

The Baron's sad last years

Hailed as one of the great botanists and plant collectors, Baron Ferdinand von Mueller's place in Australian horticultural history is assured. But as NINA CRONE reports after reviewing the third and most pertinent volume of a series of his edited correspondence, *Regardsfully Yours*, the German-born botanist never recovered from the hurt of losing his most cherished role.

Once started, I could not put this book down. A weekend disappeared as over 700 pages of letters from Mueller, to Mueller, about Mueller totally absorbed me in the last 20 years of a remarkable man deprived of his passion – the Melbourne Botanic Gardens. Previous perceptions of the man changed forever as I came to see a sensitive, hurt man, rather than a bitter man.

In letters penned on Christmas Day 1876, 1879 and 1891 Mueller expresses feelings about his “dismissal” – perhaps not unexpected for a lonely, aging bachelor to feel depressed on days when family celebrations were occupying other people:

Overall the letters portray a man of humanity, culture, gargantuan energy and a world-view of scientific research. Letters to a niece offer career advice and thanks for home-made gifts, a letter to a West Australian policeman recalls

A MAN OF LETTERS

It was once estimated that it was not unusual for Ferdinand von Mueller to write 3000 letters a year, as well as hundreds of articles and botanical pamphlets. In his 20 years as director of Melbourne's botanic gardens from 1853 he toiled diligently to keep them running despite inadequate staff and lack of water resources. It is generally agreed he lost his directorship because he was considered a man of science and not interested enough in the aesthetic side of the gardens. Although deprived of the position, he remained state botanist and did not suffer a pay cut. But his pride had suffered enormously. A kindly, religious and frugal man, he never married and worked up until his death in October 1896.

an expedition in 1877, there are letters of condolence over deaths of wives, husbands and a childhood friend, letters from collectors of “fungi” and “algae” and rather coy letters to Jacob Agardh in Sweden who wanted photographs of the women who collected seaweeds for him.

Von Mueller's broader cultural interests are evident through invitations – from Rose Grainger to “little Percy's concert”, from the Melbourne School of Music, from the Artists Society and from the German Society on his 70th birthday.

Letters threaded their way across the world to Joseph Hooker and William Thiselton-Dyer in England, to Jean Muller, Franz Stephani and Casimir de Candolle in Geneva, Paolo Dattari in Florence, Edouard Bornet in Paris, Asa Gray in Boston, Thomas Cheeseman in Auckland, Eugene Hilgard in California, Eduard von Regel in St Petersburg. Others went to farmers in outback Australia – to the Barrier Range near Broken Hill, to Bourke, Geraldton, Eucla.

A meticulous public servant, Mueller sought “permission to work at his doctor's house in Victoria Parade”. As his 66th birthday approached, he hoped “to continue service as Government Botanist” and even had “the honour to report, that last evening I met with an accident by falling from a tramcart . . .”.

AGHS members will find some correspondence of particular interest: to Thomas Jephcott, whose arboretum has been visited by ACT Branch, from the Reverend Hagenauer whose Ramahyuck Mission bordered Strathfieldsaye in Gippsland, to the Field Naturalists about a proposed change of name and the future of what is now Wilsons Promontory National Park – “. . . we could not possibly induce the Government to cede so large an area for that purpose as the whole of Wilsons promontory . . . an



PAST IMPRESSION: A sketch of Ferdinand von Mueller aged 68 that was made on blotting paper in 1893 by J.A. Panton. Reprinted courtesy of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria. BELOW: Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens today owe much to their one-time director.

application might be made . . . for withdrawing from selection the best of the Waratah-Vallies in Eastern Gippsland, also all places in which large cataracts or cascade exist . . . Places at Mt Baw Baw, the Buffalo-Ranges and towards Cape Otway might also be protected.”

In a letter to Georgina King, Mueller makes a significant



Picture: Tony Fawcett

observation about Charles Moore, director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens: “Altho’ we held very opposite views on the objects of botanic gardens, he always acted honourably towards me. English gardening in an Egyptian clime can only be carried on at fabulous expense . . . I never had any water for extensive lawns and mosaic or carpet flower-beds.”

Emeritus Professor Rod Home and his team have pursued Mueller correspondence world-wide for 15 years and it has only been possible to publish a fraction of what they have collected. Their work is superbly documented with easily followed cross references, footnotes, translations, calendar, bibliography, biographical register and index (botanical and general). But it is the balance of the letters selected that is so impressive in creating a picture of arguably Australia’s greatest man of science.

The three volumes of *Regardfully Yours* do not come cheaply and will not be everyone’s choice of reading but they certainly deserve consideration. All bibliophiles will find a way of acquiring them. Many people already car-pool or shower with a friend, so why not begin a shared library with *Regardfully Yours* – or at least make sure your local library has the three volumes.

Regardfully Yours
Selected Correspondence of Ferdinand von Mueller
Vol. III: 1876-1896
Edited by RW Home, AM Lucas, Sara Maroske, DM Sinkora, JH Voigt and Monika Wells
Peter Lang, Bern, 2006
For price, contact your local Botanic Gardens Shop or favourite bookseller, or www.DAdirect.com

A LIFE OF PLANTS

- Born in Rostock, Germany, Ferdinand von Mueller arrived in Australia for health reasons in 1848 after studying pharmacy and becoming a Doctor of Philosophy.
- A born investigator, he scoured Victoria from corner to corner and explored northern Australia with the A.C.Gregory expedition in 1855-57.
- The first Botanist of Victoria (a position he held for 43 years until his death) and the inaugural president of the Royal Society of Victoria, he was director of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens 1853-73.
- Through his career, he was awarded many honours by European governments and was knighted by Queen Victoria and made a Baron by the King of Wurtemberg.