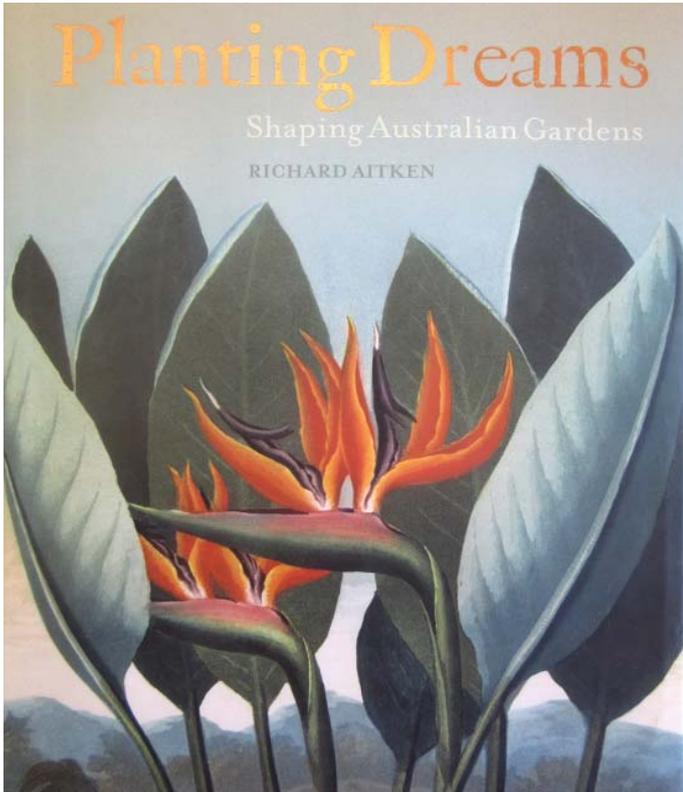


Gardens & Landscapes
Book Reviews

Richard Aitken, *Planting Dreams. Shaping Australian Gardens*, Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2016

By Ana Duarte Rodrigues

DOI 10.1515/glp-2016-0003



Richard Aitken's *Planting Dreams-Shaping Australian Gardens* is the result of the research behind the exhibition held at the State Library of NSW between September 3rd 2016 and January 15th 2017. This publication, made to accompany the exhibition, is a book on Australian garden art rather than the exhibition's catalogue.

Crossing literary sources, ancient and modern iconography and field research, the author offers an overview of the Australian garden art from the 1400s until current days. By surveying multiple topics of landscape design, gardening, botany, horticulture, husbandry, seasonal harvest and water systems, Aitken tackled garden-making as continuum throughout the Indigenous period, in a colonial context and under contemporary ethics and practices.

Starry night dominates the title page and offers the tonality as well as the tone for the all the design. Its exoticism highlights one of the main strengths of Aitken's book, which is to give some insight to the biophysical conditions found in Australia, as well as into the indigenous traditions that have conditioned Australian gardens; they have otherwise faithfully followed Western garden design.

The book is divided into ten chapters that cover the Australian art of garden history since the early modern period, organized in a chronological order. However, the chapters cover different timespans quite asymmetrically as the first chapter, 'New Worlds (1400s-1700s)', aims at covering three hundred years of garden history while each of the following chapters cover a period of around thirty years. Except for war times in which the Victory Gardens and the gardeners' contribution to the war effort constituted specific episodes, it is not always easy to grasp the criteria that lie behind the periodization proposed by the author.

In the first chapter the author includes some hints of the driven forces for Australian garden art development in the following two hundred and fifty years. The author begins the book by stressing the first-time Austral skies were represented in a Western publication and incorporates it within the vast context of maritime discoveries in which the Portuguese played a decisive role. In the early modern period, new parts of the world like Australia or Brazil were envisioned as 'paradisiacal' since they were still untouched lands, at least by Westerns. 'Utopias and New Edens' brings this idea to the forefront, and this is immediately followed by the discovery of a new world of flora and fauna.

Although exoticism would be the most appreciated characteristic provided by in the Australian flora, books on husbandry and botany are included to highlight the European background and at the same time show that utility was the most pressing characteristic in early colonial stages, whether in terms of its use to eat, to season food, to cure health conditions, as perfume or a decoration.

Furthermore, the author takes a great leap forward into English landscapegarden, where he includes an explanatory picture of ha-ha. However, this was essential to understand how Europeans perceived Australian landscape, as since the eighteenth century 'all nature [was] a garden' for British travelers. Finally, the first chapter concludes with a reference to the travel boxes for plants and seeds that have allowed the circulation of various botanical species between Europe, Asia, America, Africa and Australia ever since the period of the maritime expansion.

After these hints, considered by the author as essential to understand his detailed recounting of garden history up until today, the author begins with the event that occurred on January 26th 1788: The British occupation of Sydney Cove as they reclaimed Australian land based on the argument of terra nullius. The 1789 engraving with watercolor wash by Francis Fowkes provides the first image in which gardens in Sydney Cove are depicted. As the author states, the establishment of these gardens, and probably its orchards, farms, vegetables gardens foresaw the need to guarantee food for the navigators and the British settlers. By then, the British had already been educated to perceive that 'all nature is a garden.' Landscapes of luxuriant vegetation were the gentlemen's gardens while the gardens were productive farms.

Picturesque depictions of colonial Australia contrast with more realistic ones. Order, symmetry, and productivity were major features of colonial estates, rather than irregular compositions of landscape that evoked the paintings and perspectives of English landscape gardeners. In the late-eighteenth century, botanical curiosity and horticultural challenges rose and some native Australian varieties were included in books on botany and were grown in greenhouses all over Europe, in a to and fro movement of circulation of people, ideas, knowledge and specimens. Elements from faraway lands of the world were praised as exotic in Europe while fragments of European culture became a sign of civilization in Australia. Garden design was one of those. For

example, to establish Hyde Park in Sydney was one of Governor Macquarie's goals in the first decade of the nineteenth-century.

In 1816, Sydney's Botanic Garden was settled and plants from England, Brazil and South Africa were acclimatized there, but soon enough other exchanges were made with different nations, which went far beyond the boundaries of the British Empire. The ensuing period, as the third chapter indicates, was prodigious in establishing prosperous colonial agricultural and horticultural farms. Successful husbandry became a sign of progress both in rural and urban settlements. The author embedded these creations in the British theoretical framework, as periodical publications circulated in Australia, facilitating the dissemination of the existing models and sense of taste from the head of the Empire to the British colonies. However, these publications highlighted by the author as influential for Australian garden design were not only published in England. In fact, they also included a very successful French book by Gabriel Thouin, published in 1820, which had a major and impact both in Australia and Portugal. Thouin offered a series of garden architecture for different types of gardens using the French picturesque style.

Wealth coming out of productive estates was replaced by the gold rushes starting 1851. The chapter 'Gardens of green and gold (1851-1892)' evokes these two resources. Railways, steamships, telegraphic communications, journals and books were not only a sign of the British influence, but also a sign of progress and they secured the circulation of botanic specimens, ideas for garden, scientific knowledge and technology. Still, underneath the new apparent way of life as a colony of the British Empire, traces of indigenous traditions started surfacing, namely in Sydney's Centennial Park and in the ideas spread by naturalists who reclaimed the predominance of native flowers in Australian gardening. Indigenous flowers, shrubs, seeds and plants were exported to the most diversified destinations. Following international trends, horticultural challenges and botanical collections stemmed from the drive of private

Australian gardens in which colonial nurseries became an important business. This required expertise in wild botany, horticulture and plant geography, to such an extent that subtropical gardening could be analyzed as a 'trading zone' for the negotiation between traditional and scientific botanic and horticultural cultures. Stemming from gardens and landscape studies, the author biased historians of science and art perspectives. Hopefully, further research might follow these paths.

International exhibitions became showrooms for this expertise and contributed to disseminate Australia's riches, as societies started foreseeing the preservation of native flora and the environment. Although the readers can easily understand why this new chapter ends in 1913, they may not be able to grasp why 'Reconciling town and country (1893-1913),' begins in 1893, especially since the author points out Ebenezer Howard's *Garden-Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) as the European back-stage. More than garden cities in the suburbs, built to escape from the Industrial Revolution negative consequences, the urban renewal in Australian cities promoted middle classes gardening to which several publications of small format on gardening and horticulture, as well as cut flowers and floral arrangements were dedicated.

The interwar years - 'les années folles' -, were equally experienced in Australia, which was envisioned at the time as the land of opportunity; the modernist design mixed with Mediterranean horticulture and native flowers inspired the new gardens, where floral clocks, lawns and other international features could be found. Concrete, steel, glass and chrome were the architectural counterpart of these new gardens. After World War II, the middle-class dream was owning a suburban house with a garden; the promotion of outdoor recreation and touristic industry, together with a growing awareness of landscape and wild life conservation determined the metamorphose operated in Australian gardens and landscapes. More comfort, more color, more ecologic concerns set the path for a new level of creativity and a new utopic paradigm in the last forty years of Australian garden design. Backyards gathering old traditions,

kangaroo-shaped topiary, urban vegetable gardens in a back to basics movement show the resilience of Australian gardening to face Anthropocene's negative impact. From the author's standpoint, gardeners are well-placed to fight back against global destruction and to protect and privileging what's local.

This is a history of Australian gardens told through images, many of them included in the exhibition, which was organized in eight nuclei - 'Gardens of the Mind,' 'Dynamic Nature,' 'Inspiring Culture,' 'Respecting Utility,' 'Designing with Plants,' 'Domains of Pleasure,' 'Science in the Garden,' and 'Depicting Plants and Gardens.'

Although the book is projected as 'a visual feast' for the common reader, it is equally rigorous for a researcher as it includes references within notes and the illustrations' list, as well as bibliography and an index in the book's last thirty pages.

Australian gardens have become a hot topic in garden history for the last decade, and with the flood of new stimulating books such as

Australian gardens have become a hot topic in garden history for the last decade, and with the flood of new stimulating books such as Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi's *Reading the Garden: the Settlement of Australia* (2008), Colleen Morris' *Lost Gardens of Sydney* (2008), Andrew Saniga's *Making Landscape Architecture in Australia* (2012), Anne Latreille's *Garden Voices: Australian designers-their stories* (2013), and by the same author of *Planting Dreams* (2016), *The Garden of Ideas. Four Centuries of Australian Style* (2010) and *Cultivating Modernism: Reading the Modern Garden 1917-71* (2013), it might seem there would be no further room for surprise. *Planting Dreams* is one of those.