Book Reviews

Rex Swanson, Melbourne's Historic Gardens: a Management and Conservation Guide
City of Melbourne, 1984 $15.00 288 pages.

The love and sense of pride felt by the Melbourne public for its public gardens is evident in the reaction to the recent publication of this report. Rex Swanson, its author, was criticised on all sides, often I feel without his critics fully appreciating the points he made and, in the case of the broader public, certainly without reading his report.

There are dangers in public comments on reports of this type. The observations of professionals within a field are based on training; the views of the public are too frequently based on sentiment and prejudice. This is especially the case in relation to management of historic landscapes where, if amenity is to be sustained, bold and frequently unpopular decisions must be made in the interests of the long-term health and effectiveness of a site.

Having said this I must add that many criticisms can be made of this report, which is available from the Melbourne City Council. However, it remains an important and valuable exercise.

The need for such a report had been evident for some time, to those interested in the well-being of Melbourne's historic public gardens. Unsuitable incursions into these valuable resources had been gaining pace. I need only mention John F Kennedy Memorial in the Treasury Gardens, the Coles Fountain in the Parliament Gardens, the Dolphin Fountain in the Fitzroy Garden and the totally unsympathetic entrance to the Parliament Station in the Garden Reserve to remind readers of recent excrescences. (Two of these underline the dangers of establishing a Fountains Trust briefed to fill very effective spaces with ornamental fountains. When will people accept spaces as having merit in their own right without further 'enhancement'?)

Strangely, a major piece of the work was the preparation of a history of the gardens involved, namely Fitzroy Gardens, Treasury Gardens, Carlton Gardens, Flagstaff Gardens, the gardens around Parliament and the gardens of the Domain. I say strangely because John Foster, lecturer in History at the University of Melbourne, had already undertaken extensive research on the subject. His account of Fitzroy Gardens was published early in 1984. As it was, the historic research for Rex Swanson's report took an extended time period, clearly re-worked explored ground and delayed the publication of the report.

This is not to say that there is not much of merit in the work which Rex Swanson has undertaken. At a purely visual level the 116 photographs of the gardens offer a remarkable resource, and make the report worthy of its cost. The collection provides a fascinating image, not only of the development of the parks but also of central Melbourne from 1860 onwards.

Equally interesting is the picture which emerges of the gardens' development. Clement Hodgkinson emerges from the shadows as an important influence; while not directly in control of development on the ground he clearly directed their progress from weedy and neglected sites to infant parks. Hodgkinson, as the effective administrative head from 1860-74 of the Board (later Department) of Crown Lands and Survey, was able to make decisions and identify the way development should take place. His positive approach was clearly an immense influence, so great that Swanson suggests that 'the highly competent Hodgkinson...deserves most of the credit for creating the Fitzroy, Flagstaff, Parliament and Treasury Gardens' and judging by later comments, the Carlton Gardens too.
The report sweeps away some misconceptions long held about the development of these gardens, most notably the suggestion that Australian native plants were almost entirely ignored in their establishment. In fact so frequent was their use that the Argus 'complained regularly that too many gums were being planted; English trees were to be preferred'. Apparently one of the difficulties was the limited amount of stock available from nurseries. This was frequently augmented by supplies from the Botanic Gardens but in the 1860s this source was of limited value. Quick growing blue gums appear to have been the favoured tree but in the Fitzroy Gardens many of these were removed in the 1880s to be replaced by a diversity of trees including elms and oaks, but notably at the northern end an avenue of native silky oaks (Grevillea robusta) and pittosporums.

Sculptures and fountains made significant contributions to the character of the gardens although the sculptures appear to have placed a burden on the maintenance budget with their constant requirement for repair and for painting. Their presence was particularly notable in the Fitzroy Gardens where Swanson observes that they 'gave the Gardens a decorative charm which has since been lost. They served as markers and signposts along paths and invested otherwise unremarkable spots with a definite identity...In the end the increasing effort required to keep them looking smart was abandoned, and they were quietly removed and discarded during the 1930s.'

For the long-term health and function of the gardens the recommendations of the report are more significant. I must stress that most of these recommendations are sound and well founded, and if followed by Melbourne City Council will enhance the long-term value of the gardens.

There are issues of concern, however, the most significant one relating to Rex Swanson's desire to encourage the use of these gardens for more broadly-based recreational activities. There is great danger in extending activity types in areas which offer passive recreation, since lobbies for active recreation in parks are in the future of gardens. Planting, it must usually much stronger and better-organised than those for passive facilities.

The author seems to have failed to grasp two quite different aspects of public concern. The first of these relates to changes in use pattern where, for example, a garden of passive natives is converted to an active character, modifying its value to many users and changing its landscape character. Such a move demands concern and considerable debate. On the other hand issues of an horticultural nature require a different approach where the long-term suitability of the park for its existing function is under consideration. Thus attention to trees, whether it be thinning or surgery to limbs, is of major concern to the long-term amenity of the gardens, and here the public needs to be informed of the potentially deleterious results of inaction so that opposition to actions may be overcome.

What I fear Rex Swanson has failed to do is to adequately support the nineteenth century public gardens of Melbourne within the overall character of the city. True, he advocates the removal of much of the accumulated ephemera from the gardens, [like the model Tudor village in the Fitzroy Gardens, the Coles Fountain and the Dolphin Fountain], but then he suggests establishing further facilities to supply the needs of tourists, like more water bodies and fountains. But re-establishment of the gardens' Victorian era quality, including the bedding displays so rightfully praised by the author, would offer an invaluable resource for tourists while also providing enjoyment for city residents. I do not believe that Melbourne's city parks need to follow influences from Scandanavia or the USA to establish their suitability as tourist attractions. We are not talking about gardens 'conserved or restored as period landscapes frozen in time', but about gardens which provide for passive use while remaining in sympathy with their history and the dominant character of the surrounding tree.

Planting policies obviously are significant but stressed, is only a single element of this procedure, plant selection and after-care being equally vital aspects of tree culture. The author identifies the problems
inherent in a piecemeal approach to plant selection. This is clearly evident in many of our urban and suburban parks where a number of specimens have been used in preference to a well-constructed, well-planned scheme. While his observations are correct, he then suggests the use of the nurseryman in the selection of trees for the gardens. Surely not! A nurseryman's job is to grow suitable quality stock, as and when required, as is that of a local authority nursery. The choice of plants must primarily be left to the designer involved in the project.

In general, the City of Melbourne has failed to appreciate the historic quality and character of its gardens. The development of Parliament Gardens and the Garden Reserve is a case in point. This wedge of concrete and unsympathetic planting further divides the Parliamentary sector where a cohesive plan was essential. Melbourne can no longer afford to lose other elements of its historic landscape. Sadly, the report goes some way to making this clear but not far enough.

Finally there are several annoying errors of presentation. For example, 'ginko' for ginkgo, the Americanism adoption for adaptation and why arboriculturalist for arborist? Presumably the author would not say zoologicalist? Lastly we have the term 'hardy'. We read that the elm is a 'hardy' tree. Sadly this leaves the reader no wiser about the qualities of the elm, for 'hardy', in Australian terms, might mean tolerance of sun, cold, drought, traffic fumes or compaction in parks. It would be more valuable to suggest that these trees were drought-tolerant, if that is what the author intends.

The merit of this report, I believe, lies in the Council's perception that it is needed. There are many elements of great value, others clearly need extensive public debate. Let us hope that it leads to a reassessment of Melbourne's public gardens and, hopefully, to a response sympathetic to the needs of the gardens themselves.

Reviewed by JOHN PATRICK


Melbourne's inner metropolitan public parks and gardens constitute one of the city's most attractive amenities - many would say the most attractive amenity. With a history dating back to the 1840s, they are also a vital part of the state's heritage.

Regrettably, they are only a fraction of their former extent, and even in the midst of Victoria's sesquicentenary celebrations they are under threat. The proposed National Tennis Centre is just one more major depredation on land that former generations understood to have been reserved for free and open use by the public.

Given the fact that virtually every other inch of space in the City of Melbourne has been 'done over' by conservation analysts in recent years it has long been evident that the parks were overdue for comprehensive study. Their fate even aroused concern. It was a belief amount some councillors that 'cumulative changes were eroding some of the gardens' best qualities and historically important elements' that led to the commissioning of this report, according to its author. How well then has their history been researched, and how effective a guide is this report for their future welfare and management?

Melbourne's Historic Public Gardens passes the weight test. It makes a hefty thud when dropped on a desk. Unfortunately, its binding is poor and it comes apart when it is read. Its three main parts comprise a lengthy historical introduction, a discussion of public use issues and a detailed section on 'present conditions' which raises a range of day-to-day management questions. An interesting, but poorly interpreted, collection of photographs is included in an appendix.

The history is important because of long-standing confusion and controversy concerning the actual extent of Melbourne's parklands and their individual status. According to an important article by the lawyer and amateur historian, Dr W A Sanderson, published in the Victorian Historic Environment, 14, 3 (1985)
Historical Magazine in 1932, and reprinted resolve and clear purpose on the part of in 1975, the history of Melbourne's parklands is one of depredation. This occurred mainly at the behest of the central government, and often with a view to benefitting government agencies, private individuals and organisations, also sporting bodies. While Swanson has relied on Sanderson he has not maintained his thrust, and can hardly be regarded as having improved or even extended his analysis. One suspects that history is not Mr Swanson's strong point. He does not have a clear perspective on questions of control, mainly because he does not relate the question of the future of the inner metropolitan parks to the long and continuing sad history of relations between local and central government.

Rather, he seems to blithely accept that the parks are subject to all sorts of different demands and pressures (even some that would destroy them as we know them) and that it is the business of the political system to sort these out rationally. Not having grasped the fact that this did not occur in the past, his touching expectation that it will occur in the future is perhaps understandable. Others may well fear for the future of the parks.

Swanson's report suggests that it is based on a knowledge of the past. As such its conclusions may be doubly misleading. A great many of his statements on major issues are questionable, including some which purport to rely on his researches. For example: 'Melbourne City Council has always made a distinction between its parks, which are intended, primarily, for active recreation and contain substantial sporting facilities, and its gardens, which are generally smaller, more horticulturally decorative, and intended for quieter passive recreation.'

Quite apart from the truth of this statement, it is precisely this sort of ad hoc thinking which has encouraged Government agencies, private enterprise and sporting organisations to usurp their role and to target those public parks lacking an obsessively manicured character for much unwanted development and in some cases for absolute wastage. It has been a lack of resolve and clear purpose on the part of City councillors in recent decades that has enabled those bodies to achieve their ends.

Even more sinister is Swanson's curiously limited cost-benefit mentality. He seems to be of the opinion that vast numbers of people are required to daily plant themselves in the parks for one purpose or another for the parks to remain in a worthwhile or affordable asset for the community. Perhaps Mr Swanson wants greater public usage to finance the intensive, and expensive, horticulture that he seems to admire. This may explain his preparedness to abandon certain of the public parks to nakedly commercial purposes.

This vulgar turnstile mentality denies perceptions of those previous generations and the present, who saw the parks as having an important sanitary role as 'the lungs of the city', and who were concerned, as much as anything else, to remove the land from public use and commercial considerations. In this respect Swanson's recommendation that additional restaurant facilities be established in certain public parks is particularly to be regretted.

This is by no means the only point on which Mr Swanson has done the parks and the citizens a disservice. His observation that 'it is abundantly clear that permanent reservation and vesting in the city is no defence against future alienation of Melbourne's parks, should the State Government decide to appropriate land to other uses such as freeways' is no doubt correct. But he misses the point of the exercise. A minister who can effect such a change simply by the stroke of a pen may be less inclined to do so if he has to face hostile members in his own party and persuade two houses of Parliament that his measure should involve the total or partial repeal of an Act that commits the forces of the state to the conservation of the parks.

Rex Swanson's is not a goad report. It is inadequate from the point of view of history and heritage. No less than before, there is a desperate need for a goad historical study of Melbourne's parks, particularly one that has as its aim the clearing up of
issues of early designation in the 1840s and 1850s, and detailing the extent of depredation right up to modern times.

While he might have a point here and there on the small issues of day-to-day management, in the opinion of this reviewer he is mostly wrong-headed on the larger questions, and it is doubtful if the balance is corrected. Some benefit was no doubt obtained from rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic but a much greater benefit might have been obtained by outlining a strategy for avoiding icebergs.

Reviewed by DAVID DUNSTAN

Peter Cuffley, Creating Your Own Period Garden, The Five Mile Press, 1984, $10.00 176 pages

This book is a broad design-oriented ramble through a wide range of issues associated with 'period gardens'. It is verbose and wandering with generalisations and digressing 'chat' confusing any clear line of thinking. Constant references to 'choosing a style', 'old world' and so on cast the reader too far from sound conservation and restoration practice, into the realm of fabrications. There is little emphasis on accurate research or site-specific analysis.

The skeleton is supported by moments of direct communication, but the text is curiously inconsistent. Lengthy lessons in construction techniques would be better kept for a technical bulletin. Some chapters seem out of order, with Chapter 5 for instance [Research, Plans etc.] being better located nearer the beginning.

In summary the book leaves too much work for the reader to do, and avoids the difficult issues of the subject by referring to other references. I do not find it a significant contribution to conservation literature.

Reviewed by ANDREA MACDONALD


The reputation of Edna Walling has grown consistently through the last few years, fuelled by a fascination with her design technique, by her use of native Australian plants and introduced species, and by the biography written by Peter Watts. Her remaining gardens testify to her ability, while plans of those now lost remind us of her extensive productivity.

So popular are her books that they now demand high prices in second-hand bookshops, while the publisher Anne O'Donovan is reprinting A Gardener's Log in a newly edited form in September. Now we have this new work containing a selection of thirteen essays written in the late 1940s but never published.

It is interesting that Walling chose not to publish them for undoubtedly she was wise in this decision. They are slight and provide little to extend our appreciation or knowledge of the writer. They receive bulk from a number of poems and drawings by Moira Pye. These add little to the whole.

Walling certainly would not have appreciated the present format. The paper is thick and heavy. The type, especially the pagination, is unattractive and varies between essays. Editing is generally poor, there are numerous typographical errors and captions are transposed; the overall feel of the book is uncomfortable and as a total production it is of poor quality.

While I have no doubt that this book will sell, I doubt whether the critical purchaser will find it to be money well spent. It will do nothing to augment Walling's reputation and is an unnecessary addition to her literature.

Reviewed by JOHN PATRICK
Trevor Nettle, *The Cottage Garden Revived*  
Kangaroo Press, 1984, $10.00  104 pages

This book is a delight to read, with clear presentation and sensitive photographs. I believe it would be invaluable to anyone restoring or remaking a colonial garden, renovating a Victorian house, or a plant collector or enthusiast of old-fashioned plants.

Trevor Nettle's central advice is to impart the feel of an original colonial garden through an appreciation of the attitudes to gardening and design prevailing at that time. He advocates that attention should be paid to four essential elements of a cottage garden - a profusion of flowers, diversity of plant material, hardiness, and simplicity of design. He recommends thorough investigation of the evidence of a garden's remaining original fabric. He says any restoration should be based on fact rather than fabrication, though without resorting to exact replication. He describes the front, side and back gardens, verandah, wood shed, fences and features in terms of character, function, typical plant species used and horticultural treatment. However this is a book essentially about plants. The author's enthusiasm and experience in collecting plants, and his broad knowledge of rare plants enrich the systematic analysis of the components of nineteenth century gardens. He adopts a general cut-off date of 1900 for plants used or introduced, but does admit to one or two favourite inclusions of later popularity.

Appendices provide lists of plant groups, sources for obtaining stocks, and further references.

Little attention is paid to the differences in architectural style and size of nineteenth century cottages, and therefore to the resultant variations in overall characters of garden design, planting set out and spatial definition. However the book provides a readable and informative presentation of the 'attitudes and plants essential for 19th century gardens'. I recommend it highly.

Reviewed by ANDREA MACDONALD