

Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi. *Reading the Garden: the Settlement of Australia*, Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2008, 288pp.

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Reading Australian garden histories may reveal a few gardens similar to those in Britain or Europe, but interpreting the notion of ‘garden’ is captivating, particularly if read through a range of lenses. There is, for example, the utopian lens. For Europeans, from Rousseau to the post World War Two migrants, Australia has long been imagined as an Antipodean ‘Garden of Eden’. From the late 18th century on, as European cities were becoming increasingly compromised by the impact of industry and mercantilism, some idealists considered that there may be possible utopias, free of corrupting materialism and polluted skies, within the uncharted territories of the Pacific; places that are tropical gardens of rainforest trees.

Alternatively, there is the opportunistic lens. For the 18th century materialists, there was a new commodity: unusual plants. When Joseph Banks returned to Britain with his collection of strange plants from Australia, the nurserymen were keen to obtain seeds and plants for the great gardens in Europe. These plants were valued so highly that the period from 1770 to 1820 was known as the Era of Australian Plants.

Clearly Australia was perceived as a garden well before British occupation; however it is the perception of garden-making after first settlement that *Reading the Garden*, explores. This book joins a group of celebrated studies of Australian gardening history, including Beatrice Bligh’s seminal book, *Cherish the Earth—the Story of Gardening in Australia* (1973), in which Bligh alerted us to the many ways of seeing Australian history, using the words of Mark Twain from his *Following the Equator* (1897):

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer,... It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.

Apart from the unusual plants and animals, Australian garden history reads ‘like the most beautiful lies and all of a fresh new sort’ because the first settlers could not see the way the country was already in use. They were unable to perceive the complexity of the existing Aboriginal culture and its relationship to the land, so the ‘garden’ in this unfamiliar place was an invented tradition; a blending of remembered gardens, suitable for a cold wet climate, combined with ‘Garden of Eden’ tropical aspirations. David Malouf notes such Australian contradictions in his 1998 Boyer Lectures, *The Spirit of Play*, where he points out concepts of ‘Being Australian’ are constantly destabilised by paradox.

Reading the Garden provides yet another way of interpreting the Australian garden, in this case using themes of gender, citizenship, appropriation and national identity. In

Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamdi's book, the concept of 'garden' is broadened to include parks, streets and cemeteries, and the gardens themselves are not the great gardens but rather the early cottage gardens and later, the suburban gardens.

The book is divided into two sections; the first dealing with the process of settlement where making a garden was an act of survival as well as an expression of hope and the second exploring the garden as national imaginings from Federation to the present. Numerous engaging quotes throughout the book give voice to individual gardeners talking about their modest gardens. Avoiding discussions on the elegant romantic garden created by skilled gardeners such as Mrs Macquarie, this book focuses on the little traditions of neatness and order in unpretentious gardens that were seen to bring a civilising 'whiteness' to the settlement.

Sam Bass Warner III, the author of *To Dwell is to Garden*, is similarly interested in such 'little traditions' when he describes the community gardens in Boston's disadvantaged neighbourhoods. He notes Heidegger's observation that the word 'to dwell' fuses two older words each with distinct meanings: to build and to cultivate land. Bass Warner reveals the multiple human meanings involved in carrying out everyday tasks, within the framework of people seeking land to grow food and re-instate their identity. In *Reading the Garden*, Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamdi look at similar multiple meanings through the simple act of growing food where a particular cultural relationship is established through cultivating soil, despite the uneasy knowledge that this land was already owned by the Aboriginal population.

The first section, 'Seizing and Seeding: Colonial Endeavours', sets the scene for gardening in the emerging colony through the details in women gardeners' journals. This gendered and gentle focus ignores the drama associated with many significant men who were horticulturalists and gardeners. From the earliest days of settlement, Australian plants were a source of conflict and tension between the early Governors and their botanists and the powerful horticulturalists, as well as the King's botanists who were the explorers/plant collectors. This is a fascinating reading that would have been worth including because some of the early estates and colonial parks, even today, reflect such passion as seen in the long Bunya Pine avenue in Bidwill's garden, *Bella Vista*, gracing the Cumberland Plain west of Sydney and the majestic Moreton Bay fig avenues in key parks in Sydney.

The first section also introduces the notion of cemeteries as gardens highlighting how quickly the dead and dispossessed are forgotten amid the challenges of colonising a new land. In the second section, 'Dreams and Nightmares: National Imaginings,' the reading focuses on nationalism and the ways it was evident in the garden. In neat domestic gardens, maintaining the garden was associated with good citizenship and moral order, and as such was considered to be a contribution to the nation. Similarly, garden maps of Australia in school gardens, together with plantings for Wattle Day and Arbour Day, were seen to foster young nationalistic citizens.

A gendered reading of the garden brings out the inevitable paradoxes associated with gender roles in gardening, including the changing roles of women gardeners during periods of war where the skills of the Women's Garden Army provided food for the nation, as well as making direct contributions to the war effort. Despite this, post war

suburban gardens reverted to distinctly gendered spaces, aspects of which continue into the present.

The garden as cemeteries and memorial avenues continues to be explored in the second section, providing interesting insights to the commemorative role of plants. I have long been fascinated by the way the Kurrajong tree, often the only surviving native tree in difficult terrain, became the emblem of First World War soldiers and in many Australian memorial plantings replaced Lombardy Poplar avenues. The New South Wales town of Gundagai has a memorial of trees, where twenty four pairs of Kurrajongs are planted in the shape of a commemorative cross. Surrounded by four tall Washingtonia palms, a bleak concrete sculpture of a war-torn tree trunk occupies the intersection of the arms of the cross and is in line with the healthy 'lone pine' terminating the cross's long axis. To the east, one arm of the cross is terminated by a gate depicting the rising sun, while to the west and south, a creek defines the cross. This extraordinary memorial is relatively unknown because it is on the outskirts of the town and is overpowered by an adjoining avenue of large plane trees encircling the sports oval and an intrusive toilet block.

Such disrespect is in strong contrast to *Reading the Garden's* notion of memorial plantings of small crosses found beside busy roads. The authors explore a quite detailed interpretation of the values associated with such spontaneous actions by individuals and families in erecting roadside crosses with their desolate floral tributes.

The book is arranged as a loose chronology of gardens from first settlement to the present, so the concluding sections look at suburban gardens from the 1950s on, particularly the changing role of the back garden from food production to leisure and the advent of the bush garden in the 1960s. Here the revealing quotes by individual gardeners provide an immediacy that is most engaging. The final reading of gardens made by migrants is an on-going fascination of mine. I am particularly interested by the way such gardens differ between cities as much as by ethnic origins. In this book, the Melbourne gardens by migrants and their stories are engaging and also intriguingly different to those I have studied in Sydney and Brisbane; however none of these gardens will last! The gardeners have not made them to be passed on as an inheritance; instead the gardens reflect part of the migration experience—an aspect of dwelling in a new country. The gardens may last as long as the gardeners themselves, but in many cases, the gardens are just one of a series of gardens the gardeners have made. They are transitory cultural expressions and perhaps all we can do is catch their fleeting stories and attempt to understand their depth of meaning in the urban tapestry of Australian cities.

Reading the Garden is a comprehensive study of modest gardens and associated parks, school gardens, and cemeteries since first settlement. The richness of the readings in this book should be a catalyst to look at other ways the Australian garden can be interpreted. It is therefore of deep concern that the television garden make-over shows, the ultimate form of commodification, are erasing such possibilities. As the book points out: 'We don't garden anymore, we landscape'.

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