

One huge contrast between the Canberra of Lindsay's time and the Canberra of today is in the much closer development of new suburban enclaves such as Gungahlin and Molonglo. With smaller block sizes and many large houses in these recent areas there is little space left for major plantings, so that the streetscape is dominated by built forms rather than growing ones. Whereas the buildings of earlier Canberra fit within the green environment (as the view from Mt Ainslie shows), the new areas have a completely different aesthetic. Even allowing for the short space of time so far for the establishment of greenery in the new areas, they do contrast with earlier phases in the national capital's development. What Lindsay would have thought of the new town planning can only be guessed at, but I believe he would have been somewhat disappointed.

Lindsay's work ranged from big spaces like Telopea Park and the Forestry School grounds to small ones like embassies and advising on private gardens including that of the late Frank Fenner. Lindsay's own Red Hill garden was attractive too. While we recorded his memories in the winter of 1992, the beautiful call of an eastern spinebill rang out from the garden, and along with Lindsay's words it too is immortalised on the recordings.

Lindsay Pryor died in August 1998. The green capital that he and many others worked so hard to develop remains as his memorial.

**Matthew Higgins** is a Canberra historian and writer. The 1992 Lindsay Pryor project was undertaken under the auspices of the National Trust of Australia (ACT), with government heritage funding, and support from the National Library of Australia. The recordings are held by the library, and an indexed transcript is held by the National Trust.

Max Bourke

## *John Gray—a life in trees and parks*

Dr John Gray OAM has been a significant force in the design and implementation of park and garden design in Canberra. He is a quiet man with a great sense of history and respect for the environment 'We can't afford to ignore the way in which this planet works', he says. 'We can't afford to ignore its natural ecosystems and the resources we're benefitting from.'

John was born in 1930 in Sydney. After accepting a cadetship from the NSW Forestry Commission in 1948, he spent two years at Sydney University and a further two at the Australian Forestry School in Yarralumla, Canberra. John went to the Queanbeyan and Bateman's Bay offices of the Commission, and worked with the Commission for five years before moving to the Forestry and Timber Bureau in Canberra to run their seed laboratory. Because there was high international demand for eucalypts globally after World War II, seed importing and exporting was a vigorous trade.

At this point John's career echoed that of Professor Lindsay Pryor, another forester turned parks manager. In 1961, 'still searching for something more challenging', John joined the Parks and Gardens Section of the Department of the Interior,

where he ran Canberra's landscape construction facility on behalf of the National Capital Development Commission. 'What was exciting was that the commission was starting work on the landscaping for the future Lake Burley Griffin, and I was working on delivering those projects', he says.

'I was responsible for the construction and the design work was being done by Richard Clough. He would bring out these drawings and we would meet in the field, look at the site and he would tell me what his concept was. This is completely different to the way it is done now, where detailed drawings are prepared and the exact position of every plant is on the drawing. I would try to understand his concept and then he would leave me to it. I would get one of my staff to bring a great chaff bag of poplar pegs with a slice cut out of each to write the name of the tree on it, and we would lay it out. I would say a circle of 16 *Populus nigra* 'Italica' (Lombardy poplar) here, and my staff member would order would order them from the Yarralumla Nursery and plant them up'.

During this period John worked on planting many of the significant areas of the national capital — particularly in the Parliamentary Triangle — and

new suburbs in the town centres of Belconnen and Woden Valley. Realising the importance of design, he did a Masters in landscape architecture at the University of California Berkeley. (He and his family arrived in the midst of US student peace and anti-war protests, and the smell of tear gas became quite familiar.)

He studied with landscape designer Garrett Ekbo (1910–2000), became interested in the ways in which people use public parks, and examined the redesign of a major park. He was an interested observer in radical student confrontation involving the People's Park near the Berkeley campus, a park created in 1969.

On his return to Australia John taught park management at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now University of Canberra). He joined the National Capital Development Commission in 1974 to work again with Richard Clough, and succeeded him in 1980 as head of landscape architecture. He was very active in bodies like the Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation (National President) and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. He stayed until the National Capital Development Commission was closed down in 1988. John has always had a sense of history, and the date he selected for retiring from the public sector was 11 November, chosen for its historical connotations. It is the day associated with the sacking of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, and the hanging of Ned Kelly!

As a private landscape consultant from 1988 till 1999 John worked on projects ranging from the Old Parliament House Gardens to the Australian War Memorial and Magna Carta Place northwest of Old Parliament House, all of which achieved many accolades. He has contributed much voluntarily, including work as a guide at Old Parliament House, and development of a public park with his friend Neil Inall, a former ABC rural broadcaster, at Currabubula in northern NSW. The park honours legendary rural broadcaster Lorna Byrne (1897–1989), who came from that place.

John's interest in history led to his first book, *The Glebe Park story* (1989), followed by another book on Commonwealth Park and a doctorate on his great predecessor, Canberra's first horticulturist, Charles Weston. He has had a broad impact on the urban designs of Canberra, and it is one still visible today.

**Max Bourke AM** is a former Deputy Chair of AGHS. He was trained in agricultural science and art history, and has been CEO of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Australia Council for the Arts.



#### Reference

John Gray (1999) 'Thomas Charles George Weston (1866–1935) – a critical review of his contribution to the establishment of the landscape foundations of Australia's national capital'. Doctor of Environmental Design thesis, University of Canberra.

Canberra landscape designer John Gray in the gardens of Old Parliament House, 2016.

Photo: Bernadette Hince

John Gray's most recent book *Roses, tennis and democracy — the story of the Old Parliament House Gardens*, Canberra was published by the National Capital Authority in 2014. It traverses the ideas of the founding fathers of Australia about gardens for recreation and pleasure, as well as the travails of transferring the Federal Parliament from Melbourne to Canberra and the subsequent rise and fall – and rise, again – of the gardens surrounding (Old) Parliament House, which are now on the Commonwealth Heritage List. One of our own AGHS founders, Tamie Fraser, made a significant contribution mentioned in this book.

Printed copies are available from the author (9/146 Shackleton Circuit, Mawson, ACT 2607) for \$17.50 including postage within Australia. It is also available electronically at [www.nationalcapital.gov.au/attachments/article/232/roses-tennis-democracy-2014-web.pdf](http://www.nationalcapital.gov.au/attachments/article/232/roses-tennis-democracy-2014-web.pdf).