Book Reviews

ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, MELBOURNE


BOTANIC GARDENS OF AUSTRALIA


Australia has a proud record in the area of Botanic Gardens as it should when one realises the momentum that stemmed from the botanical enquiry that helped drive the country’s foundation. These two books chronicle different aspects of our botanic garden heritage, the one specific with a study of the world renowned Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, the other reviewing botanic gardens throughout the country.

Melbourne’s gardens have been well documented through a series of studies over the years, most recently Joan Law-Smith’s small publication of 1984. This new book brings the information right up-to-date and much has been happening in recent years that requires documentation as the gardens reflect new pressures from the general community, for example for Water Conservation, as well as improved recreational facilities, and from the scientific community with increased pressures for ex-situ conservation and plant breeding, for example.

Many of the predictable historic photographs of Guilfoyle and early works in the gardens are reproduced but they are enhanced by outstanding contemporary images by Greg Elms that provide an effective assessment not only of how the gardens look today but also how their community use them.

As increasingly in the gardens, there is a strong awareness of the original form of the land pre-European settlement and of the Aboriginal tradition of the site and charming vignettes about some of the characters, personalities and individuals who have made significant contributions to the gardens today.

This is neither a thorough history nor a scientific tome but offers a beautifully packaged keepsake of one of Australia’s really great gardens. I only wish all the captions to photographs were correct and that the designer had resisted filling pages with photographs cheek by jowl. The airless result means that none of that page’s images can be fully appreciated and the result is indigestible.

Botanic Gardens of Australia is invaluable as a reminder of the number of Botanic Gardens we have in Australia and therefore the opportunities there are for visiting as one travels through the country. With 80 gardens discussed and plentiful maps and photographs it is inevitable that the reader would seek more information than the book provides.

Equally there are gardens omitted that could easily have been included but for
many the knowledge that gardens exist in these many parts of Australia will be valuable information. Perhaps most valuably the book reminds us of the gaps in coverage of habitats by existing gardens. New South Wales provides 19 of the gardens and Victoria 27 but Western Australia only two and the Northern Territory; three. If our major climate and habitat zones are to be represented in our Botanic Gardens, these are the areas where increased representation will be required.

John Patrick

John Patrick is a landscape architect in private practice in Melbourne and a past Board member of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.

Planting the Nation

Editor: Georgina Whitehead


Hardback, 196 pp. illustrated (in black and white and colour), rrp. AU $40.00

As the Depression eased in eastern Australia in the late 1890s, articulation of Australian nationalism was becoming more common in education, urban planning, recreation, literature, painting and the decorative arts. Concurrently, moves towards the political federation of the six Australian colonies were taking shape and gathering strength, which culminated in the proclamation of the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901. Development recommenced and a positive outlook slowly pervaded. New suburbs, established during the land boom of the 1880s, grew up and spread further, facilitated by the expanding suburban railways, tramways, ferries and, most significantly, the introduction of the motor car in the early twentieth century. With a seemingly unlimited amount of available land around Australian capital cities, there seemed no need to contain development, and they spread in the English and American vogue of the Garden City. The precedent was set for the ‘Great Australian Dream’, and the average citizen’s desire for a single-storey house on a relatively large piece of land was established.

Planting the Nation explores Australia’s gardens and landscapes between 1890 and 1914, exploring the nation’s changing attitudes to garden design, horticultural developments, city planning, and architectural and social history, suggesting that we have much to celebrate in our journey of discovery of this fascinating period of evolution and definite period of change.

Published to coincide with the Australian Garden History Society’s 22nd annual conference, 2001: A Federation Odyssey, Australian Gardens and Landscapes: 1890—1914, staged in Melbourne this October, Planting the Nation is a collection of nine dissertations, eight of which were amongst thirteen papers presented at the conference. Edited by Georgina Whitehead, Conference Committee Convenor, and published landscape history author, this beautifully presented volume covers a diverse range of material, reflective of the multitude of influences and thoughts prominent at the time.
The period leading up to and following the federation of the Australian colonies was one of significant transition and reform. The major political events were merely part of an even bigger picture which affected not only the way we lived, but where we saw our position in the greater world picture and our relationships with the landscapes in which we existed. Australians continued to echo overseas design trends, however they began to evolve their own interpretations and adaptations of international styles.

John Rickard discusses the context of this sea change in the first chapter, pp. 1-10, suggesting that the urban decay connected with the depression heightened the allure of the bush as the site of Australian values and an associated mythology. Painters such as Roberts, Streeton and McCubbin went in search of pastoral landscapes and much colonial nationalism was being presented. Around the same time, Rickard points out, one of Australia’s earliest Prime Ministers, Alfred Deakin, surrounded himself with the pleasures of the outdoor life and, like many Australians, he appreciated the temperate climate and opportunities for outdoor leisure activities; the colonists’ relationship with the environment had been reassessed.

Susan Reidy goes on to explore how recreation and sport bowled into the Australian garden with the transition in the mid-nineteenth century of urban parks, from places of purely passive relaxation to areas where recreational pursuits were accommodated. Although these were most likely to take the form of band recitals, hence the development of the ubiquitous rotunda. By the period in question, however, most new, and many existing, urban parks were fitted with some form of recreational facilities, due, in part, to the pressure from newly founded ‘progress associations’ and sporting clubs. Tennis, cricket, lawn bowls, football and golf competitions were to benefit.

Nina Crone’s contribution discusses the greater awareness of native flora and fauna and their use as motifs in the decorative arts and crafts movement and contemporary design. Crone points out that it was not only the celebration of ‘blokey’ mateship and the aura of the bush which was behind the growth of national sentiment, but the contribution of women in the 1890s, who regularly brought it into their daily lives and domestic routines. Use of the indigenous flora in the decorative and applied arts was characteristic at a time when Australia was searching for new symbols of identity and independence, and the battle of the wattle and the waratah as the national emblem is explored.

Suzanne Hunt shares some fascinating insights in her chapter, Where the Sweet Australian Peas Bloomed: State School Gardens of 1901 to 1914, pp.11-30. Delving into the recommendations of the 1902 Royal Commission into Technical Education, Hunt offers a delightful insight into the cultivation of school gardens and the ‘art’ of gardening, whereby students could learn first hand about nature, science, mathematics, geography, horticulture and botany. She suggests that the school garden movement was a sociological reform that produced startling results and promoted in the younger generation a greater sense of ‘place’.

Complemented by additional papers which focus on themes as diverse as the Golden Age of Gardening in the Subtropics by Jeannie Sim, a glimpse into the quirky influence of the clam shell and curiously ‘exotic’ plant species; to the smaller scale, yet fascinating, Grottoes, Rockeries and Ferneries: The Creations of Charles Robinette, examined by David Jones, the subject matter is varied.
Peppered with well selected and engaging historic and complimentary contemporary images, *Planting the Nation* is a worthy narrative into the diverse gardening and landscape themes and outcomes of the federal era. The publication scans the influences and outcomes of a period of great change which would appeal to the academic and garden enthusiast alike, being at once a reference companion and easy holiday reading. The only real disappointment being that more of the papers which conference delegates shared in were not included.

**Kate Paterson**

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**General Reading with a Heritage Theme**

**Fiction**

*A Year of Wonders*  
Geraldine Brooks  
Publisher: Fourth Estate.  
Paperback, rrp. $27.95.

In 1666 the bubonic plague reaches an isolated Pennine village. Desperate, the villagers turn to sorcery, herb lore, and murderous witch-hunting. Then, led by a young and charismatic preacher, they elect to isolate themselves in a fatal quarantine. The story is told through the eyes of Anna Frith who, at only 18, must contend with the death of her family, the disintegration of her society, and the lure of a dangerous and illicit attraction.

**Fiction/Social History**

*The Peppered Moth*  
Margaret Drabble  
Publisher: Penguin.  
Paperback, rrp. $21.00.

It is 1905 and Bessie Bawtry is a small child living in a South Yorkshire mining town. Naturally gifted, she sits quietly and studies hard, waiting for the day when she can sit the Cambridge entrance exam, and escape the fate of her life that her ancestors have never even thought to question. A wonderfully absorbing, multi-layered portrait of four generations of one family, exploring themes of inheritance, the individual's time in history and fate.
**Francophile History**

*Paris Between the Empires*
Philip Mansel  
Publisher: John Murray.  
Hardcover, rrp. $85.00.

Paris Between Empires tells the story of the city's golden age, from the entry of the allies into Paris on 31 March 1814, after the defeat of Napoleon I, to the proclamation of his nephew Louis-Napoleon, as Napoleon III in the Hotel de Ville on 2 December 1852.

**Naval History**

*The Sea Warriors*
Richard Woodman  
Publisher: Carroll & Graf.  
Hardcover, rrp. $59.95

Their stories today are largely unknown, but in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the captains and crews of the world's great sailing ships endlessly braved weather, enemies, and disease to gain control of the seas. This volume vibrantly chronicles the true-life exploits of men like Lord Cochrane, Charles Brisbane, and Nisbet Willoughby - naval heroes who for nearly two centuries have stood obscurely in the shadow cast by the famous British admiral Horatio Nelson.

**Biography/Architecture**

*His Invention So Fertile*
Adrian Tinniswood  
Publisher: Jonathan Cape.  
Hardcover, rrp. $75.00.

Christopher Wren was the greatest architect Britain has ever known. But he was more than that. His Invention So Fertile presents the first complete picture of this towering genius: the Surveyor-General of the King's Works, running the nation's biggest architectural office and wrestling with corruption and interference; the pioneering anatomist; and the mathematician.

**Travel/Cultural Tourism**

*A Walker in the City*
Alfred Kazin  
Publisher: Harvest.  
Paperback, rrp. $35.00.

A Walker in the City is a timeless meditation on the boyhood walks that take Kazin
from his Jewish neighbourhood of Brownsville, Brooklyn, out into the vast city of New York in the decade before the Depression. Stretching out to compelling, mysterious Manhattan and from there to the world, each walk is a journey out and a journey in. Kazin takes us outward from Brownsville to the great, electric, hallowed streets of the city.

**Young Adults**

**A New Kind of Dreaming**

Anthony Eaton  
Publisher: University of Queensland Press.  
Paperback, rrp. $17.95.

When the court sent Jamie Riley to Port Barren, he hadn't expected much - thought he'd serve his time and leave. He hadn't counted on being drawn into the town's murky past, into a web of secrets, lies and murder which might well cost him more than his freedom. (Ages 13-17).

**General Reading** reviews kindly supplied by Andrew Robertson, Manager, Hill of Content Bookshop, 86 Bourke Street, Melbourne.