



A fortunate life - Maggie Campbell-Culver

Elaine I'm here at Prad Pourric to talk to our very well known voice Maggie Campbell~Culver who is not just the flower lady but something else as well. So I'm here to find out a little bit more about a very colourful life as colourful as all the flowers she describes to see exactly how she came to be where she is now. So Maggie.

Maggie Well that's very kind of you and I don't consider that I've actually had a colourful life, I consider that I've had a very fortunate life.

First of all I had a grand-mother who brought me up and my sister and my brother after my parents died and she was really the dominant character in my childhood and, really, throughout my life because she comes from a family who live at Scotney Castle in Kent. Great gardeners, somebody called Christopher Hussey, the Hussey family were tremendous gardeners and they employed, actually, in the beginning of the 20th century somebody called William Robinson who is an Irishman. He was rather fiery actually, but he was the first person to naturalise daffodils, i.e to put daffodils into lawns and grassy areas and he did it first at Scotney Castle in Kent.

Scotney is a mediæval ruined castle surrounded by water which was their moat and the family actually lived in a Georgian house, so it was much more civilised than living in a mediæval house. But my Grand mother was a tremendous personality really, and when I left school, I was educated at a convent and went off up to the big smoke in London. But prior to that I'd, actually the year my mother died, I won a scholarship to Ballet Rambert. Really nothing to do with me because talent it isn't anything to do with you at all, it just happens that you're given something which sometimes you are able to exploit but not very often and I had very good, very strong feet for a ballet dancer.

Anyway I used to go off up to London, from twelve in fact on the train from Worthing to meet these extraordinary dancers and Madame Rambert herself, who took the class that I was in. She was tiny, minute, she was like a little comet running around. Piercingly blue eyes with a most wonderful smile when you did something right and she smiled, the world was your oyster, you felt on top of the world. Which was marvellous. Other times she could give you a great thwack with her stick and scream at you, shout. She could be reduced to tears because you were so stupid and silly and

clod-hopping. I took all this in and I just thought it was quite ordinary and quite natural and then, in those days, during August Ballet Rambert was danced at Covent Garden and because I was still at school, um, I did the stint at Covent Garden. So I danced in some ballets at Covent Garden which was fun. But by the time I was eighteen I knew that I would never ever get to the top. I had had solo parts, I'd had two ballets created particularly for me. But I knew in my heart, really, that I couldn't, I would never aspire to being a Margot Fontaine for goodness sake and really, my background with my grand mother, who was then, by then on her own, looking after us, I felt that it was my duty really which sounds rather pretentious but I don't mean it like that, really to do something which brought in some money because ballet dancing for sure, didn't, in those days, bring in money.

So in fact, quite unknown to me, I was actually recruited to work in MI5. It was nothing to do with me at all I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and was asked a few questions, not very much. There was a frisson of excitement when I said that my father although dead had actually come from South Africa. Interviewers were rather fretful about that, but any rate, it didn't make any difference.

I stayed living in London and working for MI5 for a number of years, and then hove to on the horizon my husband, who was a persistent bugger really, and kept asking if I would marry him and eventually of course under the clock of Victoria station, um, he proposed to me and I said 'yes'.

Elaine Very romantic place.

Maggie Yes it was really. I have to say that the clock has disappeared, but our marriage hasn't cause fifty-two years later we're still together which is lovely.

But gardening, gardening, gardening, really, the abiding memory of childhood, really, is my grandmother's garden and how she taught us the names of the plants and all sorts of other things and they really stayed with me and I worked in London for a bit. Um, I then transferred to something which I suppose lots of people still think of as MI5 but, actually, it was the Conservative Central Office which wasn't unlike MI5 in its dealings but it was great fun and I understood, perhaps for the first time, that working could be fun rather than very serious which it definitely was beforehand.

I stayed there for a bit really not doing anything, certainly no gardening and moved back when my grand mother fell ill and eventually died. Er, moved back to Sussex and got married and had my two lovely children which was great and then started to sort of thrash around a bit because I didn't see my role as just being at home. It wasn't enough for me I couldn't understand that I'd been educated really well, I thought, and the outcome of that

was that I went to work for the museum in Chichester. We were still living in Sussex and I was very lucky and very fortunate because it came at the time that Fishbourne Roman Palace was being discovered just on the outskirts of Chichester with Margaret Rule. And I went and worked with her and I began to work on the garden and the different styles of gardening there were in Fishbourne Roman Palace and that began my interest really both in history although that had always been an undercurrent that I was keen on, er, and gardening, and the combination of the two for me is perfect and really from then on, I knew that my role, somehow or other, was me learning about gardening or gardens and the history of actually where they were.

Now the history of plants which, actually, I've homed in on over the past few years came about in a completely different way and that was, by the time our children were in their teens, we moved to Cornwall and lived on Bodmin Moor and did the self sufficiency bit. Making butter and cheese and ploughing the land and goodness knows what. Which for a few years, while we were all at home, was wonderful, absolutely marvellous.

Elaine Did you read that book 'Self Sufficiency' by John Seymour?

Maggie Well yes, it became our bible.

Elaine It was our bible as well I think. It was in that period wasn't it?

Maggie It was lovely, yes, and we met lots of other people who were doing exactly the same thing. Michael would go off and solicit, he's a lawyer and a notaire, er, he would do that during the day and the rest of us would get on doing what we had to do.

Elaine Milking the goat

Maggie No, no please, milking the cows

Elaine Oh cows

Maggie Oh please, yes, we were really rather proud 'cause we ended up with an accredited herd of two, but of course your children leave home to go off to university and explore the world and all sorts of other things and the two of you do not need to drink over a gallon of Jersey milk a day. So we had to move on from that really. But I was still intrigued and interested in gardening and history and we met, almost by chance, somebody called Mavis Batey who some of you will know was one of the original ladies at Bletchley Park. I only knew her as a garden historian who had begun in the nineteen seventies, The Garden History Society. We had joined that and when she knew we were moving to Cornwall, my dear, she said, do you think you can go and look at Mount Edgcumbe because the council there is worried about what they are going to do with it. So like a dutiful friend as I marched off to Mount Edgcumbe and had a

look and absolutely fell in love with the place. For those of you who don't know but use the Roscoff ferry when you are coming into Plymouth if you look to your left you will see cascading down a hillside, trees and a folly of an arched window which is all part of the landscape of Mount Edgcombe. It happens to be, under English Heritage rulings. It is a Grade I listed garden. It's extremely important in the sphere of the natural landscapes that there are in Cornwall and in Devon. It is an extraordinary asset to the people of Plymouth and to the surrounding area and to Cornwall of course. It is completely free to go in and there you are. It is a stunningly beautiful maintained and glorious landscape. It's wonderful, absolutely lovely. I was lucky enough to do the restoration work there and get it going and stayed for fourteen years to see it on its way. But I gradually got frustrated with garden history, because garden history was about the humps, lumps, hillocks and plantings of the landscape and not what went into the landscape not about the plants. I could never find really what I wanted and I started compiling a list. Around this time, um, I suppose in the nineteen, late nineteen eighties, nineteen nineties I was also involved in helping to run the big marquee at the Hampton Court Flower Show which had just begun, just started and Plant Heritage always had a very large marquee and I was part of the team who looked to see what we could display etc., and I came up with the idea why don't, for the millennium year ~ I can remember two years beforehand, saying why don't we do plant introductions from the year a thousand to the year two thousand and that's, really, how all my writing, and everything from then on, has actually focused. Um so we started doing that and I said I'm sure we can do it, I'll do the research I'm quite happy to do that and it was then suggested by a great friend, Tim Heald, the journalist and writer who lived next door to us when we lived in Fowey suggested that I write a book about plant introduction. I said "don't be so stupid I can't write, I don't write, I'm happy to do the research but not the writing". Um, and I then met an agent, he introduced me to an agent who said "How do you know you can't write until you do it. Go away and do the first chapter". Oooh its like being back at school. So I did and he just sort of said, 'well for goodness sake of course you can write. Just get on with it. We don't want any more false modesty here'. But if it's not false modesty 'cos I know that I'm not a writer. I'm a communicator, which is a bit different. I feel quite strongly what I want to do is enthuse people when they're weeding. To look at the plant they are weeding round and think to themselves, gosh you've come all the way from Siberia to be in my garden and you're named after a Russian Prince or whatever it happens to be and that sort of I, I find that absolutely fascinating, I love it. I love to know what's behind a plant. You know what happens to it and I'm just in the process of writing or, or trying to bring together a thousand years of plant introductions into Britain, and I've done a spreadsheet and it's called the..... rather grandly actually 'The Millennium Introductions to Plants into Britain'. I think that's a bit cumbersome but it will be something like that. So I've broken it down yet again into hundred year chunks and I'm doing hundred

years at a time. I'm actually working on the twentieth century at the moment.

Elaine So you've come a long way

Maggie No, I haven't actually done the fifteenth century backwards yet. In fact it's all there but I actually have to check it and make sure that the spelling is right and that the name is up to date and the Latin is right and I try to find sort of an interesting item about a plant. Actually I was looking at an Iris in the twentieth century the other day about nineteen thirty-four I think it was and it was Iris Lady Hindcup, Hindcliffe, Hindcup, Hindcliffe something like that. Anyway I had a grovel around and had a look and lo and behold she's an ancestor of Kirstie Allsopp. So there you go, if you are growing this Iris in your garden you've got an ancestor of Kirstie Allsopp. You're practically related one way or another.

I just want people who love their gardening to love them, their plants a bit more and to learn about them. After all plants were on this earth before we were.

Elaine So Maggie you've got, shown me your three books here, can you tell us something perhaps....

Maggie The first one is 'The Origin of Plants', um, which I have to say was short listed for a prize. It didn't win it, um, something from the RHS actually won. But I was thrilled with it and it says on the front 'the people and plants that have shaped Britain's garden history since the year a thousand' and that's exactly what it does. I do each chapter and a bit of history. So I start off with significant dates, 'cos I'm very bad at actually remembering what history is and I started this off, first of all for my own benefit, but then when the publisher looked at it, they thought it was actually rather useful for all of us. So 1603 James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England and then there's the Gunpowder Plot and the Great Fire of London and a book called, in 1682 'The Anatomy of Plants', which was written and published by Nehemiah Grew. That was an important book and then in 1685 Celia Fiennes begins her journey through England. So I, I have that at the beginning and then I go through some of the plants and what happened through that century in the way of plants and how important it was and I named this particular chapter "Plants across the Pond" which means to say that the most plants which were coming into Britain at that time were obviously from the Americas where exploration was taking place. So although there were plants still coming in from Europe and travellers and so on, it's just emphasised that plants from America were really most important in this hundred years and so it goes on and right to the end of the chapter sumptuously illustrated it was lovely it was...., that's in the day when books were really books. I then have plant introductions into the period and I go from 1601 when there was an Autumn Crocus came in. That came from Turkey or the near East. The European Silver Fir, Abies Alba that came in as well in 1603.

Tulips arrived too from the Crimea and Turkistan. Tulips, hit, financially the roof, absolutely extraordinary really and then it all just dissipated, because you couldn't make tulips behave how they wanted them to behave and they realised actually what they had, most of the tulips that had strikingly different colours within their petals was that it was a virus and the bottom fell out of the tulip market. Not for the first time.

So that's really how I came to be interested and since then I've done two books on John Evelyn. That came about because when I was researching for lots of times I would come across a quote from a book called 'Silver, a discourse of forest trees' which John Evelyn wrote in sixteen six...., it was published in 1664 and it was the first book of the Royal Society and Britain, then, was desperately short of good timber and John Evelyn was tasked with writing a book to encourage people to plant trees. So what's new? Anyway I decided that I would somehow buy one of these books, which I did, a 1669 edition and I read it from cover to cover and was utterly flabbergasted because it was so modern, in its approach, in its ideas, in the practises that they did in forestry and so on. Exactly as we do today. There's nothing new at all and I thought 'gosh I think I must get this out somehow into the public domain' and again get people keen and interested and thinking about planting trees, perhaps, and I knew that he'd died in 1706. So it was coming up to 2006 and I thought it would be really nice to remember him, 'cos everybody knew him as a diarist, jolly boring diarist. He writes acres and acres of print about religious texts, but then when you get down to it he actually talks about hedges and plants and, gradually, gardening took over his whole life and my passion for trees really goes through "Silver" and brings it up to date and so on and so forth and then I've also got, because he wrote books about gardening and how to look after a garden and what to do in a garden. All, just as we do today absolutely, called "Directions for the Gardener" and that was lovely 'cos I met a lot of people who were intrigued and interested in him. I mean I often say I started off by not liking John Evelyn very much. He sounded to me when he was writing 'Silver' rather like a Roman senator, standing on steps declaiming and gradually, I presume as he got more confidence in writing, he became much more readable and in the end I actually fell in love with him. Ah sad that I, the little thing that I am but, um, he was a tremendous character and we should all be reading about John Evelyn and taking in what he said. He was the first environmentalist really. A most important man and very keen on planting all the new trees that were coming in from the Americas, planting them on his own land and encouraging others to do so. Which was lovely.

Elaine So what are you currently working on Maggie. You said something about, I saw it up on your computer screen, Siberia.

Maggie Siberia

Elaine Siberia, yes, that's a change of direction.

Maggie Yes, Yes

Elaine It's very cold in Siberia

Maggie Well I, yes, yes it is really. But several years ago when Afghanistan when um, we went into Afghanistan I wrote a major piece about the flora of Afghanistan which was utterly intriguing it's just extraordinary. It's sort of, sort of the buckle or the belly button of the world as far as the flora goes. Because plants from eastern Afghanistan stretched right the way through to the tip of northern Australia, just some of, some plants not many but some plants stretched right the way through their nativity and some from the western side in fact go right the way across to America. Which was very interesting and I had been asked if I would do a Chelsea exhibit again and I wasn't quite sure what, whether I wanted to let myself in for such a dramatic thing to do again. But I suddenly thought I'd like to explore the flora of Siberia. Now today's useless piece of information is that the United Kingdom, large as we think it is and grand as we think it is will fit in fifty-three times to Siberia. So that puts us in our little Putin place doesn't it when he was talking about this small offshore island. Which was great. So I'm in fact researching and doing the plants of, of Siberia. There's a of lot plants from Siberia that, which we grow in our gardens.. You know Baby's Breath? Um yes Gypsophila, OK keep that in your mind that is from Siberia. I'm sorry, oh dear gosh Gypso..., how do you say it?

Elaine I'm sure I've heard it said Gypsophila

Maggie Absolutely fine it doesn't matter, no no. The plant doesn't know what its name is and I am always a great believer that if the plant doesn't know what its name is why, why should we worry too much. I know botanically, of course, one has to and get it right. But honestly, us girls who do the gardening, we don't need to know.

So that's really what I'm, I'm, I'm, that's most important what I'm doing, I feel, at the moment.

So that's for, if anyone's going to Chelsea in twenty fourteen, look us up, Plant Heritage. We shall be there. "Coming in from the cold" it's going to be called "Coming in from the cold". It is a very cold place to go to. It has over four thousand indigenous plants. Lots of them not of interest because they're foraging plants or vetches and crawlers and small cushioned plants which have such a very short time to flower and set seed, something like three or four months, that's all they have and right up in the north east they only, in the winter, they get three hours of daylight only. Can you imagine that? Conversely of course in the summer they don't even get three hours of real darkness.

Plants and humans, really, and animals have to be really tough to live up there and they have to have extraordinary adaptability. They have to be cushioned plants. Their, their leaves have to be very hairy to keep off and keep them so that they can live for seven or eight months under the snow. Exactly as the same in the Himalayas plants you will find right up high, fourteen to sixteen thousand feet you will find cushioned plants with really not flamboyant and gorgeous, luscious looking tropical leaves. That doesn't occur to them. They have to be tiny and hugging the scree or the permafrost as the case may be. It's just a game something like Gypsophila or there's a lovely Pulsatilla which grows in Siberia. Pulsatilla patens, which has the most beautiful, lovely anemone-like blue and violet flowers and that's, that grows both in North East Siberia and across the other side in Alaska and, and Northern Canada. So its, its, its, its, that drifts across both. But there's honeysuckles, there's all sorts of different things there's about 200 plants I've worked out, that have come into being into Western Europe's horticultural life from Siberia. Mostly found from two huge expeditions which were initiated by Peter the Great in the seventeenth, have to get this right, seventeenth thirties or forties. He sent two big expeditions to the Kamchatka Peninsula which is on the far North East of Siberia, huge place and what is interesting about Siberia now, I mean we've, we've all got in our Western background when we say the word Siberia, we've got all sorts of nasty things like the gulag and so on. Utter unhappiness. I mean the country is drenched in it. But, there's the Trans-Siberian Railway which is wonderful. That really set the trend for the development of Siberia because an enormous number of towns and cities developed along the line. Quite a few large, very big cities have no road access whatsoever. They're either by train or by air. I suppose it's the last great wilderness really. I mean it isn't because they, they do mining of diamonds and gold and oil, coal, all sorts. I mean you know you name it and Siberia, is, it's a very very, its got the makings of being an extremely wealthy area and also of course the drama of it is, is that the permafrost which in some places four thousand feet thick, four thousand feet thick and has been like for perhaps ten or twenty thousand years in Western Siberia is melting slightly and the methane that is produced from the melting, in fact is going to kill us all. If it melts we're a goner. That's a happy thought. Isn't that a happy thought?

Elaine You could say Maggie that really in a full circle sense your whole inspiration for and passion for gardening and plants and trees came from your Grandmother.

Maggie Yes and, and really the older I, I realised um I suppose about twenty years ago that I could go through my childhood home and I could name and place all the plants that she grew in her garden and I could see it as clearly as anything. So it yes she's been the dominant influence. We should all nurture our Grandmothers.

Elaine Absolutely. Well thank you very much. This has been, it's been

really, really fascinating.

Maggie Well thank you very much for being interested.

Elaine No I am absolutely fascinated