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Adelaide is known for its parklands, hill station gardens in the Hills, and the dry saline landscapes of its plains. The title of the 'driest city, in the driest State, in the driest country' is a phrase commonly applied as an answer to the perceived lack of a landscape design tradition in the city.

In the 1920s and 30s, while Melbourne and Sydney par­took in the writings and designs of Olive Melior, Edna Walling, and Paul Sorenson, often featured in The Builder and The Australian Home Beautiful, Adelaide perused the periodicals but retreated to the wisdom of Elsie Marion Cornish. Cornish's contribution to the city's public and private gardens between the mid 1910s to 1946 has been considerably overlooked.

THE CORNISH RESIDENCE

In March 1948 a young planning officer with the South Australian Housing Trust, Gavin Walkley, purchased from the estate of Bertha Law Downer a residence at 26 Palmer Place, North Adelaide. Downer had only acquired the Henry Stuckey and Edmund William Wright designed and altered house from the estate of Elsie Marion Cornish, described as a Landscape Gardener on the land title, on 3 March 1947. Both Stuckey and Wright were prominent Adelaide architects in the mid 1800s. Walkley was later appointed, in 1951, Head of the (Louis Laybourne Smith) School of Architecture at the School of Mines (later the South Australian Institute of Technology, now the University of South Australia), and rose to become the second National President of AILA amongst other professional positions.

In the backyard of the residence, at the time of Walkley's purchase, was a small plant nursery. Raised some 0.3 m by timber hoardings, in a mixture of medium to rich soils, were rows of plantings, both natives and exotics, but particularly succulents. The garden was semi-focllorn, but Walkley took an interest in two elderly grape vines and a young Grevillea robusta, which he subsequently nurtured, before demolishing the house and nursery in 1955 to enable the erection of a Robin Boyd designed residence. It was in the original house, with Walkley, that Boyd first stayed in Adelaide. At the time, Walkley was unaware that 26 Palmer Place was the former residence of Cornish. He was also unaware of her standing in the community.

Cornish was born in 1887 to Agnes Maria Cornish (b. 1843), apparently after the death of Agnes Cornish's husband Samuel (b. 1827) in October 1887, and was the youngest member of the family. Elsie Cornish resided at 26 Palmer Place from November 1888, following her mother's acquisition of the property for £750, until her death in 1946.

Cornish commenced her career as a professional gardener in about 1916 and gradually developed an interest in landscape gardening and design while acquiring a private group of clients. For example, she established a close friendship with Lady Gowrie, the state Governor's wife.
...then Lady Zara Hore-Ruthven) before the Gowries moved to the Governor-General's residence. 'Their interest in and love of gardening was always a close bond...'

Little is known of Elsie Cornish's projects because most of her plans and letters were disposed of by her executor, the Reverend Cornish, following her death, and she contributed little on gardening advice in the popular press. Two design and curatorial projects however remain. One project is the escarpment of the University of Adelaide's North Terrace campus and another is the Pioneer Women's Garden in King William Street adjacent to the Festival Centre. Related design associations in Adelaide include 'Broadlees' in the Adelaide Hills for the Waite sisters, and a garden for the Sidney Kidman family.

UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE APPOINTMENT
Cornish was engaged by the University of Adelaide on 1 June 1934, and died unexpectedly while still employed. Her engagement at the University was upon the personal recommendation of prominent Adelaide architect Walter Bagot. Bagot, then principal of Woods Bagot Laybourne Smith & Irwin and consultant 'University Architect', had a strong interest in landscape design as exhibited at his Italian-influenced 'Forest Lodge' residence in Aldgate and 'Numey House' in North Adelaide. The University initially offered a salary of £154 per annum but Bagot successfully increased it to £212. Part of this engagement was as a consequence of the 1933 River Torrens floods that severely affected many trees along the riverbank and the lower campus, and the progressive relocation of the showgrounds to Wayville. Bagot appears to have regularly used Cornish as a consultant where practical landscape design issues were involved.

Cornish was engaged to 'control', design and manage a garden covering:
...the whole of the [original railway] escarpment garden, ...the whole of the lower site, ...including the maintenance of all trees, creepers and areas at present planted...the care of the shrubberies, Melia and Celtis plantation, five Cupressus on Victoria Drive,...the acre of the 14 elm trees...gravelled pathways by weeding, raking etc...[and] the cutting and trimming of kikuy grass lawns [sic].

At the same time the University purchased its first 16 inch motor lawn-mower and allocated the 'present small hand mower...[to Cornish] for cutting the Buffalo Lawns'. Because of its exposed sunny northerly aspect and poor clayey-rubble soils, Cornish took the unusual decision to plant the escarpment in a mixture of tough but flowering succulents, Brachychiton populneus, and typical Italian hillside species. Succulents, including Aloe, and cacti species, were prolific. Funds for these plantings were donated by the Misses Lily and Eva Waite. The forlorn young succulents in her Palmer Place garden were most likely destined for re-planting on the escarpment. The unusual plantings and...
colourful blooms were often recorded by The Advertiser and The News in full expansive photographs in the 1930s. ... it presents a blaze of color and is a real adornment not only to the University but also to Adelaide. Imagine a bank about 10 feet [3m] high and 30 yards [27m] long, covered with a cascade of crimson and lilac-colored flowers, and you will have some idea of the appearance at present of the University grounds just behind the men’s and women’s union building. Rock gardens in the grounds of the University are ablaze with color [sic].

Her use of succulent plants for covering the old embankment in this area created a unique note in the city landscape.

The escarpment, with this regular publicity, became a prominent Adelaide attraction during the 1930s and 40s. A number of University graduates, enrolled in the 1930s, remember seeing and talking to Cornish as she regularly tended, weeded and planted the escarpment, and mowed the lower campus lawns. One recalls the plea: ‘never plant kikuyu in your garden’.

Parts of these plantings remain today on the escarpment. A plaque on the University steps, incorrectly dated, recalls the role Elsie played in laying out these gardens ‘and lovingly tended them for many years 1929-1947’.

GARDEN OF MEMORY

In early May 1938 the Pioneer Women’s Memorial Trust of South Australia, through their Secretary, Miss Phebe Watson, and their Chair, Adelaide I. Miethke, approached the City of Adelaide Council Town Clerk, Colonel Veale, to create a ‘garden of memory’ below the Government House. The garden’s aesthetic and historical significance today is overshadowed by the modernist 2 m high statue prepared for the site by Melbourne based artist Miss Ola Cohn. But Cornish occasionally took the train up into the Adelaide Hills and stayed with her brother and sister-in-law, the Reverend Samuel Raymond Baron and Gwenyth Cornish (née Kniffen-Thomas) at ‘Stagrate House’ in Aldgate. Whether she had any influence upon the design of this now National Trust of South Australia owned property is unknown.

‘BROADLEES’

In the Hills, Cornish had a role in the planting and landscape design of ‘Broadlees’, Graters, owned by Misses Lily and Eva Waite. This significant garden, purchased by the Waite sisters in 1924, was extensively re-developed by Eva in the style of Gertrude Jekyll. Eva diligently studied Jekyll’s writings and designs, making a point to see her gardens on her visits to England. At the time of their purchase, Walter Bagot had established a long-standing professional and social friendship with the Waite family, especially at their ‘Urrbrae House’ property. Eva’s passion for gardening was nurtured at ‘Urrbrae House’.

‘Broadlees’ is the only South Australian garden known to have been based on Jekyll’s ideas. It possesses dry stone wall construction and planting selection reminiscent of Jekyll’s Wall & Water Gardens (1901), and cypress hedges and topiary arches mimicking those at ‘Brookehurst’, by John Morant, about which Jekyll wrote in Some English Gardens (1904). Flagstones, used in the paving, were retrieved from Rundle Street, Adelaide, when it was sealed. The herbaceous borders were removed in the 1950s due to maintenance costs. The garden design was implemented, proceeded in October 1938 to prepare the statue, which was unveiled on 19 April 1941, by Lady Muriel Barclay-Harvey.

The measurements of the garden were progressively modified, as the Trust and Cornish argued with the Council about siting and planting design issues during late 1938 to late 1939, but the garden was undertaken to Cornish’s design. She personally planted the original species and constructed the low patterned brick wall.

During the arguments, Miethke wrote to the Council in November 1939 standing firm on Cornish’s design and its considered execution:

The Trust desires me to state, however, in fairness to Miss Cornish, and Miss Cornish herself wishes strongly to reiterate, that the Garden was made out in conformity with the late Mr Orchard’s direction and supervision ... It is probably the lack of a perfectly free hand, or trying to work in other people’s ideas which has detracted from the garden as a garden in the eyes of the Council. All this must be said in fairness to Miss Cornish whose reputation as a Landscape Gardener stands high in the community.

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The concrete slab entry porch at 'Eringa' in Unley Park, designed and constructed by Cornish. Lady Sidney Kidman stands to one side. (Photograph: Australian Home Beautiful, 1 August 1932)

under the watchful eyes of Cornish and Eva Waite, by the gardener Ken Mosel.

Cattlemans Sir Sidney Kidman in Adelaide also engaged Cornish to design and construct portions of his garden 'Eringa' in Unley Park. In two separate spaces, Cornish's designs recall the ideas of Edna Walling: tessellated pavements with herbaceous perennials emerging from the cracks, and a recessed dry stone sunken garden, but adapted with flowering species more reliable in Adelaide's climate.

Cornish was also strongly associated with the North Adelaide community and their churches:

... for a time [she] was on the honorary committee for the lay-out and improvement of [the] Church of England grounds, and for many years she was closely identified with the activities associated with the parish of Christ Church, North Adelaide, which adjoined her home in Palmer Place.

She died unexpectedly in Wakefield Street Hospital on 8 October 1946, and was buried with her family at St Jude's Anglican Cemetery in Brighton, a coastal suburb of Adelaide. Her grave, unusually, is marked by a series of pseudo-random rubble Carey Gully sandstone rocks with a cross, in the midst of conventional gravestones.

The Advertiser described Cornish, in her obituary, as:

... one of Adelaide's best known landscape gardeners, and [who] was responsible for the design and care of many of the city's most beautiful gardens.

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