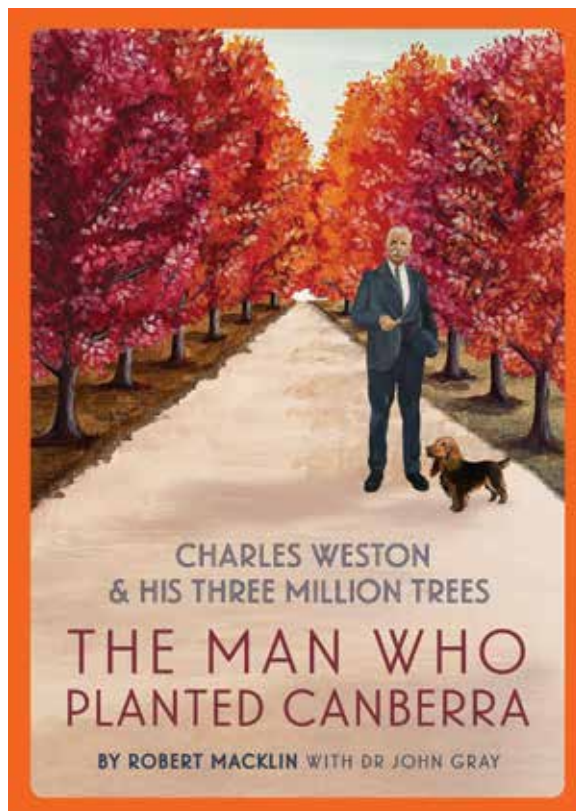


The man who planted Canberra

Robert Macklin with Dr John Gray



In May 1913, the English-born horticulturist Charles Weston was made officer-in-charge of afforestation, Canberra, the site of the nation's new capital city. He died in 1935, four years after retiring from his monumental planting effort and moving to Sydney. His obituarist, 'Redgum', lauded Weston 'as a poet, an artist and a tree-planter in one' and regretted that his contribution was not sufficiently well known. Redgum would be most pleased to see Weston's story now fully told. Robert Macklin's biography draws on the work of Dr John Gray, another significant contributor to Canberra's treescape, who died in 2023. This project was supported by the AGHS's Kindred Spirits Fund. Here, we join the story as Weston chooses a site for his experimental nursery.

The first plantings included *Pinus insignis* (now *P. radiata*, Monterey pine), *Cupressus macrocarpa* (Monterey cypress) and other seeds and plants from suppliers and nurseries overseas. As well, [Weston] secured lists of local plants, including prevalent weeds. As Lenore Coltheart writes, 'His planting lists were for experimental trials useful for shade and shelter, food and fodder, as well as the beautiful and ornamental'.

In developing his masterplan, Weston made several trips to Sydney for consultations with [Botanic Gardens director] Joseph Maiden who arranged for him to visit the Melbourne Botanic Gardens as well as the horticultural developments at Ballarat and Macedon. They were indicative of a growing Australian consciousness of the need to reverse the ravages of the colonial era. John Gray says:

[Charles Weston's] innate landscape and horticultural skills, his experience and training in Britain and Australia, and his understanding of what was needed at this critical stage of the capital's development, all contributed to his ability to make these decisions speedily and decisively.

In his *Report re Site for a Forest and General Nursery*, Weston rejected two proposals by [senior surveyor] Scrivener for areas near Mount Stromlo. Both sought to 'improve atmospheric conditions' for the astronomers, but Weston's proposed site at Yarralumla was more generous and he put it directly to [Home Affairs department secretary] Colonel Miller, who within five days had withdrawn the area from public lease.

It encompassed a 40-hectare (98-acre) nursery/experimental area divided equally into 20 hectares (49 acres) each for a sheltered area for propagation and testing, and the rest for holding young trees prior to planting. The latter would also include the nursery buildings and an official residence for the officer-in-charge. Clearly, Weston envisioned himself and his family living on site as soon as practicable.

A further 120-hectare (296-acre) 'demonstration arboretum'—later known as Westbourne Woods—would be divided into three areas: one for Australian trees, the second exclusively for exotic species and the final for a collection of conifers. He noted that the exotic species would:

create the glorious Spring and Autumn effects for which the cool, temperate countries of the world are justly noted, and I predict that the chief ornamental charms of the future Federal City's surroundings will be these same Spring and Autumn features.

The final area, the conifers, he said, 'will probably prove to be one of the greatest attractions to tree lovers anywhere in Australia'.

Miller agreed without demur and sent it also to Melbourne for ministerial signature. While approvals would be delayed until June 1914, Weston pressed ahead immediately and began the removal of stumps with a mechanical lifter on 20 October 1913. Miller authorised the acquisition of Westbourne Woods for £530 in June 1914.

Weston immediately staked out the area for his own system of arboreal testing—no doubt inspired by his experience with David Thomson at Drumlanrig Castle. He planted the trees in expanding circular clumps, a device that gave maximum information on the effects of the environment, from wind direction to planting proximity. But easily his most urgent decision was his choice of an officer in charge of eliminating the grey [rabbit] plague.

Hearing of Weston's need for an experienced rabbitier, 27-year-old James Carrington Brackenreg wrote an application noting the 120 kilometres

(75 miles) of rabbit-proof fencing he had developed at Narrabri. Weston approved, and the two men would soon develop a congenial working relationship.

By now, Weston had a share of the 610 construction workers on the site and they set about installing fenced areas of about 160 hectares (400 acres) each, eliminating the rabbits by digging up or ploughing the warrens, poisoning, trapping and finally sending in the 'dog men' to finish the job. Brackenreg's son—also James—says, 'I can well remember them with their packs of twenty or so very mixed dogs rounding up the last few rabbits in what is today the city area. It was my father's first major task and it did not happen overnight'.

Weston noted the enormity of the undertaking in his work diary:

Outside the areas enclosed by the rabbit-proof fences, rabbits are very numerous. Some are so badly infested that the return from the land is reduced to a minimum, and until concerted and well directed action is taken, no improvement can be expected.

Brackenreg also carried out stock inspections and increasingly played an active role in the government's acquisition of former land grants in the Territory. His wife, Helen, accompanied her husband to the site where at first they lived in a tent. 'Colonel Miller was very much against wives,' Brackenreg's son says. 'Many of the young couples were living under canvas.'

However, with Weston's intervention, they were able to obtain two rooms and the use of the kitchen at St John's Rectory, courtesy of the Reverend F.C. Ward. 'Life was lonely but pleasant,' Helen says, noting that Weston was a frequent visitor.

We played 500 with Mr Ward and his sister ... The staff of the department of Home Affairs ... were mostly young people not long married and we all became friendly ... The work people lived in bag houses in quite a large settlement near Duntroon and at the Cotter and the school for their children was a tent.

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Charles Weston and his wife, Minimia, 1925 Weston Family Papers, ACT Heritage Library