toxins are maybe 50 times more toxic than pesticides. And so Australia had a system where in Queensland they would measure the level of that mycotoxin in every single load of peanuts before it was unloaded and if there was a level that was considered dangerous, those peanuts would be processed in a different way. And so within ACIAR we were also by supporting various initiatives to improve management of mycotoxins, particularly aflatoxin in peanuts. We're fortunate if you like the evolution of marketing has reduced those risks because it's easier now to kind of prevent peanuts from getting wet after the harvest, drying them properly, and storing them in supermarkets is much better than storing them in a wet market in Indonesia.

There are complexities beyond measure in your work, but it must have been very exciting to have gone on these trips overseas and returned to Canberra and had these conversations with colleagues.

Yes, certainly it was exciting in a way, but often the trips were relatively short. I was rarely away for more than two weeks with a very busy schedule. And, you know, there has to be a focus. Because often when you visit the country, your host wants to entertain you … they will almost do anything to make sure you're happy and so there has to be a measure of the discipline by you as an individual, when you go somewhere to say, *look, if I see everything the first time, there's no reason to come back*. Sure, only nice to do that sightseeing, but let's stay here and talk about the work instead. I think I probably went to China for more than 10 years before I even saw the Great Wall in Beijing, you know, because there just wasn't the opportunity. And of course, my colleagues, in other programs within ACIAR with similar travelling so there was a shared commonality we had.

I wondered, you mentioned going to New Guinea and you also mentioned a long journey you had in Bhutan - is there one country that that stands out for the physical challenges it posed in your work.

I think most of my travel didn't really involve very much physical challenge. Because you were representing Australia, you're well looked after but I was travelling a lot to Pakistan where we were fostering and supporting a multi-pronged project that had both mango and citrus, dairying, social aspects over 10 years from starting in around 2006 and in those early visits, it was safer in Pakistan, we were able to go to Peshawar for example, but in later years it became more dangerous so the security was tight and we weren't allowed to just go wandering around. But I always felt safe, because of course the government and the partner country really had everything in place to make sure that visitors were looked after. Going to Bhutan as a consultant when I worked as a consultant for my own business we travelled by road the length and breadth of the country looking at citrus. Some of the roads are basic but the drivers are always very good and you only really have glimpses of, you know, what people go there to see with sightseers. I know once some of my visits to India I guess were perhaps the more challenging - usually the biggest challenges that were encountered were food poisoning. But I learned how to reduce the risk of that.

How do you do that? What's your secret for travelling?

Well, I think when it comes to food poisoning, … you've got to realise that you can't just turn on the tap and clean your teeth for example – you have to use bottled water even to clean your teeth. And you don't eat fresh greens, you may love eating salads at home but in much of Asia

that's just something you don't do and even eating cut fruit or avoiding cut fruit. Sometimes on particular airlines I would be very careful not to even eat the cooked food just to reduce the risk because when you're there for a short term with big responsibilities you can't necessarily afford to be not available.

Of course. Greg may ask what prompted you to start your own business?

30.00 I guess that was – again it was serendipity in a way because my position in ACIAR was a contract position and the priorities of the agency changed and I didn't really want to go back and work for a department and there were the opportunities to work as a consultant in the same area of development that I had worked in before, you know, I was fortunate to have those opportunities both helping in the implementation of some ACIAR projects, some projects funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through what was formerly AusAID and also doing other things, for example, an FAO project in China that was relatively short term visits advising on a kiwifruit disease problem. Similarly, the opportunity to go to Bhutan came through my predecessor, my person who moved to ACIAR after me, connected to ACIAR project. And, of course, some of my work subsequent with ACIAR was also to reviewing projects and program that ACIAR was funding.

You just mentioned FAO, just for the record, what does that stand for?

Well, FAO is the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations. And they're very involved in addressing priority issues for their partner countries.

You've made a large number of connections and links with individuals across so many realms of your work with the FAO and with your the ACIAR. Do you maintain those links? Or have they in retirement slid away?

I certainly maintain some of those links. Of course, the beginning of all those links really begins from when you began work as a researcher because when I started work as a researcher, if you wanted a copy of a paper you would send a little postcard requesting a reprint, and they would post it to you. But then you would have identified that through the literature that came into the library and so, you know, my 20 years or so of research I had a base of connections and expertise in my own field of plant pathology, both in Australia and in other countries and that really was part of what I took with me when I became more involved in development. And, you know, some of those people I've kept connected with for many years. Similarly, with some of the farmers that I worked with coming out of tobacco research, then into mangoes, some of the farmers had gone out of tobacco and into mangoes: some of those industry leaders were people I've kept connections with. Some of them passed away but it may just be a Christmas card every year but, you know, there's still some connection with most people.

And I think that, you know, one of the outstanding features or one of the outstanding aspects of what ACIAR does, is that many of the Australian scientists who have been involved with their work, give much more for the dollars that they're getting funding because, you know, they maintain those connections for twenty, thirty, forty years, just in the sort of personal interactions because like everything there's not only the research but there's also the encouragement, answering questions, there's providing advice, suggesting connections - all those things that happen then. I've just seen time and time again that the people that are in Australian research projects have maintained those links for many years. And that's sort of very subtle diplomacy by Australia in a way but they're the people to people connections … very important.

Speaking as someone who reads the paper every day and sees a whole lot of political actions happening, you never see any of these sorts of conversations or interactions happening internationally. There's a whole scope for another interview, as well as for many theses I'm sure on the role of, of

development agencies and agricultural agencies and other agencies in Australia and the opportunities that we could have across our immediate neighbourhood.

Yes, I think that a lot of that is going on, there's a lot of … there's even a lot of sociological research into these various agencies. But as you say, it doesn't necessarily make the news. You only see glimpses of it and glimpses of it usually when there's the human dimension, like, you know, the Australians who went to Thailand to help with the cave rescues. You mightn't necessarily see the Australian who went to … a colleague of mine went to Afghanistan before all of the last twenty or thirty years of conflicts. He went there to advise them because the potatoes were being frozen and he wouldn't be likely to go back again. But right back into the 50s, and even the founding of those international agencies after the after the second world war, there were Australian advisors going to different places, advising on particular problems.

Our culture is much more focused on sport and the arts, I suppose, than on the science. We see glimpses but in a way people I think who do research are happy just to get on with what they're doing.

Does it frustrate you that there's not a greater interest and emphasis?

Well, I think that, yes, it is frustrating. You know, there's many more examples of philanthropy in other countries. I know, just as an example, in South Africa there's been some philanthropists who have funded for many years some of their agricultural research. Philanthropy in Australia has got to be strong focus on human health research but there's much that philanthropy could do for agricultural research. You know, there's examples in the UK where there's research institutes funded by philanthropy in agriculture. Maybe our state system detracts in a way but if any philanthropists ever listen to this perhaps they could think about agriculture a little bit more.

Perhaps that's your next career, guiding them. And speaking of that international connection, you are very deeply involved in the International Society for Plant Pathology which was established in 1968. When did you join?

Well oh I guess I joined … when I started work (fifty years ago this year) I became a member of the Australasian Plant Pathology Society and the Australasian Plant Pathology Society was a member of the International Society for Plant Pathology so I automatically became a member of that Society. The International Society for Plant Pathology represents about 60 societies around the world. National and regional societies of plant pathology and in toto that means it represents about 26,000 Plant Pathologists around the world. Plant pathologists have a very important role in society, but it's perhaps unrecognized and from when I became a consultant, or even before that when I worked for ACIAR, I was able to become more involved in the International Society. I became the Secretary-General (2006-2013) and then the President and I'm the only Australian so far who has been a President of the Society – I was President from 2013 until 2018 and I continued on the executive until last year. So I was involved in the executive through the period of COVID. I oversaw the initiative (which my predecessors had begun) to give more emphasis to food security and that had been inspired by Norman Borlaug talking to the International Society in 1998.[2] We established a journal published in partnership with Springer Nature on food security.

You initiated that link didn't you?

40.00 I was really part of the executive that oversaw the beginning of that. The role I played because I was a Secretary-General was to scrutinise more carefully the contracts and we had a contract in which we initially owned half of the journal but last year under the terms of our contract we could acquire the other half of the journal for complete ownership. We still publish in partnership with

2 https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1970/borlaug/biographical/

Springer, the advantage of publishing with someone like Springer is you have a global reach and you know, the topic of food security, of course, in that period has become more and more important. And the income that the Society earned through a share of the publication income gives the Society more independence financially and allows the Society to continue in the future to fulfil its major roles, which are to promote plant pathology throughout the world and also to convene the International Congress of Plant Pathology every four or five years. That can be a major meeting of 2000 plus people, scientists. I forgot to say earlier that the importance of building networks also very much comes through going to conferences where you talk about your work, you hear about someone else who's doing something similar, and build a network of contacts that strengthen what you do.

There's social events are invaluable in that score. But it must be very difficult, just think about the Australian Garden History Society's conferences, they must be almost a piece of cake compared to organising an international conference across so many fields.

Well, yes, of course. The Garden History Society conferences are small, limited a little bit in number because of it being linked to garden tours where there's always a limit on the number of people that can visit. Of course, when it comes to organising an international conference, you know, there's many more people involved: many teams of people usually have professional Congress organisers; you have the Congress facilities; many challenges but many hands make light work and for me, some of the memorable opportunities working with the International Society included the … I think I could mention my colleague from Italy, Professor Lodovica Gullino, who is a tower of strength and energy when it comes to organising meetings and she organised the wonderful Congress in Torino.

Then I was very much involved working with our Chinese colleagues for the Congress in 2013. That involved visits to China, Beijing, talking about the scientific program, putting together bits and pieces, working out teams to develop technical sessions. Of course, our Chinese colleagues also had the capacity and energy to organise all of the practical aspects of the conference. I think it was a great success for them. Then in 2018, when I was President we had the Congress in Boston. That was also a great meeting very much aided by the American Phytopathological Society. But I suppose I took great pleasure particularly in organising the opening plenary which consisted of three speakers from different parts of the world, including a colleague from Australia. We had hoped to have a colleague from Papua New Guinea go as well but she was unable to work through the challenges of getting to Port Moresby to get a visa. And so in the end, she didn't get there. But and, of course, one of the legacies of the COVID period is learning about and beginning to hold meetings by zoom. So we do have zoom connections now and of course, one of my most recent experiences working for the International Society came about because of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

And for the Congress in Lyon, we organised the session - you can say I really helped inspire it rather than organized it. The session was called *War and Conflict and Plant Disease*[3] and we had some experts and people from both Ukraine, but also Syria and Africa who talked about some of the challenges of dealing with plant diseases and horticulture in times of war. And that was, in a way, it was a great honour to be in any way involved with them and to attend the meeting in Lyon where some of the speakers from Ukraine were able to attend in person, but of course some couldn't, some by video, and the title of one of the speakers from Ukraine's talk was, *Keep Calm and Grow Plants*, and that session is available and can be listened to online.

Is that the first time that the Society has had a seminar section on food, food security?

[3] Session C1.7 - Impact of war and conflicts on plant pathology research and food safety of countries

Food security has been a strong feature of our Congress has, right from the very beginning, the very first congress in 2000,in 1968, the keynote speaker was about food security but since the late 90s, we have had a taskforce on global food security, currently led by Professor Lise Korsten, from South Africa and that is really continuing and that was inspired by Norman Borlaug who challenged our Society to work into that area.

What was different in Lyon last year was we had a session on war and conflict and the impact of those things on disease and one of the speakers was Dr Safaa Kumari from Syria, who worked for one of the international centres and she commented that this was the very first time she'd ever been to a conference where the issue of war and plant disease have been discussed. She's sort of famous because of the role she played into creeping back into war-torn Syria, she rescued some of the seed collection belonging to the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Arid and Dry Areas. She talked also about losses and the challenges of rescuing or saving seed collections from countries where natural disasters such as hurricanes have damaged their country's collections.

In all those stories, you read … that's not as not part of the story the general person reads in the paper, is that going to be something that Society is going to consider regularly that question of war and food security?

50.00 I guess that remains to be seen. We would hope that the topic becomes less important over the years through the breakout of world peace, but

That's a nice hope, Greg.

But within that program, of course, the International Society (ISPP) also initiated the system of bursary support at the time when the conflict in Ukraine broke out. Some of the women scientists and others with, men, for example, with physical problems or disabled children, fled to Poland to escape the conflict and then work closely with our colleagues in Poland to provide short term support for some of the scientists to continue work in research. Some of them went on to get support from other bodies. Many others … agencies began to offer support research for these people. And you know, that will become I guess, a permanent legacy of that period, we hope to provide bursary support for emergency situations. We went on to provide support for a couple of students who were affected by the earthquakes in Türkiye last year. These things, of course, depend on resources but you know, it's an ongoing need to be able to just step in when you have to and provide some emergency support.

And just going back to your conference in Boston, what was that session that you were very pleased to have presented?

It was the opening plenary, and I think the topic was Plant Health is Earth's Wealth, as well and we had speakers with diverse backgrounds. I know that my colleague from Australia was the third speaker, and his topic was, *Whatever the Question Chocolate in the Answer*. His name was Professor David Guest from the University of Sydney and he talked about his work in Papua New Guinea, working with colleagues in PNG and East New Britain and Bougainville where it is recognised that one has to have a One Health approach, that is not only think about the health of the crop, but also the health of the community and take a farm family approach to extension that is talking to both men and the women. A project that David lead involves also human health specialists from the University of Sydney and so there was also attention to human health. Often it's not recognised that it's hard for a farming community to implement disease control measures because the humans in that community aren't well enough themselves, whether it's through illness, disease, conflicts, lack of food, lack of vitamins, there's many things that need to be thought about.

Is that program, how's that program succeeding?

I think I think that it's been quite successful. And I know that most recent report from ACIAR talked about how some of that work has been extended to the Solomon Islands. Of course, the whole idea of Farmer Field schools has also been strongly supported over the years by the FAO in our program for ACIAR working in Pakistan on the agriculture sector linkages program, a sociological team from the University of Canberra were working both with the men and the women to identify opportunities to improve livelihoods but also to extend agricultural information. Taking awareness of cultural sensitivities and the cultural systems of that country.

A lot of complexities to work together with.

You know, and of course, it's not that the Australians do everything, it's the whole partnership model because ACIAR is about the partner country scientist who lead and play an important role in that work, because they continue that work long after we have left.

Absolutely. So just going back to your time as President of the Society is there, there must have been many highs and many challenges. But is there are there a couple of examples that stand out in addition to the plenary session?

Well, I think, you know, establishment, purchase of the journal [Food Security], are obviously something very important, but also, in this period, my colleague who was Treasurer, when I was Secretary-General, oversaw the registration of the Society as a charity in the USA. We've, I guess, tried to enhance the professionalism of a Society which is not always easy when you're basically depending on volunteer scientists who have other jobs. But you know, it's building the connections, it's engaging with scientists on the whole conflict in Ukraine led to me working a lot with the Polish scientists, for example. And you know, it's great when you engage a country or society in that work so that they become more involved, they get more out of their membership [of ISPP]. And the other thing that the International Society is responsible for is the awarding every four or five years of the Jakob Eriksson medal – and this is a gold medal.[4] It was from a fund established in 1920s and it's a little bit like the Nobel Prize for Plant Pathology, I suppose, because the scheme is administered by the Swedish Academy of Science and the International Society has a role in overseeing the selection of the recipient of that award every five years or four years. And, you know, in recent years we've made an effort to make that … make the processes more equitable. We've also worked to encourage both our congresses and the executive more diverse in representation – this is going to be a challenge but it's important when you're working with societies representing many countries to have both gender balance, if you like, and representation from at least the five continents.

We're much more conscious of these.

Yes, and sometimes when it comes to the congresses, of course, resource is limiting because, you know, many countries there is a challenge of getting resources to bring people to the congress, but you've got to start somewhere. And we're fortunate that some of our societies, and the countries where they are based, recognise the importance also of helping to bring people to Congresses.

How did you feel when your term as President came to an end?

1 HR Well, I guess you know, I think I've said before Plant Pathologists - it's like a life task. But for my term as President, of course, I served five years as immediate Past President and so there's a long, a long goodbye, you could say, and even now, I'm still involved in some ways, both in providing advice to the incoming executive. You know, I would hope to go to this next congress,

4 https://www.icpp2023.org/programme/jakob-eriksson-prize

which will be on the Gold Coast in 2028. The connections there, of course, are something that I have to fund myself, but it's just one of those commitments of your life.

So you have other interests beyond that in your own garden, just continuing those … those threads, your own garden interests? So what has been the role of gardening for you?

Well, of course, you know, you could say gardening is the reason why I'm here because, you know, it's been an interest throughout my life. It's something that is innate and lead to my career path. The opportunity that has been here for me and my wife living in Canberra has been, you know, to have lived in the same garden, in the same home for 27/28 years. You know, so you can plan a garden: I guess my gardening approach is a bit like my research, you know, there's a lot of … and the way some people do art … there's a lot of intuition involved, you know.

It's not, I'm not a 'neat and trim' gardener and living where I live, of course, we had many mature trees, and the garden, are more than 50 years old and so there's a legacy but you can see many, many changes, transition over the years. So that being in one place, and in the period since I've become consultant, I've also been able to invest more time in professional interests such as the Society but also in the interest that began in my childhood, which was growing unusual plants, propagating things and growing things from seed and living here in a cool climate like Canberra, I can grow the bulbs that are from cold and mountainous countries in Europe, particularly fritillarias and primulas - they're two species or genera I'm interested in.

Why are you so keen on those?

Well, I think that, you know, the thing about many of the cold climate bulbs, is that they die down over summer and so you don't worry about watering them over summer, some of the primulas also die down and so they're easy care for the environment that we live in. And whilst, if you can say for example, tulips began to being interested in Europe from, you know, from seventeenth century or earlier, some of the general like Fritillaria were really, really beginning to be coming into cultivation. Some of them of course, the species come from what was the former Soviet Union, other parts of the Middle East's mountainous areas. And so the sort of work that began with the Dutch, with tulips, you know, three-four hundred years ago, it's only just now beginning with things like Fritillarias. So in 100 years perhaps we might see many more of these what are now relatively rare bulbs much more widely grown in the way that people love to grow tulips. Being on the edge of being on the edge of new things.

I can see that. Did you import them or are they that new?

No, I didn't import them. There are some societies that have seed exchanges and so each year for the last few years I would be getting seeds in seed exchanges from the Scottish Rock Garden Club, the Alpine Garden Society, North American Rock Garden Society. Those seed exchanges also occur within the monitoring constraints of Australian quarantine systems - you're only bringing in varieties that are approved and there's inspections involved. My interest really began because of the efforts of earlier collectors and importers, such as the late Marcus Harvey from Tasmania. Marcus was a great collector and grower of many unusual bulbs. There is a book available which is a record of some of his adventures in bulb collecting and he used to sell bulbs by mail order and also seed and he encouraged me to try growing them from seed. There are others - the late Brian Tonkin is another early grower of bulbs from Victoria and his daughter, Jane Tonkin, still operates Tonkin's Bulbs, and you can buy commercially from her some of these rare and unusual bulbs.[5] And here in Australia we have the Alpine Garden Society Victorian Group and they also promote seed exchange and also encourage cultivation of unusual plants.

[5] Tonkin's Bulbs & Perennials

And you're a member that or you're very pleased to be mentioning that clearly.

I'm a member of that and it's really a subgroup of what was the Alpine Garden Society in the UK.

Perhaps it's a project for the 50th anniversary of the Society to see how many garden societies of different interests there are around the nation, you start scratching the surface, and it just it becomes a genealogical tree never ending.

Yes, that's right. Well, I think the Alpine Society, the Victorian group, might have celebrated thirty or forty years last year. So they've been going a while.

So just thinking about your general garden interests Greg, you also mentioned that you'd attended the Australian Landscape Conference. Why does attending that appeal?

Well the Australian Landscape Conference began in the 1960s or 70s, always in Victoria. I first started attending maybe ten years ago, organized most recently by Fleur Flannery, who's based here in Yass. But the Australian Landscape Conference will involve one day of visiting gardens and two days of talks. The very first conference, I think it could have been 1968 involved a whole host of famous and eminent gardeners from UK, including Christopher Lloyd and other well known gardeners (who were) writers. And [in 1992] Christopher Lloyd spoke at the National Press Club – you can listen to his talk online[6] and one of the questions that came from the press was, "What do you think of an Australian garden?" And he replied, "I haven't seen one yet." He was very much tongue in cheek.

And in fact, I'll come back I'll come back to Christopher Lloyd when we talk about Cedric but just finishing your landscape conferences.

Yes. So you know, they're enjoyable, they have always have always been in Melbourne and because of bringing in exciting, international speakers there's usually an optional day of visits to gardens. It's held at the Melbourne convention centre so it's just a couple of days of talks, meeting people that you know who come to conferences. Fleur is moving beyond just the conference every second year in Melbourne, and she's having two events this year, a series of speakers at the event in Sydney and linked to that is the half day event here in Canberra, bringing out some eminent gardeners from UK.

I think it's called Outlandish. And how does the focus of the landscape conference differ, say in generalities, from the Australian Garden History Society?

1HR 10 I think the focus of the landscape conferences focuses on modern gardens focuses on gardening now rather than necessarily being focused on history. And, of course, there's a much stronger international dimension, you know, there's been speakers from India, speakers from Japan, China, giving modern perspectives on landscape and there's probably a more emphasis on landscape design, rather than necessarily gardening per se.

Are you going to go to the Outlandish one,

I'm going to the event that's in Canberra – the half day event.

So coming to the to the Australian Garden History Society, and just touching on Christopher Lloyd and Cedric, I was going to ask you, you, you're smiling. You know, Cedric is a very well, obviously, he's no longer with us, but a will of the wisp and a very enthusiastic garden person. And you knew him and you were also very instrumental in helping me with the interview but he also talked about Christopher Lloyd.

Thank you. Yes. Of course, Christopher Lloyd, would have been one of his inspirations, I guess. Cedric, of course, came to Australia in 1950s and he also studied landscape design under

6 https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/1092257

another well known, designer, whose name I can't remember.[7] But yes … Cedric undertook a diploma course with him.

Yes. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to visit Christopher Lloyd's garden in UK, Great Dixter, which is now managed by Fergus Garrett. And Christopher was the wonderful entertaining writer, I guess, as well as having an interesting, exciting garden.

So tell me about your role in the (Australian Garden History) Society in Canberra?

Well, I guess, you know, I began to become involved in the local Management Committee a couple of years after I joined the Society in 2010 or 11 and as a member of the Committee often you can be over-awed by the knowledge and experience of your fellow Committee members and you contribute in ways that you can and so I became involved initially in preparing the talks on Australian garden writing, and early Australian garden literature – which was an interest I had. And over the period of a few years I gave four talks on various areas of garden writing. I then moved on to helping organise some events starting with a walking event starting through New Acton here in Canberra, where we spoke to some of the chefs in that area who were using and growing some food around their restaurants. And then organising some of the speaker events - the one that sticks in my mind is a more recent one during the COVID times where we had Jason Chongue[8] from Melbourne talk. Jason has the background from Timor-Leste that he's well known amongst young gardeners for his advocacy relating to indoor plants particularly and he has, and operates with his partner, The Plant Society[9] based out of Victoria, so it was an initiative to reach a broader audience beyond our Society.

And of course, also during 2020 we initiated the photo competition. Also Helen Page from Victorian Branch had similarly conceived the idea, and we ran the photo competition over two years. We didn't get a huge response in terms of numbers, but it was interesting and we were fortunate to have the artist Lucy Culliton, Trisha Dixon, two photographers - Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper - as the judges of that competition and we had a wonderful prize-winning entry by Maggie McCredie of her grandson launching mid-air with his lawnmower – and lovely texts that went with it, it was a fun thing to do. Or the opportunity for others to enjoy that fun in the future.

Is there much interaction with the other Branches as with Helen Page?

There's a little bit interaction when, for example, you go to the conferences and get to know people. As a member, of course, we also see in the regular newsletter from the national office events in various places. I've been to and spoken at events in the Southern Highlands and Sydney that is in relation to my garden writing talks. And also in Melbourne, for the Victorian branch. But I've also been to some of the one day seminar events organised by the Southern Highlands Branch, you know, so, you know, I've just taken the initiative myself to be on the mailing list, so that I can keep tabs of what opportunities there are to go to other events.

What is the health of the Society right now, do you think?

I think the Society is healthy we have active, engaged branches organising lots of interesting activities. There is always the regular worry about ageing membership and need to continue to engage and involve younger people, newer people on committees. But as a Society we are going OK. I think that if we did live in a world where horticultural history societies received a small slice of government largesse when it came to funding it would allow those societies to be more active.

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7 John Andrew Brookes MBE (11 October 1933 – 16 March 2018)

8 https://www.jasonchongue.com/about

9 https://theplantsociety.com.au/

When it comes to … if you think about sport, and if you call gardening a sport, then perhaps gardening would be the sport that involves most people in Australia. And If we take the health angle with gardening, importance of gardening as I mentioned, to keep people active as they get older, then there's all sorts of reasons why our governments from local government to national government, could think a little bit more about providing financial support and other support for these little endeavours by groups of gardeners.

I wonder if that's … that's your next advocacy project in the ACT Branch?

Perhaps Yes. You know, having said that, of course, we're very fortunate just to have Gardening Australia on the ABC and I know that the ABC radio will have gardening programs right across the country that engage and involve gardeners. And there can be much more I know that when I've been in the UK attending the Chelsea Garden Show, for example, for the whole week you can turn on the television and there'll be television coverage of what's happening at Chelsea. I thought.. I answered a questionnaire about live streaming of sporting events and I added a footnote suggesting that they could think about live streaming the Chelsea Garden Show.

Good luck.

1HR20 That was something I would actually be interested in watching.

Yes, I think that's a very strong start to your next advocacy. But speaking of advocacy, Greg, the Society also punches above its weight, particularly the branch, your ACT Branch, you've had a number of issues that you've had to fight for.

Yes, yes. That's true. And we've been fortunate to have over the years had members who have had strong professional roles in history, conservation, advocacy to help underpin a lot of that advocacy work and even now, local Branch member, Anne Claoue-Long is a professional in that area and she can help to add clear thinking to those submissions.

Anne’s on the National Management Committee, has that … joining the National Management Committee being something that you might think about to fill the void from your ISPP?

It's not something I would think about. That’s because I guess, I've spent 50 years being involved in those ways very professionally, I think it's always important to give the opportunity to other people and maybe just being more focused on family and personal interests.

You mentioned your involvement with the journal before and your association with that. And I meant to ask you one name that's cropped up a couple of times in your writings, I'll just dip back into your professional world and come back to the Society is [the late] Brian Deverall, he was involved wasn't he on the journal for your Society?

So Brian Deverall’s wife, Flora Deverall, is a member of the Garden History Society, Sydney Branch, and Brian was the Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of Sydney. But he was also the newsletter editor [of the International Plant Pathology Society] for many

years until he unfortunately passed away a few years ago. Brian was a stalwart proponent and regular producer of the newsletters newsletter of the Society that has been published every month since about 1972. And that's distributed of course online, free to anyone who wants to receive it. And just currently, the editor is Daniel Hüberli who is in Western Australia.

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AUDIO FILE 2

What about the journal - the Society's journal today? Do you have a thought about that?

> The Garden History Society's journal?

Yes.

> Well, the Garden History Society journal is an exemplar of high editorial standards, interesting articles, a labour of love of all involved, and you know it's both a record of some of the things we're doing currently but also of all sorts of elements of garden history. Outreach to a broader community will continue to be a challenge but I know that our current Editor, Francesca Beddie, is aware of that and the interest is gradually growing.

Yes I think that's an enduring challenge. Throughout the life, I think of the Society it's had to renew and revive and review the future, and I think that's preoccupying the Society now. Do you have any thoughts about that? Is that something the Branch is involved with?

> I think that you know, where the Society is at the moment has to be taken in the context also of the last few years of history, starting with COVID. And, you know, the habits of a lifetime for many people changed. And I just know myself that I have become much more interested in following the news on my phone, you know, just as an example, where I would be, you know, refreshing hourly to find out about COVID. And, you know, so that habit takes up more time than it would have if COVID never had happened and you know, Instagram is another one - social media where people become, you know, engaged in, you know, the same topic, but in a different medium.

So it's an ageing community within the Society, and you mentioned the need to attract younger members - is that happening?

> I think it happens to some extent but I think that we also have to know or realise that there's the future members out there who maybe their lives are too busy right now to be involved, maybe they don't even have the money necessarily to paying an annual membership. But the seed remains in their mind for the future. You know, if we were going to get government grants, maybe we could at least have a grant once a year to run a couple of free events, you know, public outreach type events. You know, because a lot of these things involve more effort than they can undertake, I mean, our Branch – we usually participate in the ACT government's Heritage Festival and that will be a weekend sometime in April and usually the Society will have a booth where we can, you know, publicise the Society and talk to people. But if it was any longer than two days we just couldn't do it.

It's the volunteer manpower question, isn't it?

> Yes. And one year, there was a … I think it could have been at the Heritage Festival … we actually had one of our members speaking about rabbits. And she gave talks each day in a tent about, you know, the challenge of managing rabbits in Canberra and that was when we had the heritage events at Lanyon, one of our National Trust properties here.[10] We've also provided volunteers who've given tours of the vegetable garden down there. It's all those sorts of things. One of our - usually during Heritage Week - we might have a member organise or lead a tour of something like modern gardens or, you know, some event that can … I mean we do things with the National Trust and also with the National Library. We do a joint lecture once a year with [the Friends of the] National Library we'll usually do some sort of walking event with National Trust.

[10] Lanyon is not part of National Trust, it is an ACT Historic Place https://www.historicplaces.com.au/lanyon-homestead

Those are things that actually when you think about it could transfer to every (AGHS) branch in every capital city where there's a State Library.

> Well, yes, just yesterday at our local Branch event I spoke to a couple who joined the Garden History Society because they first encountered us at a National Library joint event, because they were members of the Friends of the National Library and that's how they heard about us.

Slowly, slowly. What was the event yesterday?

> Yesterday's event … we had a guided tour by the Head Gardener of Parliament House and we toured the outer garden of Parliament House. That is a large area of native vegetation and a small formal garden area. Those areas are open to the public, you can go there any time to look at them and for most of us, we have never seen and even being aware that there was this formal garden there that we can look at. And we then, as we always do, had a short socialise - drinks and food in nearby York Park afterwards so that members could think about … talk about the event and the Society more generally.

So that's a picnic, as it were, that you all will bring along?

> No, the Committee will usually cater, you know, so we'll have you know, wine, mineral water, some savoury food, some other finger food, just some refreshments for perhaps an hour after the actual event.

The calibre of the entertaining, the hostessing, the food … is always of a very high standard in the Society too. Did you take your scones by chance?

> No, I'm no longer on the committee anymore so I don't have that responsibility. But one of the measures in more recent events has been to have some outside catering because providing catering can also discourage people from joining a committee if they think they have to bake a cake every event. It's just something that some people like to do, some people don't really want to.

Quite. So Greg, I think we've covered a range of things today. And I hope that some of these have filled some of the .... have augmented your earlier interview. But is as we come to an end is there any particular aspect that we haven't touched on that you'd like to cover?

> I think it's worth also talking a little bit about the whole initiative of the Society in recording the oral histories. When you look back at them, they're a record. It's hard to imagine that anyone will listen to them in 100 years, but perhaps they will. I know that it wasn't done by the Society but I've enjoyed listening to Christopher Lloyd speak at the National Press Club in the 1960s[11] and you know, an oral history can take you places that perhaps a more considered written speech or something doesn't. It's more natural, informative and of course gives you the luxury of a longer period of time to talk about something or someone or what they've achieved.

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Yes, and I think there's a lot of studies now into memory, how people remember things and I think for the Society to have a record of the people who were involved and the work and activities that the Society has done - and you've talked before when we met about the conference that you were involved with and attended once you returned from overseas, but I think all of those things the Society pitches very high and I think that in 100 year's time people will speak - they speak differently now than they did when you were a boy.

> Yes, but I think also that this is the Australian Garden History Society and I think that my view of the role the oral history should be to capture garden history, not the garden history of members.

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[11] Christopher Lloyd addressed the National Press Club on 17 November 1992

Example being Cedric Bryant, well Cedric only had a little bit of involvement with the Society but he's had a lot to do with the history of gardening in Canberra. You know, I can think of people like the late Brian Tonkin, you know, many people who have - at least the people who have been involved in the Alpine Garden Society of Victoria - there's well known landscape designers, many people who have had a different role in history.

I mean, yesterday, we had the Head Gardener of Parliament House speaking to us and he had worked at Parliament House since 1986 starting out as an apprentice, I guess. He talked about how when they were at Old Parliament House, one of the jobs he had each week was to pick flowers and take them around and give them to the offices of each of the Members. He was only a young man, and he was giving flowers to the young women usually in the offices, you know, so he had ... and of course, that was a small earlier time, but he had much more contact with individual parliamentarians. So there's just so much about garden history that I think the Society could be capturing in oral histories.

Perhaps he's a potential interviewee?

Perhaps … yes, that's right.

Tell me, does he still take flowers to the offices?

No, no, no, I don't think so. And partly also because the type of climate has changed: they have to look after the Courtyard Gardens which are planned and just as the building has been designed, the landscaping is designed. And so there's committees that consider ... he talked about how initially there was one type of tree in the Courtyard Gardens which grew too vigorously and they changed to a type of a acer [Acer rubrum 'October Glory'], which has red leaves in autumn. And that went through a committee process to decide - involved the architects there's a committee of people initially represented by the Italian architect of Parliament House and so his younger colleagues are now on that committee, and they ensure artistic integrity, and they also ensure that we don't in that situation … there's no pressure to succumb to the whim of an individual. (such as) *Well, let's pull out all of the landscaping in the courtyard and plant roses or petunias*.

Yes, yes.

There is a structure that ensures the intentions of the architects are maintained. It's a living work of art.

Yes, yes. What a lovely opportunity to have that "behind the scenes" tour from someone who's been so invested in two very different buildings as well.

Yes that's right.

Well, Greg, I think your reflections have a lovely richness to them about the Society and about your work, and your professional career and your private interests so thank you very much indeed for your contribution to the Oral History Collection.

Thank you. I'm happy to contribute.

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End of interview