In 1899, 72 women enrolled at the Burnley School of Horticulture, Melbourne to study part-time a ‘Certificate of Competency in Horticulture’. This was a ground-breaking moment for women wishing to work in horticulture, as Burnley was the only educational institution in Australia at the time providing horticultural instruction. Australia looked to Great Britain for direction and observed the English tradition in establishing agricultural and horticultural colleges to address rising unemployment and new advances in technology brought about by the Industrial Revolution. It caused a change in working patterns in the Western World and created a demand for education and training. Education brought knowledge and women began to question the established belief that their place was in the home. A forward-thinking Victorian colonial government passed the Agricultural Colleges Act in 1891 that established an institution to train young men in horticulture.

The 1880s and 1890s were a turbulent time in Melbourne and one well-educated middle class Irish immigrant, Ina Higgins became involved in the suffragist movement, demanding the right to vote. The suffragists were also feminists and demanded better education, health care and equal pay for equal work for women. Higgins, interested in gardening, lobbied the Principal of Burnley, Charles Bogue Luffman, to allow women students and he agreed. Luffman, well aware of the feminist movement in England and the opening of many women’s only horticultural colleges, agreed and thus began the formal education of women in horticulture in Melbourne. This decision challenged society’s perception of women as delicate “flowers”; not capable of manual labour. It also challenged the male-only apprenticeship system creating competition between the not so well-educated apprentices and scientifically-trained women, who had studied the sciences of soil, chemistry and botany. These women excelled creating opportunities for the next generation and subsequent ones succeeding in making a sustainable career.

Keywords — Horticulture; Education; Burnley College; Ina Higgins

INTRODUCTION

An undercurrent in re-making cities and societies is the role of education as an instrument of change and inspiration. In
In a context, in Melbourne, the Burnley School of Horticulture under Principal Charles Bogue Luffman was instrumental in advancing horticultural education in Victoria and following the English tradition of transforming horticulture into a science-based profession.

While horticultural education was commonplace in the UK and parts of Australia at the time, it was his commitment to pioneer women enrolments into horticultural education that led the next generation of individuals like Edna Walling and Olive Mellor being elevated as key horticultural advocates and pioneers in Melbourne. Luffman’s policy to accept women, that elevated women’s standing in suffragette circles in Melbourne, was embraced by Frances Georgina Watts Higgins (always known as Ina) (1860-1948). Burnley, opened in 1891, sought to initially teach males horticulture. Burnley’s 1891 Prospectus stated that ladies were included to attend the free lectures if they wished. It was not until 1898, that Higgins with the help of well-known suffragist Vida Goldstein, lobbied Luffman to allow females as students. Higgins was a tireless supporter of women gardeners, always advocating horticulture as a suitable career for young and older women.

Ina Higgins left Ireland when she was 10 years old, arriving in Victoria as Melbourne was maturing into a wealthy and prosperous city. Her siblings all benefitted from the move to Melbourne and took advantage of the tertiary education available to them at The University of Melbourne, especially Henry Bourne Higgins her oldest brother. Colonial liberalism and socialism were reshaping the political scene of Australia and moulding it into a different country from England and Ireland. It is not known what age Higgins became interested in social and political issues but as a teenager at the age of 15 Higgins was sent to the new Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC). PLC was not established as finishing school, but was one of the first private schools where girls received a serious education, similar to the equivalent boy’s schools. Higgins sat her matriculation exams at The University of Melbourne 1878 and wanted to become an artist after she left school, but she did not pursue this dream. One could speculate why: family interference, lack of her own confidence or realisation that ladies were included to attend the free lectures if they wished. It was not until 1898, that Higgins with the help of well-known suffragist Vida Goldstein, lobbied Luffman to allow females as students. Higgins was a tireless supporter of women gardeners, always advocating horticulture as a suitable career for young and older women.

Ina Higgins arrived in Melbourne from Ireland with her family in February, 1870; her family believed that education was their mode out of gentile poverty. The Higgins were no ordinary family. They had been brought up with a strong Wesleyan faith of helping others either by leading them out of their slovenly ways (being poor was seen as one’s own fault) or by sacrificing oneself and working tirelessly to improve living standards of the working poor.

Ina Higgins and her older brother Henry (a member of the colonial and Federal Parliaments, Federal High Court judge and Industrial Arbitrator and Conciator) both believed strongly in using the democratic process to bring about change. Ina Higgins has been described as socialist feminist, more radical than her brother Henry, and one who devoted her life to improving the lives of women by joining the suffragist movement.

Ina Higgins Background

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Women’s Rights and Employment Opportunities

The women’s right’s movement was not a 20th century phenomena or even 19th century one but has its roots as far back as 1792 with the first feminist philosophical work authored by English woman Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in her book A Vindication of the Rights of Woman inspired by the changes to society she had witnessed with the French Revolution (1789-1799). Wollstonecraft pointed out how restrictive women’s lives were. Emily Davies (1830-1921), also an English feminist and suffragist, bluntly articulated in her book The Higher Education of Women (1866) that motherhood was not what every woman wanted and that the many illness women suffered were due to unfulfilling and dull lives. It is highly likely Higgins read both books as there is a very subtle reference to them in her article ‘Women and Horticulture’ in the Victorian 1934 Centenary Gift Book.

The suffragists believed that the way to improve women’s lives was through the democratic processes of the Westminster parliamentary system. But they did not have the vote and so fought valiantly over the next two centuries until 1928 when the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in England was finally passed allowing all women over the age of 21 the vote. Australian women were first granted the vote in South Australia in 1894 and the last were in Victoria in 1908. Federally, the Commonwealth of Australia granted women this basic human right of suffrage in 1903 after the colonies Federated in 1901.
British Horticulture and its Influence

Times were changing and women all over the Western world at the turn of the century were demanding better education. England in particular was setting the scene in women’s horticultural education advancement, opening Swanley Horticultural College in Kent in 1889 and admitting women in 1891. In 1902, the Directors of Swanley decided to close the college to male students and only accept women. Swanley also set another precedent, structuring their syllabus to include science-based subjects thus raising the quality of graduates it was producing, much to the dismay of the proponents of the traditional apprenticeship system in England.

Horticulture was one of these traditional male bastions in both England and Australia. Traditionally, in the United Kingdom male gardeners went through an apprenticeship system residing at the grand homes of the English upper class or institutions such Kew Gardens, Chelsea Physic Gardens or the Gardeners’ Improvement Societies nurseries. These apprentices had the opportunity to rise through the ranks if their talent and capabilities were noticed by their employers. 1 But this system was not available to young females. The only horticultural work available to women was weeding and they were known as ‘weeding women’. 2 There was no prospects of promotion or horticultural education until 1891 when Swanley Horticultural College opened and admitted women students. Opitz (2013) claims that horticulture became available to females in England for two reasons: 1) the worsening effect of the 1880s Agricultural Depression, and 2) the availability of new educational opportunities for unemployed single women. As a consequence, between 1889 and 1940 large numbers of unemployed single middle and upper-class women.

As a response, the British government tried to lessen the effects of the Depression by sponsoring horticultural education and research for both males and females. Feminist leaders at the time were able to link the two issues and advocate that these educational opportunities be opened up to unemployed single women. 7 As a consequence, between 1889 and 1940 there was a boom in the development of women’s horticultural colleges (most privately owned) across Britain with at least 19 opening.

In England, women’s horticultural colleges at the turn of the century were only open to middle and upper-class ladies 8 and was thought by the English press that horticulture was a respectable career that would not damage a woman’s social status as gentleman’s. Australia however, was much more utilitarian and at Burnley any woman could apply as long as she was over the age of 16 and could pay the fee of £1.00 per annum for the part-time course. As there are only very scant records of the early days there are no statistics showing the students demographics.

Victoria looked to England for developing its agricultural and horticultural education systems. Already parts of this system had been transposed into Australia with the Victorian colonial government opening the Dookie Agriculture College near Shepparton in 1886 and the Longerenong Agricultural College near Horsham in 1889. It was not until Alfred Deakin (Acting Colonial Minister of Agriculture at the time) decided to establish the first ‘School of Horticulture on the site of Royal Horticultural Society of Victoria (RHSV) property at Burnley’ 9 that horticulture became a serious educational pursuit in for males and women in Colonial Victoria. There were articles appearing in the British and Australia newspapers as early as 1873, discussing the issue of women gardeners. One of the very early headlines ran ‘Horticulture as a Profession for Young Ladies’ in the South Australian Register. 10

It appears that Higgins had decided that marriage, the endless drudgery of housework and having large numbers of children was not for her. Instead, like many of her generation of the 1890s—1920s, such as Vida Goldstein (suffragists and social reformer (1869-1949)), Catherine Helen Spence (writer, preacher and feminist (1825-1910)) and Annette Bear-Crawford (suffragist (1853-1899)) wanted a choice to choose either family or career or both. In Victorian Melbourne in the 1880s-1890s, middle and upper-class women led very restrictive lives, there were very few employment opportunities outside the home; instead there were endless rounds of tea parties and other vacuous social engagements but no sporting clubs to join 11, no challenging employment opportunities and certainly no tertiary education until the Victorian Parliament passed The University Act 1881 which allowed women to attend lectures. 12

Higgins’ younger sister Anna was amongst the inaugural cohort of women to be able to take advantage of this change, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1894. 14 For working class women, however, there was even less choice because many had to work to support their families in sweat shop-like conditions in factories and were paid much less than men for doing the same hours and tasks.

Perhaps the newspaper articles inspired the mind of one unmarried 38-year-old suffragist who loved gardening, Isla Higgins. It was not until Higgins was in her late 30s, after going to several public lectures on pruning roses that she decided she wanted know more about gardening and receive proper training. 15 While she was able to attend free public lectures, Higgins was not able to enrol to study and gain the Horticulture Certificate of Competency because the course was only open to males. When Burnley finally admitted women in 1899, there were numerous articles published in The Argus, The Age, The Leader and The Australasian that vehemently debated the issue. Several detractors stated that “No woman, certainly no lady, is fit to cultivate fruit trees and pumpkins or even accomplish the digging.” 16 but overall the media coverage was positive.

Horticultural Education in Australia

Traditionally, horticulture is not thought of as a controversial profession, challenging society’s norms, causing change and resulting in the reshaping of the workforce of society. But at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, horticulture quietly changed many women’s lives. Changes in England, swept over the Indian Ocean arriving at Australia’s shores about the same time as the suffragettes were ramping up their demands for the vote. Surprisingly, the two were connected in both England and Australia, with one unassuming female student being largely responsible for the quiet revolution in offering horticultural education to women students at the Burnley School of Horticulture in 1899 in Melbourne.

The Victorian colonial government chose Charles Bogue Luffman as Burnley’s first principal. Luffman was a progressive and passionate about horticultural education and one who harboured a belief in educating women. He argued that “Horticulture—although not generally so regarded—is a science” 17 and despite his own self-taught and apprenticeship education pursued the English trend of transforming horticultural education into a science-based profession.

With the help of Luffman’s wife, Lauretta Caroline Maria Luffman née Lane, a well-known English suffragist, writer and women’s activist (1846-1929), Higgins lobbied Luffman in 1898 to enrol into the School to allow women students. With the permission of the Minister for Agriculture (Mr. Taverner, later Sir William Taverner), MLA for Donald and Swan Hill). Luffman reputedly said to Higgins, that if she could find six students, the classes could go ahead. Higgins however found 72 students 18 the majority of whom arrived to enrol on their first day on their ‘safety bicycles’, with net string bags. Palmer interestingly notes they arrived without chaperones. 19 Thus commenced the education of women at Burnley. A photograph of the students in the 1899 class was published in as depicted in Figure 2.

The key English colleges that appears to have most influenced formative horticultural education in Australia were: Swanley Horticultural College in Kent (opened 1889) that offered a scientific-based syllabus that moved to admitting women in1891 and the Studley Horticultural & Agricultural College for Women moving to Warwick family castle in Warwickshire in 1903. 20 Luffman course was analogous to the course structure and syllabus of Swanley and Studley. As part of the training, Luffman set aside a paddock where women could learn the practical side of horticulture, growing strawberries, citrus, vegetables and table grapes. Then there was class time concentrating on science subjects including soils, botany, chemistry and vegetable pathology. Luffman’s philosophy was to teach the basics to the students, so they could run their own small holdings growing fruit and vegetables, or to work in plant nurseries, the cut flower industry or to do conservatory work.21

As Luffman stated in his 1902 report for the Agricultural Journal of Victoria, ‘horticulture is one of the most natural
outdoor occupations for women working in areas of design, managing garden projects, growing grapes, lemon, bush fruits and salad vegetables. Luffman was not concerned about their class in society but about their ordinary healthy and strength.

The Contribution and Influence of Ina Higgins

The inner suburbs of Melbourne like Collingwood and Richmond where many polluting factories were notoriously Higgins was aware how bad the working conditions were in factories as she was involved in 1896 in the Richmond Club for Working Girls which helped educated young factory girls to improve themselves and if possible find better jobs. Higgins felt horticulture was a desirable career for all women and believed that:

... among the numerous advantages of this calling, we claim that it is a rational, health-giving, useful occupation, and that it has a beneficial effect on character and metal development, as well as on physique, for it calls for the exercise of self-control, forethought, observation, initiative, close application, orderliness, sincerity – in fact of all the virtues under the sun.

and pro-actively promoted horticulture as a suitable career for young and older women through the act of writing several articles published in the newspapers of the day, being involved in the Women’s Horticulturists Association of Victoria (WHAV) (1914-1920s) and serving as the Horticultural Instructress for the socialist Women’s Rural Industries Co. Ltd project being a Women’s Training Farm in Mordialloc from 1915-1919. Higgins retrospectively, summarised her contributions in the 1934 Centenary Gift Book in an article entitled ‘Women and Horticulture’ where she wrote:

None of them at the beginning found the work very remunerative, but it promoted health and the formation of character, calling into play such qualities as patience, endurance, application, foresight and vision.

Higgins worked intermittently on various horticultural projects and consultancies until the end of the First World War. Today, society does not realise how unusual and difficult it was for middle and upper class women to leave the sanctity of the home, go to work and accept money for the exchange of labour. But this is just what Higgins did, commencing with family and friend’s gardens in terms of their designs, layout out, planting and maintenance. This step into the commercial world (Higgins charged for her professional services) is the beginning of our cities being reshaped by women designer and jobbing gardeners. Luffman (1902) notes that women were beginning to find employment: 2 students were working in design and garden maintenance, one student managing a small mixed estate, one has become a garden writer and another student has laid out and managed a new orchard. Disappointingly he did not identify who they were or where they worked so their contribution to changing our cities has been lost. The next generation of women graduates from 1911 onwards were Olive Mellor, Emily Gibson and Edna Walling and they went onto established successful careers, venturing into areas of designing gardens for the new suburban home owner, or designing gardens for business or for local councils or becoming horticultural journalists. Their horticultural training opportunity existed because Higgins in 1898 was brave enough to challenge the male decision makers such as the Minister of Agriculture Mr. Taverner MLA and have the admissions barriers removed.

Of Higgins garden design activities, the information is scant. But we do know that she:

• redesigned her brother Henry’s seaside holiday house ‘Heronwood’ at Dromana (now the Digger’s Club venue),
• designed her second brother John’s garden ‘Ardmouir’ in Kew before the house was built,
• designed a garden for a relative of John’s wife Katie,
• designed the garden of Hector MacDonald’s home at 146 Toorak Road West, South Yarra and
• designed an unidentified garden at Mount Martha.

In addition to these domestic projects, Higgins was professionally engaged to:

• design the gardens at the Talbot Epileptic Colony (now Monash University’s Clayton Campus),
• the garden of ‘Hethersett’ in Burwood (now the Presbyterian Ladies College),
• was contractually invited to work with Walter Burley Griffin on the planting plans for the Leeton and Griffith new towns, and
• was appointed the Horticultural Instructress for the Women’s Rural Industries Company Limited farm in Mordialloc to train unemployed women in horticulture.

The latter socialist project was so unusual for the time that it was reported widely in local and interstate newspapers. Even though the farm failed, Higgins continued educating young women by being guest demonstrator in the mid 1920’s at Dookie Agricultural College. Of all her design projects, there is only a few plants extant at ‘Heronwood’ and PLC. Overall, Higgins worked for approximately 20 years, retiring to become the senior Higgins family historian.

Challenges in Horticultural Education Establishment at Burnley

There were certainly many challenges to accepting women as trained professional horticulturists at Burnley and sustaining this opportunity. For reasons unclear, after Luffman resigned as Principal in 1908 and between 1909 and 1911, there was a change in Victorian state government policy that resulted in women not being permitted to enrol as students. An impassioned plea by ‘Pomona’ (Pritchard) published in 1910, in The Herald and Weekly Times, brought this issue to public attention arguing that the government needed to remove its embargo upon female students enrolling at Burnley, pointing out that “In England, gardening is recognised as specially women’s work” and “we are behind the times”.

There is no evidence to suggest that Higgins lobbied the new principal Edward Edgar Pescott, (1872-1954) who was appointed in 1909, but it would not be surprising if she did. Perhaps this impassioned plea, had some effect as The Leader announced in November 1910, that the Burnley Gardens were being put to a new use. Pescott had arranged with the state...
Department of Education that trainee teachers (male and female) would receive training in horticulture thus enabling it to be taught in primary schools. Further, the gossip newspaper *Table Talk* announced in September 1911, a restructure at Burnley enabling the admission of women and that women students would be re-admitted, starting in October. This initiative saved Burnley from closure as male student numbers had dropped in 1911 to 5 full-time students and 2 part-time students. By December 1911, The Leader reported that there were 31 women students enrolled.

This 1911 change of policy enabled the next generation of very talented women to enrol and become Australia’s first women legends in garden design. Olive Mellor née Holttum enrolled in 1911, Emily Gibson née Grassick enrolled in 1914 and Edna Walling enrolled in 1916. Each practitioner went onto pioneer new avenues for women to earn a sustainable living. Mellor was the first female Horticultural Instructress employed at Burnley and one of Australia’s earliest garden journalists along with Gibson and Walling. All three wrote for magazines and papers with Mellor and Walling publishing many gardening books between them. Gibson went onto serve an apprenticeship with Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony in their Melbourne Office. Later she negotiated an articulation route for Burnley graduates to study at Kings College, Durham University, as there was no post-graduate studies in horticulture available in Australia.

Higgins did not venture into garden journalism. But she did write an influential article in 1913 promoting horticulture as a suitable career for women. This article created great interest at the National Congress of Women’s annual conference and was read by Higgins’ niece Nettie Palmer. The theme of the conference was ‘Different phases of Women’s work’ and *The Argus* reported on the 4th February, 1914, that her paper entitled ‘Horticulture for Women’ was to be read at the International Council of Women Quinennial Meeting in Rome. It would have been a very prestigious achievement, but unfortunately there are no records of it in the Proceedings of the International Council of Women Quinennial Meeting (1914), but then there were no other women’s papers mentioned either. In this paper Higgins called for the employment of women and outlined the horticultural jobs that employers thought women were ideally suited for including propagation because of their nimble fingers and nurturing natures, raising and managing seedlings, grafting, budding and pruning and for the better educated students, landscape design. This paper created strong interest because it was published in full in *The Argus* and *The Leader* newspapers and there were also calls for it to be read at the National Council of Women’s (Tasmanian Division) Hobart meeting.

Higgins continued her advocacy improving women’s employment opportunities, through her involvement in the Women’s Horticulturists Association of Victoria (WHAV) and by 1917 was one of its patrons. The aims of the WHAV were to support women graduates, giving them a place to network and to educate the general public that lady gardeners could become jobbing gardeners. To create a supportive environment Higgins and her fellow compatriots established the WHVA which gave its members a place to meet other women with horticultural interests to discuss and hear what was the latest trend in horticulture.

Higgins concluded her advocacy improving women’s employment opportunities, through her involvement in the Women’s Horticulturists Association of Victoria (WHAV) and by 1917 was one of its patrons. The aims of the WHAV were to support women graduates, giving them a place to network and to educate the general public that lady gardeners could become jobbing gardeners. To create a supportive environment Higgins and her fellow compatriots established the WHVA which gave its members a place to meet other women with horticultural interests to discuss and hear what was the latest trend in horticulture.

Higgins (1934) concluded retrospectively in 1934 that by 1923–1924, the public had generally accepted women as knowledgeable professional gardeners.

Higgins proved all the naysayers were proved wrong and that women could still be lady like and grow pumpkins, dig and earn a successful living. Thanks to her passion for horticulture she opened up opportunities for a succession of generations and I am one of those female students who have benefitted from her fight for our right to be educated in a profession of our choice.

### Socialists Experiments

Ina Higgins’ final project was the Mordialloc Women’s Farm where she put all her philosophies and theories into practice. During the First World War, there was a high number of unemployed women and in 1915 Higgins together with the Women’s Peace Army (including Vida Goldstein, Bertha Merfield, Mary Eliza Fullarton, Mabel Singleton and Adela Pankhurst and farm manager Cecilia John,) in 1915 established the Women’s Rural Industries Co. Ltd, in Mordialloc. It was reported in the *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill) that it was modelled on the Studley Horticultural & Agricultural College for Women in Warwickshire.

The Farm’s aim was to teach unemployed women horticultural and agricultural skills, which would enable them to get employment. In a sense, it was a socialist experiment where six unemployed girls would live on the farm, be paid pocket money and the Co-Op would sell the produce at the Melbourne markets. At the Farm, students learnt dairy work, market gardening, poultry-farming, bee keeping, fruit growing etc. Higgins was the ‘Horticultural Instructress’ for the Farm. The project had the backing of the principal of Burnley, Pescott, who stated that it could not fail, but it did fail and the reason(s) have been lost to time. The project abruptly disappeared from the pages of newspapers, slipped out of people’s memory and was forgotten. The reasons for its failure are most likely that the public were pre-occupied by the disastrous death toll and destruction of the War, that resources were scarce and that John and Goldstein were distracted by other commitments. With both these women distracted, the Women’s Movement collapsed, exhausted and disheartened after the War.

### Legacy

It is now over 100 years since Higgins was involved in the suffragists, women’s movement and horticultural education equality. Higgins’ contribution was significant but she has been overshadowed by more prominent front leaders of the women’s movement, (she was modest and unassuming), the passage of time, lack of remanent gardens and the second group of female horticultural students whose work was documented by the new-lifestyle type of garden magazines.

Ina Higgins social legacy was she helped women gain the right to vote and worked hard to improve women’s right to education, become financially independent and remove many of the socially discriminating laws regarding divorce and family issues. She was an example to others that motherhood was not the only option for a fulfilling life by becoming involved with many community organisations where she was honorary secretary or treasurer.

Her horticultural legacy is impressive. She worked to get the rules of student admissions to Burnley changed which prevented women from being accepted into the Certificate of Competency of Horticulture. This opened up new educational opportunities for women to become professional garden designers, horticultural journalists or create their business and become jobbing gardeners. To create a supportive environment Higgins and her fellow compatriots established the WHVA which gave its members a place to meet other women with horticultural interests to discuss and hear what was the latest trend in horticulture.

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