

# Beautiful Adelaide and its botanic riches

## Max Bourne AM takes a light-hearted look back at the AGHS Annual Conference

A truly great Conference with good papers and good visits. A very well run event by Di Wilkins and her team. An added bonus was the launch of the superb book *Botanical Riches* by Richard Aitken and the two excellent related exhibitions at the Adelaide Botanical Gardens and Carrick Hill where we could see some of the source material for the book.

A quick, though slightly facetious, review of the papers presented follows:

Trevor Nottle opened up with a description of the town and country habits of early Adelaide. It sounded like the arrival of "Little Britain" but made sense of the close connection of the Adelaide bourgeoisie with the surrounding hills, the idea that you moved to the hills "when the sewers smelled in summer". He also touched on the arrival of the gardenesque, particularly a version adapted to Mediterranean plants.

Richard Heathcote in his inimitable style told a beautiful story of a little girl growing up and the gardens growing with her. The trajectory of the life of Ursula Barr Smith to Ursula Hayward, from an Indian squaw to a designer interested in all aspects of flowers in design and art, was a good story setting the scene for both Carrick Hill and other gardens seen on the tours. A sad aspect of modern garden management emerged when it was revealed that crazy paving had been removed to protect the stiletto heels (and ankles?) of bridal parties using the pear arbour. Richard also detailed the designs that were making a literary story trail for young people to keep them amused in the gardens.

After these opening presentations there was a question time and most surprisingly Stuart Read opened the batting!

Kate Cullity spoke on context, cultural content and design as narrative reflecting these elements in the design work she had been involved in. She took us through the design thinking processes that had created the overall scheme of both North Terrace and the Australian Garden at RBG Cranbourne, as well as projects in France and Canada her firm was involved in. And she concluded: "The way we construct landscapes reflect who we are."

Stephen Forbes, Director of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, took us on a journey not only around "his" garden, via the work of his predecessors, but also to the wilds of central America and East Africa plant collecting. His tales of seeking additional germplasm for *Victoria amazonica* soon had him nominated as the Indiana Jones of the Garden World. His talk outlined the five dimensions by which Botanic Gardens had 'changed the world':

1. **Apothecary gardens:** the role of gardens from physick herbals through the continued search for medicinals
2. **Classground:** the role of gardens in development of the classification systems of botany from the middle ages to the present research using DNA analysis
3. **Economic gardens:** Adelaide has the "best Museum of Economic Botany in the World" still remaining, he said, and this was put into the context of the role of Botanic gardens as precursors of departments of agriculture and forestry research stations around the world, and in the case of Adelaide the role played in the introduction of wheat
4. **Gardens as a way of travelling the world:** the place of the exotic and in the local case the role of plants like *Victoria amazonica* and its new home being constructed

5. **Reconciliation:** finally, the role that gardens can and do play in our reconciliation with our natural environment as we still struggle to come to terms with the fact that we live in a dry country

Marylyn Abbott gave what was a strikingly candid expose of her own obsessions. And what obsessions they are. She took us on a journey of her own approaches to designing and redesigning and redesigning her own spaces in the UK and in NSW as changing influences inspired her. She frankly admitted to the role of travel in what she described as her "play gardens". But her final remarks reflecting on what she wanted to retire with to contemplate spoke to me and many others!

Dr Holly Kerr Forsyth took us on an interesting 'herstory' of the "meaning of gardens, particularly by women", to balance the "boys' story". I found it particularly germane for the audience dominated by women! Going through the experiences of Elizabeth McArthur, Georgiana Molloy, Louisa Ann Meredith, Una Faulkner, Winifred West, Beatrice Bligh, Edna Walling and Kath Carr gave us an extraordinary perspective over two centuries. Holly reminded me, though I hope I did not need it, not only how important gardens are for the spirit but how important women are for the garden!

Stuart Read to whom we all shout "Hola!", took us on a look at the eastern Iberian peninsula, its garden history over six centuries and its resonance to garden design today. This was particularly relevant to Mediterranean interests Australians now have. A series of "bocadillos" wet the appetite for more inspiration from Spain.

Dr David Jones told probably the saddest story of the conference of the loss of the Walling Gardens. We were reminded how lucky we are to have people with passion like the Michell family who pursue an interest in historic garden preservation, when it is so much easier for most to neglect the roots of historic design.

Professor Lance McCarthy on the other hand told a hopeful story of how history itself had inspired a garden he has been designing. Following his longstanding interest in the extraordinary botanical work carried out by Flinders, Bauer, Brown and Westall, with their diverse though well-fitted skills, he has developed a garden in the Adelaide Hills overlooking the Gulf which grows the species collected, described or drawn on this expedition. As well Lance shared with us a taste of some of the superb original artefacts he owns from these various men.

Betsy Taylor took us on a very personal family history of an extraordinary forebear, George Chapman, who appears to have been the Samuel Pepys of Adelaide. It was a story that will continue to unfold as Betsy does her research but which revealed a rich seam of information into garden practice and management over a very long period in central Adelaide, yielding a rare window for historians. It also revealed the lack of information on cooking aubergines!

Finally Marilyn Kuchel led us into the Swinbourne Manuscripts and launched a book based on the work undertaken by Robert Swinbourne, produced by the AGHS in South Australia. Marilyn described Robert as a 'bowerbird' and at the end one could only say "hooray for bowerbirds" and Robert Swinbourne! She also enlightened us all on the history of South Australia and gardens before 1836, which few of us understood.