Cemeteries are an important part of the Australian heritage. We are in the early stages of researching our past and each year discover more facts about those who helped develop this country. The monuments of our ancestors form a visible record of Australia's growth. Through names, dates and other information on the headstones it is possible to trace family and local history, or in a wider context to determine cultural development. The symbolism in the decorative elements of nineteenth century tombstones expresses attitudes towards death that are very different from our twentieth century ideas. Some of the larger cemeteries are valuable examples of nineteenth century formal garden design, and they retain today landscaping that is seldom seen outside the few remaining public gardens.

Two booklets recently published demonstrate a new awareness of the value of Australain cemeteries. The first is A Guide to the Conservation of Cemeteries published by the National Trust of Australia, New South Wales branch of the. The paragraph above is part of its Introduction. The second publication is Cemeteries of Victoria, Guidelines for Management, Maintenance and Conservation. It was prepared for the Victorian Department of Planning by L.P. Planning Consultants and funded by a National Estate grant.

While the aim of each publication is basically education towards the conservation of cemeteries, in approach there are marked differences between the two texts. A Guide the Conservation of Cemeteries was compiled by members of the National Trust's Cemeteries Committee and reflects the Trust's philosophy on care and maintenance of historic sites. The National Trust's stand against conversion of cemeteries to rest parks is clearly stated. Their policy is that cemeteries should not be converted but be preserved or restored in a way which retains their significance. Cemeteries of Victoria advises that if no burials have taken place for many years, and if its original use is unlikely to continue, then a cemetery trust may consider having its graveyard converted to a Pioneer Memorial Park. Obviously this fundamental contrast of attitude creates a confusing situation for cemetery authorities. The books are distributed in different states, but the dichotomy is really between the ethic adopted by the National Trust and that of State Departments of Planning.
The National Trust developed its policy because of its unhappy experience of these 'conversions'. In 1974 the New South Wales Government passed the Conversion of Cemeteries Act. This legislation enabled local councils to convert cemeteries to parks. In the worst cases the monuments were completely removed and a tablet installed commemorating 'Our District Pioneers'. The best of these conversions left the intact tombs standing, cleared away damaged stones, and trying to ignore the remaining monuments, made the area into a public park. A requirement that Councils should place with the Mitchell Library, Sydney, a record of burials of sites converted, was largely ignored. Conversions must, by their nature, totally destroy the character and spirit of the cemetery. What they also destroy is the district's visible link with the past. The gravestone of a person known to be historically important is usually preserved. However, there are instances where relatives have demonstrated at a later date the contribution of an ancestor to the development of the region, and the tombstone has already been demolished.

The more profound and serious loss is the destruction of records of our social history; groups of miners' graves in goldmining towns from the 1850s, victims of the 1900 bubonic plague, members of the armed services who died from war wounds, burials resulting from mine accidents, floods. There is the further loss of funerary art when cemeteries are destroyed, and with it the expression of changing taste and social status. Fortunately, local councils, especially in country districts, are now realising that their early cemetery is a tourist attraction and have approached the National Trust for advice on restoration and conservation.

The importance of cemetery design, layout and planting is stressed by both publications. The National Trust maintains that the essential character of the cemetery cannot be retained if its layout is drastically altered. Survey information in the form of plans, field books or certificates of title may be useful in understanding the original planning. Most small cemeteries are based on an axial or rectangular grid pattern; the grand layout of larger sites sometimes includes circular avenues and serpentine walks. In nineteenth century cemeteries where tree planting was made a conscious part of the layout, evergreen species were traditionally used. Many species had links with death that go back to antiquity such as the Cypress which dates its symbolism from Roman times; the Palm emblematic of
peace and victory over death. Native Australian trees and shrubs were chosen for their similarity to the European species. The character of a cemetery can be reinforced by replanting the same species. The National Trust Guide makes a further suggestion that the original grave plantings such as Ixias, Watsonias, old-fashioned Roses and Periwinkle should be retained and not destroyed by excessive mowing, poisoning or burning.

Cemeteries of Victoria takes less of a historic approach to planting. It envisages a situation where a new character for the cemetery emerges from planting different trees, removing old structures and ignoring the original layout. The National Trust would object to several aspects to this type of planning programme, especially in regard to layout; there is seldom any worthwhile reason for departure from the original plan. Features such as dish gutters of brick, gravel paths, and small shelter sheds were installed as an integral part of the original design. Their retention and restoration helps preserve the picturesque atmosphere that was typical of nineteenth century garden planning.

The Victorian Cemeteries Act 1958 specifies that cemetery trusts must keep their sites in a 'neat and orderly fashion'. Provided a cemetery is not dangerous, a low standard of maintenance is less expensive and often more appropriate. Some of the most charming cemeteries are those where 'neat and orderly' is loosely interpreted. Having considered how existing species were originally used, in avenues or boundary planting, a decision may be made to use similar looking species which grow more quickly or are more resilient to local conditions. The removal of weeds and long grass from paths only is often a sensible solution to maintenance. Slow-growing creepers can then be encouraged on grave sites.

The greatest problems of maintenance are associated with tombstones. Natural weathering, subsidence and vandalism all lead to decisions on how restoration can best be undertaken. These publications offer some advice on repair, cleaning and re-inscription but suggest that expert advice should be sought. Many graves consist of a headstone, footstone, and surrounding fence. Each element is a part of the tomb and should not be removed with the aim of 'tidying-up' the cemetery. When railings of cast or wrought iron are removed, examples of the craft of regional blacksmiths are lost. At the base of the stone the name of the monumental mason is often painted...
or inscribed. When restoration entails re-setting, care should be taken that the sculptor's name can still be read. The new style of electric grass cutter with a 'whip' blade often tears at the base of the stone where the mason's name is written.

A Guide to the Conservation of Cemeteries stresses the value of the information on gravestones, especially those prior to 1856 when Civil Registration of births, deaths and marriages became compulsory. Grave inscriptions generally include the name, date and place of birth often family associations and sometimes date of arrival in Australia; all valuable leads to further biographical research. Verses indicate attitudes and aid an assessment of the social mores of the period. If transcribing is undertaken everything should be copied, including the name of the stonemason.

In New South Wales it is now more difficult for local councils and churches to remove tombs from their cemeteries. A recent test case of the Heritage Act 1977 (N.S.W.) made it clear that gravestones which are pre-1900 are considered relics and need an excavation permit before they can be removed. The cemetery in question belonged to the Anglican Church at Batemans Bay. The tombstones were removed to a shed and the land sold to a developer despite protests from local residents and the National Trust. The Heritage Council wrote to the Anglican Church but decided in this instance to take no action. In future removal of tombstones will require a permit from the Heritage Council of New South Wales.

At a recent meeting with the National Trust, representatives of the denominational Trusts of Rockwood Cemetery indicated that they are considering reburials in some of the older sections of the cemetery. The National Trust has applied for a Permanent Conservation Order on this historic site. It was prompted to take this action because despite assurances from the local council that gravestones would be relocated when a new road went through, recent local government roadworks covered an area containing a large number of nineteenth century graves. Rockwood is one of the great cemeteries of the world. Its older sections should be preserved in their entirety. For garden planning its only rival in Australia is Kew in Victoria. For monuments outstanding in their architectural significance and sculptural beauty, Rockwood stands alone.