

Editorial

This special issue of Queensland Review is devoted to the refereed papers presented at the Australian Garden History Society's 24th National Conference 'Tropical Pleasures', Brisbane, 11-13 July 2003.

It is a measure of the society's increasing focus on documenting Australia's garden history that, in addition to its journal, it launched the first issue of occasional papers, *Studies in Australian Garden History*, at the Brisbane conference. These papers join another recent Society publication to celebrate the Centenary of Federation, *Planting the Nation*, 2001. Its support, both financial and practical, was essential for the publication of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens* in 2002. Following the direction established by the Society, we are grateful that the Queensland Studies Centre at Griffith University has presented us with the opportunity to further document the educational responsibilities of the Society with these papers which focus on the history of Queensland gardens, both public and private.

We were being a little provocative in subtropical Brisbane when we established 'Tropical Pleasures' as the conference theme because everyone in Rockhampton and the North knows where the Tropics actually lie! The conference, however, was really concerned with the *idea* of tropical gardens. The papers presented in the lecture series represent a wide geographic spread and diverse range of topics, from leading authorities on Queensland's garden history to the insights provided by personal recollections and stories. The time span represented is from the 1850s, when the house and gardens at Gracemere outside Rockhampton were established (the focus of Laura Emmison's paper), to Lawrie Smith's paper on the Roma Street Parkland which was opened in 2001.

In her summation of the conference Dr Catherin Bull mentioned that when she first arrived in Brisbane after years of architectural practice in Australia and Asia she noticed a distinctive character in Queensland gardens. She observed also that there was virtually no documentation which identified this character, and the situation has not changed radically since. These papers attempt to help rectify this situation.

The theme of tropical gardens was set against an international background in Jeannie Sim's keynote address 'Tropicalia: Gardens with Tropical Attitude', in which she explored some of the scarce early written and pictorial accounts of tropical gardens from around the world. Her aim was to find a sense of the 'tropical garden character' and examine stylistic forms of the past that might inform today's designers. She discovered that Nature herself provides the best exemplars for designers and gardeners alike, including: a lush jungle-like density of planting (the selection of large-leaved plants and the enveloping growth of creepers scrambling up tree trunks); components of the 'Exotic Aspect' (especially plants and materials

with visually striking forms); combining traditionally ecologically disparate species, such as pines and palms; plant types that provide masses of colourful flowers and/or foliage; bold colour combinations; and typical tropical shade gardening practices such as verandah, bush-house and fernery gardening.

The character of the city of Brisbane had been established by the history of development, the hilly topography, the incidence of tin and timber buildings, and the range of tropical plants used in public and private spaces. The nature of domestic structures and their effect on the lives of their residents was acknowledged by journalists in the late 1930s:

The Brisbane house no longer needs stumps to keep white ants at bay, for they are almost banished from the land; but long usage has so accustomed the people to the cool, airy space that stumps provide under the house that they are loath to let it go. It gives almost a second storey in a land of one storey houses – a garage for a car, a shaded playground for the children, a cool place for the wash-tubs and the copper, and a drying-ground for the clothes when the summer rains are pouring down in sheets outside.¹

These are the Queensland houses celebrated in images and stories of the city. Peter Spearritt's paper 'Can Brisbane Remain a Subtropical City?' provides an historical overview of the development of the city and establishes a focus for the succeeding essays. With the periods of development following after World War II it is the subtropical landscape and the tin and timber dwellings of Brisbane that are most seriously under threat.

Dinah Hansman in her paper 'Tropical Gardens: The Myth and the Reality' avers that 'tropical style' is founded in the image of tropical rainforest, which is only one of the possible plant communities of the Tropics and only one of the gardening styles available. In fact the international garden designer Made Wijaya, in his presentation at the Brisbane Institute on 10 July, observed that it was the local artifacts which provided the identity of gardens as the plants used throughout the tropics were quite similar.

Maurice Wilson's paper 'The Evolution of the "Queenslander" Garden' was based on his forty years of experience and his deep knowledge of Brisbane gardens. In it he identifies the salient characteristics of the Queensland garden which were established in the inter-war period: mature flowering trees; emphasis on large, glossy or colourful leaf forms; geometric garden beds; and, of course, a specific range of plants then available. Only the hardiest survived. Of course the focus of the Queensland garden is the Queensland house itself, which establishes its individual and particular character. An essential part of the experience of this Queensland character is the enjoyment of the garden from the elevated verandah.

One of the very positive comments from the audience was the connectedness of the papers. Anna Haebich's paper, 'Assimilating Nature: The Bunya Diaspora' discussed this iconic tree in the context of Indigenous, colonial and international

cultures, and mention was made of the bunya pine in several of the presentations. One of the most specific connections was Glenn Cooke's paper, 'The Oasis: Brisbane's Water Playground', which provided the history of a site promoted as 'Queensland's most beautiful garden' from 1938 until it was demolished in 1989, with Dennis Hundscheidt. Hundscheidt worked as a supervisor in The Oasis for many years and his experience of its tropical gardens inspired his own gardening efforts. Hundscheidt may be credited with the reinvigoration of tropical gardening styles in Brisbane. His talk, 'A Personal View of Bali Gardens', added a fascinating personal element to the more formally presented papers, but it was not possible to include it in this collection.

Personalities have a role to play in the development of local histories and Judith McKay's paper on the botanical floral artist Ellis Rowan, 'Ellis Rowan: Flower-hunting in the Tropics', documents at least six visits that Rowan made to Queensland to paint exotic species. There could be no more significant promoter of tropical and subtropical gardening than Harry Oakman (1906-2002), as he was the author of thirteen books on the subject and remains the most widely read gardener in Queensland and probably Australia. Ross McKinnon, Malcolm Bunzli and Ray Steward presented a personal tribute in an overview of his life and achievement.

The role of botanic gardens in experimenting with economic plants during the nineteenth century was an important aspect of the conference. It was taken up particularly in Catherine Brouwer's paper on 'The Acclimatisation Society Gardens' in Brisbane, and John Taylor's paper 'Planning for Conservation of the Rockhampton Botanic Gardens'. Though these gardens had a primarily economic focus, the idea of the pleasure garden was not forgotten. It finds contemporary expression in a paper on 'Roma Street Parkland: Past, Present and Future Heritage' by its designer Laurie Smith. The Roma Street Parkland has already become a significant tourist destination and Smith also conducted conference delegates on a tour of the gardens. The Gold Coast is one of Queensland's primary tourist destinations and Kate Green's paper discussed contrasting resort styles: the lushness and international appeal of Palazzo Versace and the restraint and ecotourism focus of Couran Cove.

One of the disadvantages of gardening in the tropics was pointed out by Jinx Miles in her presentation, 'Paronella Park: Conserving a Tropical Pleasure Garden with Ruined Concrete Structures'. A wet and humid climate is very hard on man-made structures and the growth of trees exceedingly rapid so that, as she evocatively comments, any construction soon becomes lost in a 'green fog'. Jane Lennon's paper on the origins of the two resorts in the Lamington National Park, Binna Burra and O'Reilly's (a farm and garden respectively), shows how their histories have become part of a broader cultural landscape. Her paper further acknowledges the importance of tourism.

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiasm of all the researchers who presented their papers and express the deep appreciation of the Australian Garden History Society for their efforts in making the 24th National Conference the success it was.

I would further express my appreciation to the publishers of *Queensland Review* for making these refereed papers into a permanent record of the occasion and thus helping to document an under-researched aspect of Queensland's cultural heritage. I would also like to thank our reviewers for their valuable input and suggestions and our proofreader Marjorie Shackleton for her dedicated efforts.

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Note

1 C. C. D. Brammall, 'Brisbane, the City of Go-As-You-Please', *Walkabout*, Jul. 1937: 29.

Note on Nomenclature

Names of plants appear in the texts in lower case except if they are proper or pretentious names: e.g., jacaranda, croton, Chusan palm, Rose of Sharon. If the full scientific name is given it appears in italics, e.g., *Dicksonia antarctica*. If both names are given, the common name appears first with the scientific name in brackets, e.g., Chusan palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*). Any cultivars appear after the scientific name within inverted commas, e.g., *Cupressocyparis leylandii* 'Castlewallan Gold'.