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Higgins, Frances Georgina Watts (Ina)

(1860 - 1948)

Born	18600101, Fermoy County Cork Ireland
Died	19481231, MalvernMalvern Victoria Australia
Occupation	Feminist, Landscape gardener, Suffragist, Women's rights activist

Summary

Ina Higgins was amongst the first wave of feminists and one of the first professional landscape gardeners in Australia. It is due to her lobbying that women were admitted to the Burnley School of Horticulture in 1899. Later graduates such as Olive Mellor, Edna Walling and Emily Gibson were able to follow her footsteps because she paved the way. Higgins became involved in the garden at the Royal Talbot Epileptic Colony, Clayton (now Monash University), Heronswood at Dromana and she was invited by the New South Wales Murrumbidgee Irrigation Trust to assist on the planting plans of the New South Wales towns Leeton and Griffin, designed by Walter Burley Griffin. One of her most ambitious projects was with her friends Vida Goldstein and Cecilia Anne John in establishing the Rural Women's Industries Co-operative women's farm in Mordialloc. In 1891 she signed the Women's Suffrage Petition and in 1894 became honorary secretary of the United Council for Woman Suffrage. She was a member of the Women's Political Association and when World War One broke out she became a member of the Women's Peace Army. In 1934 The Centenary Gift Book celebrated the contribution that pioneer women made to settling Victoria; Higgins contributed an article promoting horticulture as a career for women.

Details

Always known as Ina, Frances Georgina Watts Higgins was born in Fermoy, County Cork in Ireland and of all her brothers and sister, she was the one who retained her Gaelic accent. Her family were Irish Protestant and immigrated to Australia in 1870 on the cargo ship Eurynome with her mother Anne, who was the decision maker of the family, her four brothers Henry Bourne (politician, judge), George (Civil engineer), Samuel Ormsby (Doctor) plus her younger sister Anna Maria. Anne decided to leave Ireland because her oldest son James Henry died of consumption and Henry's health was fragile. Just before they arrived in Melbourne Charlie, aged 6, died and was buried at sea. Her father Reverend John Higgins, a Wesleyan Preacher and her other brother John came out later that year. Reverend Higgins found it difficult at first to find work as a minister but eventually became a home missionary in Australia. Higgins' mother Anne was determined her family would succeed and saw education as a way forward for the boys as well as the girls.

Higgins and her sister Anna were foundation students at Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC) in Albert Street, East Melbourne enrolling in 1875, along with Vida Goldstein, the future suffragist leader. She sat her matriculation exam in 1878 at Melbourne University and received a satisfactory Pass. Except for herself and her brother John (an accountant), all Higgins' siblings went on to further studies at Melbourne University. Higgins had an interest in art, especially in colour and design, and was thinking about being an artist once she left school. Art – painting and drawing – had always been valued as a part of education at PLC. But it seems that wasn't meant to be because for a while she worked as a governess in New South Wales.

The 1890s were a very pro-active time for Higgins as by 1891 she had returned to Melbourne and signed the Women's Suffragist Petition, listing her address as Killenna, Malvern. In 1894 she became the founding honorary secretary of United Council of Woman Suffrage (Melbourne) and by 1900 was sitting on the executive committee. Around the same time, 1896, she became involved in the Richmond Club for Working Girls as the honorary secretary. Its aim was to provide somewhere safe at lunchtime where the factory girls could go to eat their lunch and learn new skills such as sewing, cooking or more about personal hygiene. In the evenings they could attend lectures or play games, dance or sing together. But by 1899 she decided to study horticulture.

Burnley was established in 1891 and was the first horticultural school in Australia. With the help of Mrs. Laura Luffman (a suffragist and wife of the first principal Charles Bogue Luffman (1897-1908)) Higgins convinced him to allow women students. But the Board of Horticulture were horrified and all through Luffman's tenure there was tension regarding the issue of women students. It was such an amazing phenomenon educating women that newspapers such as the Australasian published an extensive article on the women at Burnley on the 18 February 1899, including pictures. On 20 December 1900 the women's gossip magazine Table Talk (page 5) wrote a piece outlining that Higgins from Malvern received highest marks, therefore first place in the school. It then goes on to point out that the Burnley Director (Mr Luffman) was dealing with 'an incompetent board who oppose all new ideas of progress' and as Luffman reported later that year, September 1900, to the Royal Commission on Technical Education, 'I do not think horticulture is an affair of sex.'

The philosophy of Luffman was to teach the women the basics of horticulture and use this knowledge to establish their own small business/farms. They learnt garden making and management, bush-fruit, lemon, table grape and vegetable culture, plus poultry and bee management. This is very similar to the curriculum of the Studley Horticultural and Agricultural College, established in 1903 in Studley Castle, Warwickshire, England, by Lady Daisy Warwick (who had become interested in socialism) to educate middle class ladies in horticulture and agriculture.

Higgins' list of known designs is impressive. In 1903 her brother Henry Bourne Higgins purchased the Goth-revival designed house Heronswood by Edward La Trobe Bateman in Dromana. In the papers of Nettie Palmer (nee Higgins, Ina's niece) Palmer mentions that Higgins renovated the garden 'designing a garden that wound off into the bush' and that Higgins sent Henry a package of native plants for his birthday. Around 1906-1907 she had met Lady Margaret Talbot, the wife of Victoria's Governor, Sir Reginald Talbot and Higgins became involved in the design of the gardens, drives, paths and naming of the various trees and shrubs at the Royal Talbot Epileptic Colony, Clayton. At the same time she became the secretary to the extraordinary Women's Work Exhibition held at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings in 1907. There were over 16,000 exhibits and attracted over 250,000 people. Exhibitors came from all corners of the Empire as well as Mexico, Japan and Russia. It showcased the type of work women could do as well as new avenues of employment for women such as nursing. It even contained a horticultural section. After the exhibition was over Higgins returned to England for a well earned rest with the Talbots.

Higgins designed gardens for her family and friends. Around 1911 Higgins was employed to re-design the garden of the property Hethersett, Burwood, which was being renovated and was purchased in 1938 by PLC, as they had outgrown their East Melbourne site. From the photos it can be seen that it is a typical Federation garden. With a central driveway, aligned with strips of lawn following the garden beds the length of the driveway it ended with a circular bed of lawn at the front door.

How Higgins met Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin isn't known, but Professor James Weirick of the University of New South Wales, believes it could have been through Hyde Champion, Vida Goldstein's brother-in-law. Champion had been introduced to Griffin via a letter from Miles Franklin who socialised with the Griffins in Chicago. Griffin first came out to Australia in September 1913 and met Mr Leslie Wade, Executive Officer of the NSW Murrumbidgee Irrigation Trust. Soon after, Griffin began working on the towns Leeton and Griffith and it is possible that he recommended Higgins to Mr Wade. As this was such an unusual event to appoint a woman, it was reported as far away as Perth in the paper The West Australian.

Over time, Higgins became good friends with Marion and eventually part of her inner circle of close friends. In 1918, Marion was invited by the Women's Horticultural Association of Victoria to give a lecture of which Lady Stanley, Mrs Arthur Tuckett and Higgins were the patronesses.

Her biggest project and the one closest to the principles she learnt at Burnley regarding learning how to grow fruit and vegetables, inspired by Warwick Farm, was the establishment of the Women's Rural Industries Co-operative farm in Mordialloc. It was part of the Closer Settlement Scheme, a Victorian Government incentive that arose after the 1890s depression had begun to ease and the demand for agricultural land increased. Unfortunately, most of the good farming land had been acquired by squatters or free selectors. So in 1904, the State government decided in to buy back land from the large estates and break it up into smaller lots, offering to other people. The farm was 14 acres (5.5 hectares) and was between Lower Dandenong Road (North), Governor Road (South) and Boundary Road (West); there was no east boundary. The site was west of Woodlands Golf Course in White Street. Today this area is light industry.

There was great fan-fare in the newsprint media of the time with articles in the metropolitan and local papers such as Western Mail (Perth), The Sydney Morning Herald and The Preston Leader (Melbourne) reporting her involvement. Several meetings were held in February and March 1915 in the meeting rooms of the Melbourne Town Hall, where women such as the Lady Mayoress (Chair), Vida Goldstein, Adela Pankhurst, Cecilia Ann John, Bertha Merfield, and Mary Eliza Fullarton met to formulate their ideas. They decided to start a co-operative where women and girls who weren't interested in being maids or working in factories and wanted to work in the rural industries could learn skills that would help them get a job. According to the gossip journal Table Talk (8 April 1915) the co-op required £300 to begin with and then needed to raise between £700 and £1000 for the first years' upkeep. To raise this cash it was set up as a Co-operative where people could buy shares at a £1.00 each. Some notable purchasers of shares were Lady Allen, Lady Creswell and Dr Lilian Alexander.

The scheme had the support of Mr Pescott the Principal of the Burnley School of Horticulture. He felt they 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 then could sell. As they become more experienced they could go out and earn money by giving garden advice.

Only women would be allowed to work on the farm and the idea was to start with six women. Cecilia John taught the women about poultry and Higgins instructed them on horticultural issues. There were no fees to pay and the trainees received a home and some pocket money. There was a strong belief that the farm couldn't fail as they were close to the markets of Melbourne making it easy to sell their produce. However it did fail and the reasons could have been many. The First World War had started, the state government reneged on the promise of some of the infrastructure, such as sealed roads, or providing enough equipment. Also, as the unmarried sister, it was Higgins' job to nurse her ailing mother Anne, who died in 1917 and she therefore wasn't able to spend as much time at the farm as she would have liked.

Higgins last project was writing an article entitled Women and Horticulture for The Centenary Gift Book (1934), which celebrated the first one hundred years of settlement in Victoria. It was a celebration of women's pioneering spirit and contribution. The idea for a book was Frances Fraser's, who was also a PLC student and later returned there as a teacher. The editors were Frances and Nettie Palmer, Ina Higgins' niece. Many well known women of the time contributed: Mary Grant Bruce, Anna T. Brennan, Henrietta C. Walker, Jeanie Gunn (Mrs Aeneas Gunn), Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Mary E. Fullerton and Edna Walling.

Higgins mixed, met and worked with some amazingly talented people many with forward ideas, who were feminists and had socialist leanings such as Vida Goldstein, Hyde Champion, Alice Henry, Adela Pankhurst, Cecilia Anne John, Walter and Marion Griffin, Henry George (friend of Henry Higgins) Mary Eliza Fullerton, Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Charles Bogue Luffman. Other well known people were Lady Talbot, Lady Stanley, Dr Springthorpe, Nettie Palmer, Frances Fraser, William Guilfoyle and Dame Nellie Melba a former PLC student.

What is amazing about Higgins is that she had the courage to stand up against the pressure to conform to the social norm of women not being able to vote, not having their own financial independence and having to stay home to look after the family. Her stance against this social oppression was at a time when women were not encouraged much passed sixth grade at school, let alone to go onto university or out to work with strangers and earn their own money.

She never married, living in the family home Killenna in Malvern until she died in 1948 and is buried in the St Kilda cemetery. Sometime after her friend Vida Goldstein became a Christian Scientist (1903-04), Higgins converted too. She was a quiet achiever, the person who worked behind the scenes, carrying out the secretarial duties and not attracting attention to herself. She strongly believed that the only way to end oppression of women was to end the economic and cultural sources of women being dependent on men. Her horticultural career allowed her to follow her interests as well as other women to follow in her footsteps. It is a great pity there are only fragments of the gardens she designed left. Arguably, if Higgins had been a man her legacy would be better known.

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Magazine

Patchwork [new series], Presbyterian Ladies' College, 1938

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

Papers of Alice Henry, 1873-1943

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