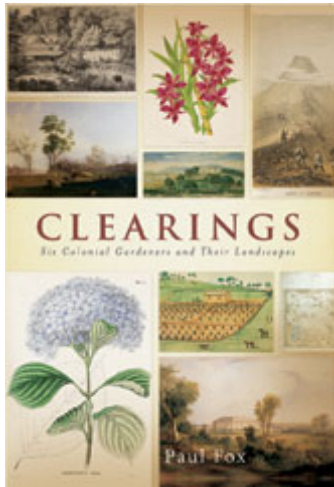


Clearings: Six Colonial Gardeners and Their Landscapes by Paul Fox. Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2005, AUD \$39.95 Paperback, ISBN: 0522851983.



It is reasonable to expect the title of a book to reflect its contents or, at the very least, not misrepresent them. Readers expecting to find rich discussions of the landscaping of Australian colonial gardens will be disappointed by this book. In only one of the six chapters (the chapter on William Guilfoyle) is there an extended discussion of specific gardens and the principles upon which they were created. Some attention is given to the design of the Geelong Botanic Garden by Daniel Bunce, and the private gardens designed and tended by William Ferguson are very briefly evoked. The chapter on Sir William Macarthur is predominantly about his commercial trading in plants with the Veitch nursery in England, that on Thomas Lang is about the plant trade he established, and Josiah Mitchell is discussed from the point of

view of his agricultural principles.

However, if we look beyond the expectations created by the title, Fox provides a valuable set of biographical studies of important figures in Australian horticultural, silvicultural, and agricultural history. All of his characters are interesting in ways other than their contribution to these fields, and the contrasts between the chapters provoke a great deal of thought. For example, both Daniel Bunce and William Guilfoyle encountered Indigenous populations yet reacted differently to them. Guilfoyle, in the Pacific on a plant-collecting trip, was quite insensitive to the 'others' he encountered, with a disregard for the cultures and customs of the Samoans. He interpreted the unwillingness of the locals to give him specimens of an ornamental plant grown in their gardens as covetousness, whereas other Europeans there knew that to break such plants grown to honour deceased relatives was a serious offence punishable by death. Bunce, on the other hand, was anthropologically curious, travelled with bands of Australian Aborigines, published his *Language of the Aborigines* in 1851, and challenged the general settler belief of the intellectual inferiority of the Aborigines.

It is especially valuable to have chapter-length studies of characters who have not received full-length biographies and do not appear in general biographical sources, but who may appear peripherally in the stories of others. Although all have entries in Aitken and Looker's *Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*, there are no *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries for Thomas Lang, who established a major nursery in Ballarat and was a major importer of economic plants and is sometimes mentioned in studies of acclimatisers, or for William Ferguson and Josiah Mitchell, both usually cast as villains in the story of Ferdinand von Mueller's troubles that led to him being stripped of his Directorship of the Royal Melbourne Botanic Gardens.

While, of course, focussed on the horticultural side of each subject's life, the treatment afforded them, with the possible exception of McArthur who is so well known that it is probably unnecessary, does give a more rounded 'life' than short encyclopaedic entries allow. So we learn of Lang's meritocratic social views and the interaction between his professional skills and his commitment to civic duty. However, his strong advocacy

for vegetarianism (he was the founding secretary of the first Australian Vegetarian Society in 1886) is ignored, although it must have been relevant to his arguments on urban gardening and may have given impetus to his introduction of so many varieties of vegetable to the Australian market. Similarly, Josiah Mitchell's unsuccessful attempt to win election to the Victorian Parliament to ensure representation of farmers' concerns in the face of 'wasteful expenditure on urban public works' illustrates the depth of his commitment to the rural communities and his driving concerns with the importance of supporting scientific understanding of farming in Australian conditions (p.178).

Ferguson was clearly reluctant to manage von Mueller's garden, refusing to do so when it was first suggested to him, and he was clearly a skilled and perceptive plantsman, whose work at the Macedon nurseries, and on the growing of wattle for the tanning industry, demonstrated a flair for experimental forestry. Fox is a little hard on Ferguson when he describes his response to the Ottway forests as failing to recognise that 'the beech trees were the remnants of an ancient forest succession. They had predominated until fire depleted their numbers, leaving only those in protected ravines' (p.216). The concept of ecological succession only began to be established scientifically by the time of Henry Chandler Cowles's 1898 PhD thesis on the Indiana sand dunes, and it is hardly surprising that Ferguson saw the forest through economic and gardening eyes in 1883.

But I have few such quibbles with Fox's interpretations, nor with his meticulous scholarly apparatus. The book is visually rich, well designed, and indexed in such a way that the conceptual issues treated are made clear. *Clearings* is a joy to read and is highly recommended: it is thus a pity that the title suggests more than is provided.

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