

## **Nancy Gordon McLaren née Ralston**

**1922-2020**

Nancy, born a Canadian, came to Britain as a small child and went to school here. Having gone back to Canada in her late teens for an operation on her legs, and worked for the Royal Mounted Police censoring letters from Italians, she was determined to get back to London. Eventually she managed to get a berth on a Scandinavian ship carrying two aircraft and lot of bacon during the Battle of the Atlantic in 1942. When asked whether the ship was torpedoed she replied "It missed."

Having met and married Major Martin McLaren, she found herself surrounded with garden history – his family came from Bodant on one side and Munstead on the other. Gertrude Jekyll was Martin's great aunt. With no previous experience of gardening she set about learning. This was one of many challenges that Nancy faced with determination. When Martin became an MP she became an involved and active member of the constituency as well as being able to use her outstanding skills of hospitality. She had three sons, of whom Richard was the eldest.

As well as this, Nancy's own passion was to develop the relationships that came with her work with the Garden Club of America and, in Britain, with the National Trust, especially enabling people in the early stages of their careers. She had a particular gift for this kind of work and it was a great solace.

The tribute published by the Garden Club of America could equally well be applied to other aspects of Nancy's life, reflecting her imaginative and generous relationships with a wide array of friends and family.





**from A Tribute by the Garden Club of America  
1922-2020**

**Nancy McLaren Chairman of the Martin McLaren Horticultural Scholarship**  
2003 Recipient of the GCA Distinguished Service Medal

Nancy McLaren, a Garden Club of America (GCA) honorary member since 1987 and 2003 recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal, died on April 25th 2020. She was 98. We mourn the loss of this ardent contributor to international exchange and fellowship, through the Martin McLaren Horticultural Scholarship Program (now The Garden Club of America and the Royal Horticultural Society Interchange Fellowships). She was a devoted horticulturalist, gracious ambassador, and generous supporter of the Interchange Fellowships, as originally conceived in 1948 by the Hillsborough Garden Club.

Mrs McLaren was committed to furthering British-American relationships through educational horticultural exchanges. She expressed her commitment on many levels, reflecting her generosity of spirit and leaving an indelible imprint of excellence on The Garden Club of America and on a generation of horticulturalists. Beginning in 1950, an annual horticultural student exchange was established and administered by The Garden Club of America and the English Speaking Union in the UK. In 1985 Mrs McLaren, the chairman of the Martin McLaren Horticultural Scholarship, named after her late husband, began funding the UK side of the Interchange Fellowship and the American student was known as the Martin McLaren Scholar (MMS). Her direct involvement provided both a foundation and a uniquely bespoke quality to the exchange.

Over decades, Nancy McLaren took personal interest in each American student traveling to the UK under her tutelage. She guided and protected, offering friendship and dedicating herself to ensure an individual program that matched their interest. She provided her personal flat in London, introduced fellows to

leading horticulturalists and magnificent private gardens, and cared deeply about the well-being of each visiting student, many of whom had never traveled outside the US. The list of those Interchange Fellows who had the gift of a year under her umbrella reads like a “who’s who in American public gardens”. This is her legacy to the GCA and to the US.

Christopher Jordan, the MMS in 1995-96 described how ‘hands on’ she was as she took each scholar under her wing. “She was a real gardener and a wonderful designer. Mrs McLaren wore her knowledge and style lightly. I sought and enormously valued her advice. She was an intuitive and generous friend. Over a cup of tea (Lapsang Souchong was our favourite), she gave me three books that I still have and use today.”

Grace Elton, the 2005-06 MMS and now CEO of Tower Hill Botanical Garden, loved living in her London flat while working on the Chelsea Flower Show exhibit with the Lake Forest Garden Club. “Mrs McLaren commanded a room. There was no question who was in charge, in her sweet and unassuming way. She saw the value of education and experience, knowing that by helping the interchange fellowship she was helping to create the leadership base of botanical gardens.”

Stephanie Jutila, now CEO of the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden, and the 2000-01 MMS, says that Mrs McLaren became “a cherished friend, the epitome of an ambassador for British American relations, and a horticultural champion. She was so curious about the work, impact and connections each Fellow made. Nancy’s legacy will live on through the work of the Fellows whose career paths were influenced through her generosity.”

Sarah Carey, former Scholarship Committee chairman and GCA liaison to the RHS from 2007-14, worked closely with Nancy McLaren, saying she will be remembered for “a lasting contribution to international exchange and friendship, the vision of the Interchange Fellowship. Her keen interest and involvement clearly launched many distinguished careers. She helped inspire the highest standards of excellent in the fields of horticulture, landscape design, and public garden leadership.”

