

CANBERRA

City in the Landscape

Ken Taylor, Halstead Press and the National Capital Authority

RRP \$69.95

Canberra 2007

Reviewed by **Max Bourke AM**

This is a very important book for AGHS members. Arguably it does what we should be doing as the basis for our work, right around Australia.

Professor Ken Taylor AM, former professor of Landscape Architecture at Canberra University, international scholar on cultural heritage issues and president of the National Trust of Australia (ACT) has set out to try to determine the causes, human and natural, for the way Canberra now looks the way it does.

There are plenty of good books about Canberra, its political history and overall design. None of them so carefully tease apart the present like this one, and scratch back through the history to what we botanists call the basic edaphic factors, because in part, the answer lies in the soil.

Taylor gives appropriate weight to 'the coincidence of ideals', whereby the concepts of the City Beautiful and the Garden City were central to utopian visions of city planning at the time of the competition for the design of the city.

He also rightly acknowledges the importance of Charles Weston, and his background as a horticulturalist in the creation of the landscape, even though he was criticized by Griffin at the time. Weston set out to determine what species would grow and perform well in this cold, high altitude and high pH soils (at least in the valleys). He was succeeded, among others, by Professor Lindsay Pryor, a great botanist and forester, who left Canberra with an extraordinary botanical legacy of world importance.

Weston's meticulous species testing has left us with many of the core structural species we see in Canberra today including *Eucalyptus mannifera*, *Eucalyptus cinerea*,

Cedrus atlantica and *Quercus palustris*. One of the many interesting new, to this reviewer, sources for Weston's work was the survey that Taylor discusses, by Richard Cambage. In 1911-12 Cambage, who was later to become the President of the Linnean Society of NSW conducted a detailed survey of the natural landscape of the ACT. Weston, with advice from Joseph Maiden, then Director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens, was keen to use native species. Both the climate and soil conditions restricted this.

While Griffin was, to this reviewer at least, a great designer, he was no arborist and a vigorous arm-wrestle about both street plantings and re-forestation over which species to plant rolled on between him and Weston. Griffin was inclined to accept advice from people he met apparently socially, rather than from the professionals he could have asked, and who were employed to advise.

Taylor takes us through the plantings of the 'coloured hills' of Canberra, a concept the Griffins proposed and that was executed, where possible, by Weston. This section gives a valuable insight into the arboreal heritage we have in Canberra today.

Today, Weston's legacy, particularly from the period after Griffin left, is best appreciated from the summit of either Mount Ainslie or Mount Pleasant which reveal the density of the city's tree cover and its diversity.

The policy of issuing of free trees and shrubs to new householders had an enormous effect upon today's landscapes, even though some of the species issued are now considered weedy and cause problems today.

When the distinguished forester and botanist Lindsay Pryor took over he later remarked that he was surprised to