

## SANDRA PULLMAN

# Women gardeners without chaperones: the role of Ina Higgins in advancing women in horticulture in Victoria

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### Introduction

Frances Georgina Watts Higgins (1860–1948), known as Ina Higgins, was a landscape gardener, pacifist and women’s political activist.<sup>1</sup> She played an important role in the advancement of horticulture in Victoria, becoming one of the first qualified landscape gardeners in Australia. Due to her lobbying of the principal of Burnley School of Horticulture, Melbourne, which was the first horticulture school in Australia, women were permitted in 1899 to enrol at the school.<sup>2</sup> Later graduates of the school, such as Olive Mellor,<sup>3</sup> Emily Gibson<sup>4</sup> and Edna Walling,<sup>5</sup> were able to follow in Ina’s footsteps because of her advocacy in support of opening the discipline up to women.

As a practitioner, Ina designed gardens for many of her family and friends. One of her early projects was the renovation of her brother’s garden. Henry Bournes Higgins acquired his holiday house ‘Heronswood’ at Dromana on the Mornington Peninsula in 1903 and asked his sister to redevelop the garden there.<sup>6</sup> Other projects that she was involved in included a garden at the Royal Talbot Epileptic Colony on what is now the main campus of Monash University; and the garden of ‘Hethersett’ at Burwood, Melbourne, now the site of Presbyterian Ladies’ College. On the basis of her burgeoning reputation, Ina was also invited to advise landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin upon plantations for a proposed Central Plaza at Leeton, in New South Wales.

One of Ina's most ambitious projects, in partnership with the Australian suffragist and politician Vida Goldstein,<sup>7</sup> was establishing the Women's Rural Industries Co-operative farm in Mordialloc on Port Phillip Bay. When World War I broke out, Ina became a member of the Women's Peace Army (WPA) formed by Goldstein, Cecilia Annie John and Adela Pankhurst. The WPA was strongly against the war, campaigning publicly against the wastage of human life and opposing the two conscription referenda. At the same time, Ina became a patroness of the Women's Horticultural Association, which held its meetings at Burnley.<sup>8</sup> After the war, Ina withdrew from public life and her name is only occasionally mentioned in the Melbourne papers. Her 1933 diary, however, shows that she was still interested in the women's peace movement and Burnley, but that her main interests were her family and friends.

Ina's last known public project was to contribute a chapter promoting horticulture as a suitable career for women to the *Centenary Gift Book*, marking the centenary of the foundation of Victoria, edited by her old Presbyterian Ladies College schoolfriend Frances Fraser and her niece Nettie Palmer, and published in 1934 by the Women's Centenary Council.

### Family background

Ina Higgins was born on 12 September 1860 in Fermoy, County Cork, Ireland, and immigrated with her family to Australia, arriving in February 1870. Her family were Irish Protestants, with her father, Reverend John Higgins, being a travelling Wesleyan preacher. The family's health was threatened by disease so her mother, Anne Higgins (nee Bournes), the decision-maker in the family, sought medical advice<sup>9</sup> that recommended the family should migrate to Australia to reap the benefits of a warmer climate.

Anne came to Australia with Ina and four of her five brothers: Henry Bournes (later a barrister, politician and high court judge), George (later a civil engineer and associate professor in engineering at the University of Melbourne), Samuel Ormsby (later a doctor) and Charlie; as well as her younger sister, Anna Maria. Just before they arrived in Melbourne, tragedy struck. Charlie, aged six, fell ill with diphtheria, died and was buried at sea.<sup>10</sup>

Not wanting to leave Ireland without fulfilling his pastoral duties, Ina's father, and her older brother, John, did not arrive in Melbourne until October 1870.<sup>11</sup> In Melbourne, Reverend Higgins found it difficult to find work with the Wesleyan Church and instead filled vacancies in ministries of the Presbyterian Church. He later returned to the Wesleyan Church when newly created chaplaincy positions were established in several Victorian hospitals and charitable institutions, and he continued to work until his death in 1895.<sup>12</sup>



Ina Higgins in the garden at 'Killenna', 1919. Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, PIC Album 885/7 #PIC/P778/562

### Beliefs and influences

Ina Higgins grew up in a loving, evangelical family atmosphere, moulded by her father's Wesleyan faith. The Wesleyans taught that individuals should perform good works and help other people and that those with the ability to be leaders had an obligation to lead.<sup>13</sup> In adulthood, Ina was able to combine the beliefs of the Wesleyan Church with those of the suffragist movement. She knew that women's lives were restricted as they were not able to vote, and that their access to education and property was by virtue of their father or husband. It was also uncommon for middle-class women to work. The mainstream social and cultural belief at the time was that a woman's place was in the home to nurture the family and run the household, while it was the man's job to be the breadwinner. Ina's brother Henry was president of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, which ironically reinforced this belief in its determination that men were the primary breadwinners and only granted equal pay to women in certain occupations.<sup>14</sup> Ina believed, in contrast, that the same financial and social opportunities that were available to men should be available to women.

The education of girls was not a high priority for most families in the 1870s but the Higgins family was more progressive. In line with its belief in the education of girls,<sup>15</sup> in 1875, the Presbyterian Church established the

Presbyterian Ladies College to provide girls with a comparable academic education to that given to boys enrolled at similar schools.

The decision to enrol Ina, who was 15, and her younger sister, Anna, at Presbyterian Ladies College may have come about during Reverend Higgins's period working for the Presbyterian Church. Ina started school there in the same foundation year with Vida Goldstein and Frances Fraser, who became her lifelong friend. After gaining her matriculation in 1878, Ina thought of becoming an artist because of her liking for colour and design<sup>16</sup> but did not pursue this ambition. Instead, she became a governess – as many women of her generation did – and worked in New South Wales from 1879 to 1890.

When she returned to Melbourne, Ina took up the position of honorary secretary for the United Council for Woman Suffrage, and was one of the 30,000 signatories on the Women's Suffrage Petition presented to the Parliament of the Colony of Victoria in 1891. By 1894 she was the honorary secretary of the United Council for Woman Suffrage, under Annette Crawford as chair, and, following Crawford's death, under Vida Goldstein. By 1900, Ina was on the executive committee of the council.<sup>17</sup> She was also honorary secretary of the Richmond Club for Working Girls and, in 1899, was elected to the Malvern Board of Advice, a group of residents who advised the council on local matters.<sup>18</sup>

Ina was active as secretary of the organising committee of the Australian Women's Work Exhibition,<sup>19</sup> which was held over five weeks in the second half of 1907. This celebration of all that feminists had achieved in the 19th century, included recognition of the granting of women's suffrage Australia wide in 1902. Over 250,000 visitors came to see the 16,000 displays that ranged from needlework to woodcarving to a nursing display. Records indicate that Ina entered a piece for display in the fine arts category, however, there are no details regarding what form the work took.

### Burnley School of Horticulture

Some 20 years after she matriculated, Ina Higgins decided to formally pursue horticulture. The first principal of the Burnley School of Horticulture, Charles Bogue Luffman,<sup>20</sup> described gardening as a form of art.<sup>21</sup> This was the perfect way for Ina to express herself because – in gardening as in painting – colour, texture, aesthetics, perspective, dimensions and proportion need to be considered in the practice of horticultural composition. Around 1898, Ina enlisted the help of Luffman's wife, Laurette,<sup>22</sup> to lobby him to allow women to come lectures.<sup>23</sup> He agreed on the condition that she find at least six women who were interested. When time came to enrol, Ina had found 72 interested women. Charles Luffman kept his promise and they were enrolled for Tuesday

and Friday afternoons.<sup>24</sup> Nettie Palmer noted that these women arrived on safety bicycles, carrying string bags and without chaperones.<sup>25</sup>

In 1899, the Certificate of Competency in Horticulture consisted of lectures, demonstrations and some practical hands-on work in the grounds. Charles Luffman paid special attention to teaching women about small farm production, with the idea that they could run their own small businesses or supplement their income. Subjects included garden-making and management, table grapes, lemon culture and bush fruits and vegetable culture. He determined that these were suitable choices for women horticulturalists as they required moderate exertion and could yield a living on a small block.<sup>26</sup> Later, subjects on beekeeping, poultry and dairy cow husbandry were introduced.

The governing board of Burnley were said to be outraged at women being allowed to study there. All through Charles Luffman's tenure, newspapers such as the *Argus*, *Age*, *Advocate* and the *Weekly Times* reported the trouble he had with the Horticultural Board of Advice.<sup>27</sup> A report in the *Argus* suggested that the problem was not about Luffman's technique of pruning, nipping and the propagation of phylloxera-resistant grape cuttings – previous complaints about these matters were just a 'smoke screen' – rather, according to the *Argus*, the real issue was the 100 women students enrolled at the school.<sup>28</sup> This proposition is debatable, however, as none of the other articles in the newspapers reported outright that the Board of Advice was opposed to the enrolment of women. From the tone of the articles, the problem seems more likely to have been that the board did not like losing control of the Burnley gardens and did not feel that they were able to control Luffman, who treated them with disdain and rejected their authority over him.<sup>29</sup> But, the *Argus* also reported that Luffman was doing valuable work and that they hoped that the 'Horticulture Board would abandon its base attempt to undermine his influence with the girls'.<sup>30</sup>

While controversy raged, Ina continued studying and graduated in 1900. *Table Talk* reported that, at the annual end of year function, 'Ina Higgins of Malvern received the highest marks in her exams and thus first place'.<sup>31</sup>

### Garden style

There is little remaining evidence, documentary or physical, of Ina Higgins's work. Her contribution to the garden at Heronswood is obscured by many layers of earlier and later designs but pictures of Hethersett in the early 1900s, however, show evidence of her vision. She imbued the garden with Federation influences, such as a rose arbour, gravel path and a circular central driveway lined with grass edging and annuals, with roses and dahlias behind them.

In 1910, Katharine Susannah Prichard, writing under the pseudonym 'Pomona', interviewed Ina for an article in the *Herald* entitled 'Women's world Miss Nina Higgins a woman gardener, gardens and gardening'.<sup>32</sup> This is an important document because it is one of the very few articles that reveals Ina's personal tastes in gardening and design. In it, Ina explained that she had always loved gardening – possibly having inherited this love from her father who, in Ireland, taught her brothers to help him in the vegetable garden – and she went to Burnley because she wanted to learn about pruning roses.<sup>33</sup> Ina also expressed that, from her perspective, the best gardens were the formal gardens of England, which allow sunlight to come right up to the house by way of a large expanse of lawn. She asserted that, in hot climates like Australia, shade was required right up to the house. Higgins may be one of the first gardeners to express the view that huge stretches of lawn are not suitable for Australian conditions and should be replaced with cooling, shady gardens.<sup>34</sup>

### Gardens designed by Ina Higgins

As is commonplace for all newly trained gardeners, Ina Higgins practiced her craft on properties belonging to her family and friends.

In 1903, Henry Higgins purchased Heronswood from his close friend Alexander Sutherland.<sup>35</sup> The Gothic Revival-style house was built in 1866 for William Edward Hearn,<sup>36</sup> the first law professor at the University of Melbourne, who had a great influence upon Henry as a student. The English artist and garden designer Edward La Trobe Bateman<sup>37</sup> is reputed to have laid out the original structure on a larger site than exists today as, over the years, the garden has been subdivided and sold off.<sup>38</sup>

There are no surviving landscape plans for the property. Nettie Palmer mentions in a letter<sup>39</sup> that her horticultural aunt invited her as a companion to come down to Heronswood to examine the grounds, which had become rundown.<sup>40</sup> Palmer also notes that Ina designed a garden that wound off into the bush and that she sent Henry a package of native plants for his birthday.<sup>41</sup>

In a letter from Heronswood, dated 18 July 1910, Esmonde Higgins (Nettie Palmer's brother) wrote to his mother that 'there was no fruit in the orchard and that major works were being done. There was devastation, the flower beds were being done up, trees being cut down and the driveway was being altered. The pittosporums in front of the porch were cut down and all this garden rubbish ended up in a huge bonfire'.<sup>42</sup>

There is no correspondence that sheds light on the species of plants that Ina used, or any new walls, paths, ponds or arbours she may have proposed. According to the present owners of Heronswood,<sup>43</sup> the only plant material



Top: Aerial view of 'Heronswood', Dromana, one-time holiday home of Justice HB Higgins, c. 1932. 'Airspy' photograph, by *Shaw-Ross Aviation Co.* Pictures Collection H84.335/3

Bottom: The path that led up to the front of Hethersett Private Repatriation Hospital, Burwood, Victoria, was lined by herbaceous borders. c. 1915–18. Pictures Collection H2009.103/1

that could be attributed to Ina is *Corymbia ficifolia* syn. *Eucalyptus ficifolia*, and *Camellia japonica* 'Hagoromo'. There is also some extant rock work from approximately 1904 located near the backdoor and memories of a concrete seat that was attributed to Higgins but no longer exists.

Ina's next major project was an institutional garden for the Royal Talbot Epileptic Colony in Clayton. The colony was founded in 1906 and was officially opened in March 1907 by Lady Margaret Talbot.<sup>44</sup> Philanthropist James Mason of Brighton donated the 70 hectare site on which the colony was built.<sup>45</sup> The aim of the colony was to establish a farm to provide therapeutic activities for patients to obtain a balance between mental and physical exercise and agricultural pursuits.<sup>46</sup>

There are two surviving plans of the colony. The first, from 1908, is a contour plan that shows the main driveway, flower beds, orchards, kitchen garden, and a plantation of trees behind a picket fence along Wellington Road. The second plan is a 1959 Monash University preliminary survey illustrating the location of garden beds, lawns, houses and the tennis court. Dots along the main drive may be the English oaks (*Quercus robur*) that are referred to in the 1957 annual report of the colony, which records that 'Miss Higgins was responsible for designing the garden beds, pathways, driveways and naming of the plants'.<sup>47</sup>

Even though Ina has been suggested as the designer of the avenue of oaks, it seems highly unlikely that she recommended them for the driveway as the 1957 *Annual Report* noted that Dr William John Springthorpe,<sup>48</sup> a physician instrumental in the foundation of the Colony, had 'a hand in the planning of the farm, including what trees to plant, where to put the orchard, stables, etc'.<sup>49</sup> While the colony was set up as an institutional farm and garden with poultry, cows, vegetable garden and orchard, it is likely that Ina was only involved in the garden at the colony and not at the farm.

Ina's next garden project involved redesigning the garden at Hethersett. Around 1911, Dr Ramsay Mailer<sup>50</sup> bought the Burwood property and renamed it Hethersett, after a village in Norfolk, England. Mailer renovated the Victorian house with Edwardian features that are still visible today. At the same time, Ina was employed to redesign the garden.<sup>51</sup>

Burwood at the beginning of the 20th century was semirural. Hethersett was a large property and it is most likely that Ina only redesigned the gardens in the immediate vicinity of the house. Sometime around 1914/1915, Hethersett became a private repatriation hospital for wounded returned soldiers. State Library Victoria's album of Hethersett photos from c. 1916 shows recuperating soldiers fishing by the pond and reclining on extensive lawns with shrubbery

in the background. A photo of the main entrance reveals a garden of the times, with climbing roses over an arbour, ribbon bedding filled with (possibly) dahlias, petunias lining the grass edge and native Australian cabbage-tree palms (*Livistona australis*) and camellias in the background.

These photos are one of the few visual sources of Ina's work. They indicate that, as a designer, she had the capacity to work existing, mature plantings into her design in a coherent way.

At the end of 1914, an exciting project presented itself to Ina when she was invited by Leslie Wade, executive officer and secretary of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Trust,<sup>52</sup> to work with Walter Burley Griffin on the plantation plans for the Central Plaza of the new town of Leeton in New South Wales. The correspondence between Ina and Wade shows that he sought clarification as to whether she was a professional or just someone interested in landscapes.<sup>53</sup> She replied firmly that she did charge fees and that she had put a considerable time and effort into obtaining her diploma from the Royal School of Horticulture, Burnley. It seems, however, that this project did not eventuate as Wade died in early 1915 and, with him, Ina's opportunity to work with Griffin.

The early war years were busy ones for Ina as she became involved in the Women's Horticultural Association of Victoria. Based at Burnley and formed around 1914, the association had the inaccurate reputation, in some quarters, of being a finishing school for ladies due to the large number of female members.<sup>54</sup> In reality, the association was formed to give support and promote the work of women in the industry. Lady Margaret Stanley (wife of Sir Arthur Stanley, governor of Victoria), Ina and Margaret Tuckett<sup>55</sup> were the patronesses.<sup>56</sup> The committee included Ellis Rowan (née Ryan, Australian botanical illustrator), Alice Murray (the Victorian premier's wife), and graduates Olive Mellor, Emily Gibson and Edna Walling.<sup>57</sup> It met quarterly and invited guest speakers, such as Marion Mahony Griffin who spoke on 'Community planning and planting' in March 1918.<sup>58</sup> The association's activities were regularly reported in the press<sup>59</sup> until it was wound up in the 1920s.

The last of Ina's major garden projects involved her work as a leader of the Women's Rural Industries Co-operative farm in Mordialloc. The scheme arose from concerns raised by the Women's Political Association about the rising number of unemployed women. The scheme offered an opportunity and venue to train women who were interested in working on the land.<sup>60</sup> The managing director of the scheme, Cecelia Annie John, was an accomplished singer, feminist and pacifist, and poultry expert, with three years' experience raising poultry in the Dandenongs.<sup>61</sup> Ina was involved as the 'trained and certified flower grower and fruit expert'. There are differing reports in the

newspapers of the day concerning whether John and Ina entered into an agreement to purchase or rent a cottage and the land around it through the Closer Settlement Scheme Board.<sup>62</sup> The Closer Settlement Scheme was a Victorian Government initiative that arose after the economic depression of the 1890s to address demand for agricultural land through the provision of smaller land holdings. Most of the good farming land in the state had been acquired by squatters or free selectors in the early colonial days and, as a result, in 1904, the state government decided to buy back land from large estates and break it into smaller lots to be sold to small land holders.

The farm was located between Lower Dandenong Road (north), Governor Road (south), Boundary Road (west) and Braeside Park (east). The site was west of the present Woodlands Golf Course in White Street, Mordialloc.<sup>63</sup> It was positioned nearby to Mordialloc railway station, enabling ease of access, and was either 5.6 or 9.3 (newspaper reports vary) hectares in size.<sup>64</sup>

The first meetings of the Women's Rural Industries Co-operative were held in February and March 1915 at the Melbourne Town Hall and chaired by Mayoress Lady Mary Hennessy. Vida Goldstein, Cecilia John, Bertha Merfield and Mary Eliza Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Ina were the conveners. Goldstein proposed that they form a women's rural industries company with John Higgins, Ina's brother, as their accountant.<sup>65</sup> There were six women trainees (no men) who did not pay fees and who, in return for their work, would receive training and accommodation plus pocket money, so that they did not have to wait on the first sales of their produce to receive an income.<sup>66</sup> *Table Talk* reported in April 1915 that the co-operative required £300 to begin with and then needed to raise between £700 and £1000 for the first year's upkeep. Funds were to be raised through the purchase of shares in the co-operative at £1 each. Men were allowed to purchase shares but had no other involvement in the project.<sup>67</sup>

According to contemporary newspaper reports, the scheme had the support of Edward Pescott, the then principal of the Burnley School of Horticulture. Pescott considered that the co-operative's trainees could start by growing flowers for decoration, seedlings and bulbs, as well as small fruit plants like strawberries, cape gooseberries and raspberries to make jam, which they could sell. As they became more experienced they could earn money by giving garden advice. There was a strong belief that the farm could not fail as it was close to the markets of Melbourne, making it easy to sell the produce.<sup>68</sup>

The farm, however, failed to flourish. The main reason for its lack of success was the outbreak of World War I, which shifted John's and Goldstein's focus away from the farm and to the campaigns against conscription. In 1917, John

was active in Goldstein's campaign to be elected to the Federal Parliament<sup>69</sup> and, in late 1918, both women were invited to represent Australia at the Women's Peace Conference in Geneva.<sup>70</sup> Resources were naturally directed to the war effort and the state government was slow to act on their promises of infrastructure in support of the scheme, such as sealed roads and equipment.<sup>71</sup>

Ina, also, was possibly unable able to spend as much time at the farm as she would have liked.<sup>72</sup> As an unmarried daughter, it was her role to nurse her ailing mother, Anne, who died in 1917.

By 1934, Higgins was 74 and the last project she was involved with was Francis Fraser and Nettie Palmer's *Centenary Gift Book*. Fraser's idea was to pay tribute to the pioneering women of Victoria by collecting stories of the women from all walks of life who helped to make the state great. With the Women's Centenary Council, Fraser convened a committee to compile the material.<sup>73</sup> Ina supported the appointment of her niece, Nettie Palmer, as co-editor.<sup>74</sup> Proceeds from the book's sale went towards funding the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden in Melbourne city's Kings Domain Gardens.

The collection's stories and poems include accounts of day-to-day activities in the professions of nursing, music, education and horticulture. Ina's contribution, 'Women and horticulture' recounts struggles women endured in gaining social acceptance of their work outside the home and reminds the readership of the contribution that her generation made to 'awaking' and expanding women's interests in professions including horticulture.<sup>75</sup>

Ina Higgins was a lifelong advocate of horticulture as a suitable career for women. Her diary of 1933 shows that she maintained contact with the Burnley School of Horticulture through the Past Students Association, and with the Royal Talbot Epileptic Colony. As a professional horticulturalist, she worked on substantial projects that required confidence, an understanding of design principles and a good knowledge of plant species.

Over time, gardens are altered and, without original plans and records, it is difficult to ascertain when, how and by whom certain designs were implemented. The record of Ina's activities in promoting professional development of women in the field of horticulture is, however, a notable testament to her contribution to women's advancement.

Higgins lived in the family home, Killenna, at 15 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern, for most of her life. She died in 1948 age 88. Deborah Jordan describes her as serious, spiritual, self-sacrificing, idealistic and sweetly spoken – possessing an Irish accent – and, according to Nettie Palmer, she 'had bad taste in hats'.<sup>76</sup> Ina deserves to be remembered for paving the way for women to initially participate and later excel in horticulture and garden design in Victoria.