



Melbourne's Parks and Gardens: Through The Magic Lantern

by Peter Timms

While the depression of the 1890s has dented their confidence, Melbournians have good reason to feel pleased with themselves as the new century begins: Queen Victoria has graciously agreed to the formation of the new Commonwealth; the first motor cars are appearing on the city's streets (a mixed blessing, admittedly); some of the better homes are lit by electricity, the marvel of the age, and the telephone is revolutionising business communications (although, of course, nobody would think of having one in the home). Furthermore, a new city-wide sewerage system has drastically reduced the risk of typhoid and other deadly diseases. Australians, as one contemporary journalist enthuses, '... are equipped by a more than usually high average of education, a broader measure of political privilege, and a more generous share of individual freedom and public liberty than those who have preceded us in the race.' [1]

There can be few more potent expressions of civic pride than the public park or garden. From the mid-nineteenth century, almost every Victorian town of consequence had established its own municipal botanic garden, an achievement unmatched by any other state. And now, with working hours reduced to an average of 48 per week, citizens of all social classes had the leisure to enjoy them. And enjoy them they did! That horticultural genius, William Guilfoyle, was transforming Melbourne's Botanic Gardens into a verdant paradise, while the ring of public parks around the city - Carlton, Alexandra, Fitzroy, Treasury and Flagstaff Gardens, and the Domain - which only thirty years earlier the visiting English writer, Anthony Trollope, had derided as 'not lovely' and 'not in themselves well kept' [2] had been rejuvenated, with wide, tree-lined avenues, colourful parterres and mixed borders.

Melbourne's unsurpassed public open spaces both reflected and spurred the gardening passions of suburban land-owners. An attractive home garden not only improved your property values, it confirmed your status as a morally upright citizen. And morally upright citizens made for a healthy, cohesive society. This is the legacy of English Protestantism, which, for centuries, had fostered a spirit of open enquiry and a love of nature as a path to personal salvation. Thus, working the soil, propagating, weeding and tending were not just pleasant past-times: they brought you closer to God, encouraging an active appreciation of His great work (and, in case we are tempted to mock, much the same view is promoted by television gardening programs today, although with any direct reference to God papered over, of course).

'So it was,' writes the historian Keith Thomas, 'that in England trees were not merely domesticated but

gradually achieved an almost pet-like status.' [3] From as early as the mid-seventeenth century, wooded parks and gardens had become an acceptable part of English towns and cities, where they were expected to raise the physical well-being, the spirits and the civic virtue of the populace. In Catholic Europe, where nature had far less purchase on the popular (or religious) imagination, gardens were thought of as part of the private sphere, leaving paved town squares as the focus of public life.

It was in her colonies, particularly those of the New World, that England's love of gardening and its tradition of empirical observation of the natural world would experience their finest flowering. Our enthusiasm for horticulture springs directly from our English heritage.

Thus did Melbourne - with its wealth, its seemingly unlimited spaces and its mild climate - become one of the world's great garden cities, in both the private and public spheres. [4] By the early 1900s, horticultural associations were flourishing and their annual flower shows and competitions had become important social events; field naturalist societies were encouraging first-hand observation of Australian plants; seed merchants, nurseries, lawn-mower manufacturers and manure sellers were doing a roaring trade, and there were handbooks and magazines to fulfil every gardening need. Then, as now, people visited the Botanic Gardens not only for relaxation and recreation, but for inspiration, ideas and information about new plants they might introduce into their own suburban plots.

Melbourne was, therefore, the logical home for Australia's first government-funded horticultural school. The Burnley School of Horticulture, established in 1891, [5] taught a range of practical gardening skills, including orchard management, vegetable growing, horticultural science and garden design. Its first principal, an English-born horticulturalist, writer and teacher named Carl Bogue-Luffmann, was a remarkable figure who deserves to be better-known than he is. He was one of the founders of the Victorian dried fruits industry (the city of Mildura owes him a very large debt of gratitude); an ardent advocate of Australian native plants (and one of the first to recommend a native botanic garden for the proposed new national capital); a promoter of the naturalistic garden (as opposed to the formal, geometric styles popular at the time) and a champion of sexual equality. While it caused uproar in polite society, his decision to admit female students to the school was vindicated by the subsequent success of so many female graduates (Edna Walling among them). 'I do not think horticulture is an affair of sex', he bluntly told a Royal Commission in 1900.

What we will probably find most appealing about Bogue-Luffmann today, however, is his immense passion for gardening and his missionary zeal as a teacher. His book, *The Principles of Gardening for Australia*, published in 1903, is a personal manifesto whose poetic language and often startling directness sets it apart from most practical guides of the time. He complains, for example, that seaside gardens in Australia display an 'ignorance and vanity' that is 'pitiful' (he would have no reason to change his mind if he were alive today). [6]

Bogue-Luffmann's lectures (on which the book is based) would almost certainly have been illustrated with lantern slides. The Magic Lantern occupied a position similar to that of today's PowerPoint presentation: a state of the art technology employed for both entertainment and educational purposes that was inexpensive and simple to use, making it accessible to almost everyone. Although magic lanterns had been around in one

form or another since the seventeenth century, it was only with the introduction of gas and, later, electric lighting that they became really practical in the lecture hall. A huge range of projectors was available, including toy ones for children, and, from the late 1890s, the English firm of W.C. Hughes had a sales catalogue of more than 60,000 coloured or black-and-white glass slides on every conceivable subject. Or, for just a few pence, a local studio would make them to order from photographs taken with your trusty Kodak Pocket Brownie.

Although not without risk (gas cylinders were prone to exploding and the heat of the projector could break the fragile glass slides) the lantern-slide lecture revolutionised education, particularly in fields such as the visual arts and horticulture. For the first time, students could sit together in a room discussing Velázquez's *Roqueby Venus* or a Kyoto tea garden with illustrations displayed for all of them to see.

The photographs in this exhibition began life as lantern slides. Although we will probably never know for certain whether they were Bogue-Luffmann's, there is good reason to believe so. What you see here is just a small part of a collection of more than 300 slides found in 1975 at Burnley Horticultural College (as it was by then called). That they survived at all was thanks to a combination of luck and the foresight of a student, who happened to come across them while clearing out a disused storeroom. By taking them into his care, he saved them from almost certain destruction. Later, he donated to the City of Melbourne those relating to the city's public parks.

The rest (still in his possession) are views of orchards, fruit trees and vineyards, and, interestingly, Japanese gardens: all subjects in which Bogue-Luffmann had a particular interest (he went to Japan around 1910). From that promising beginning, we need to do a bit of detective work to see what the images themselves might reveal.

Dating them (at least approximately) should not be too difficult. Fortunately for us, fashions - particularly women's fashions - are ephemeral, so we can gain a fairly accurate idea of a photograph's date by looking at what people are wearing. Consider, for example, the children dressed to the nines for Hospital Sunday in the Fitzroy Gardens (no. 24). The girls wear light, high-waisted dresses and flowered hats, while the boy standing beneath the tree is dressed in a casual day-suit and straw boater (which might be part of his school uniform). Look, too, at the woman taking a solitary stroll in no. 30. Her skirt has a high, tight waist, her blouse is casual and loose-fitting, her hat plain and broad-rimmed. She cuts a fine figure - the very model of elegant simplicity. Such costumes are less elaborate than those of the Victorian era yet more demure (especially in dress-length) than those of the 1920s. Which puts us somewhere between 1900 and the beginning of World War I. (It is sobering to think that many of the young men in these photographs, enjoying their summer strolls and picnics, would have been dying in the trenches just a few years later.)

Only a few of these photographs include people, however, and there is no guarantee that they all date from the same period. They certainly vary a great deal in style and proficiency. The view of a waterway in no. 22 stands out as being the work of an experienced professional, and not only because the studio's name is recorded at the bottom left corner. This carefully composed view conforms to all the conventions of picturesque view-taking, with a rough, detailed foreground bounded on either side by screens of foliage (like

the wings of a theatre stage), a serpentine stream or pathway leading the eye into the middle distance, where it is arrested by some kind of focal point just off-centre (in this case, a stand of poplars) and, finally, a glimpse into the far distance. This formula, derived from eighteenth-century European painting, is still employed *ad nauseam* by nature photographers and landscape painters today.

Because they are conventional picture-postcard views, we are likely to be drawn to such images (nos. 25 and 42 are also variations on the format). But what are we to make of the frankly rather ordinary view of Fitzroy Gardens in no. 32, or the lone tree in no. 5, or the mass of flowering Philadelphus engulfing a paling fence in no. 6? These photographs look amateurish - mere snapshots, really - quite devoid of artistry. Why, you think to yourself, would anyone want to photograph that rather spindly gumtree or those overgrown vines? Yet, it is precisely what these images are not that makes them interesting, suggesting that they were taken with a particular didactic purpose in mind: to illustrate the growth habits of certain plants, perhaps, or to test students' identification skills. In other words, they were probably never meant to stand alone but to be part of the structured narrative of a lecture - a narrative that is now lost to us.

What, then, can these photographs tell us today?

Well, for one thing, they demonstrate just how little has changed. While the entire character of the city has been transformed beyond recognition over the past century, the layouts, plantings and general ambience of Melbourne's public parks have remained remarkably consistent, a reassuring point of stability amidst turmoil. All the same, a sharp eye will be able to spot some interesting differences. For example, the lawns tend to look scruffier than they do today (see, for example, nos. 17, 21, 34 and 40), lawn-care being something of a hit-and-miss affair before the advent of mechanised mowing, instant turf and automatic watering systems. Secondly, the Edwardians appear to have been inordinately fond of iron fences, which are everywhere, keeping visitors off the garden beds and newly-sown lawns and trying to discourage vandals. (In fact, some of these fences are still in use today in the Royal Botanic Gardens).

Not in evidence here, however, is the fashion for bedding out - the mass planting of colourful annuals in geometric patterns. In 1880, *Melbourne Punch* sneered that the floral parterres outside the Exhibition Buildings in Carlton Gardens resembled 'so many jam tarts or loud-patterned hearthrugs fastened together'. [7] Today, the high cost of labour has made such work-intensive features hugely expensive, so they have been reduced to a mere shadow of their former glory (although, with the recent drought behind us, spectacular borders of annuals once again line Fitzroy Gardens' central avenues in spring and summer). Bogue-Luffmann, as a strong advocate of naturalistic planting, would surely have agreed with the assessment of *Melbourne Punch*, which may account for the absence of carpet bedding from these glass slides. What we see instead are many beautiful mixed perennial borders featuring cannas, daisies, irises, azaleas and other hardy species, carefully layered and backed by tall trees. They are just as colourful but more relaxed, in tune with the spirit of the times, and they would have been far more pertinent to the teaching philosophies of the Burnley school.

What especially distinguishes the gardens of the past from those of today is the number of statues they contain. Where did they all go?

To our predecessors, who were apt to take life more seriously than we do, garden design was not just an attractive arrangement of plants, lawns and paths. It was expected to engage the mind on a poetic or philosophical level. The judicious placement of statuary was one way (certainly the most obvious) to connect the experience of the garden to music, literature and cultural mythologies, bringing horticulture into the orbit of art. Yet, although the botanic gardens of Sydney, Adelaide and Ballarat were alive with sphinxes, fauns and eminent persons, this was not the case in Melbourne's Botanic Gardens, where the designer, William Guilfoyle, preferred to use rotundas, pavilions and summer houses as focal points. It is odd that none of these delightful structures makes an appearance in these photographs.

The tree-lined avenues and floral borders of Fitzroy Gardens, on the other hand, were watched over by hordes of noble figures (they can be seen in nos. 10, 16, 19, 25, 33 and 38), most of them copies of well-known classical works. Especially well-sited is the sprightly figure of Diana, pictured in no. 38. Against a backdrop of cascading willow branches, she marks the entrance to a shaded footbridge which is adorned with charming and entirely appropriate rusticated railings (the playful art of reproducing rough timbers in cast iron was at its height at the time). How marvelously these sculpted figures enhanced the scenery, giving it a depth and gravity that could be sensed even if the allusions were not always understood. And what a pity it is that in the 1930s they were almost all removed after a long-running battle against vandalism had finally been lost.

It is perfectly possible, of course, that some of the subjects are not Australian at all. The classical formality of the tree-lined avenue in no. 8 looks typically French. Others, such as the picturesque view described above (no. 22) might well be English, although so closely did the design and planting of Melbourne's parks and gardens follow the English landscape model that it is very hard to tell without the exact location being identified.

What this great variability of style and quality suggests is that this collection was assembled piecemeal over a period of time from various sources, both professional and amateur, to meet the specific needs of the teaching staff. As we cast our eyes from one picture to the next, we can almost hear the voice of a stimulating, erudite lecturer such as Carl Bogue-Luffmann pointing out the strengths or weaknesses of the various garden layouts, discussing the placement of statuary, the use of rusticated fencing, the particular requirements of certain plant species and the much-debated question of how best to integrate buildings into the landscape. We can imagine him pressing home his views about the importance of form and structure and about responding appropriately to local conditions, and voicing his enthusiasm for sweeping lawns, free-form pathways and the use of flowers, not as colourful features, but as an integral part of a naturalistic design.

Even if they are not Bogue-Luffmann's personal slides, they still give us some lively insights into Melbourne's public parks and gardens as they looked a century or more ago, along with an enlightening 'behind-the-scenes' glimpse of both the teaching methods and design principles at Burnley School of Horticulture before World War I, principles that would, both directly and indirectly, exert a profound influence on future generations of Australian garden makers.

- ¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January, 1901. Quoted in Crowley, *Modern Australia in Documents*, Melbourne, Wren Publishing, 1973, vol. 1, p. 4.
- ² A Trollope, *Victoria and Tasmania*, London, 1874 (reprinted in USA by Kessinger Publishing, n.d.), p. 30.
- ³ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, New York, Pantheon, 1983, p. 212.
- ⁴ The slogan, 'Garden State' was being applied to Victoria from as early as 1907.
- ⁵ It developed out of an existing experimental garden established by the Horticultural Society of Victoria.
- ⁶ C. Bogue-Luffmann, *The Principles of Gardening for Australia*, Melbourne, Book Lover's Library, 1903, p. 30.
- ⁷ *Melbourne Punch*, September 1880, quoted in Peter Watts, *Historic Gardens of Victoria*, Melbourne, Oxford, 1983, p. 172.