

LIGHTING OUR GARDEN, SHADING OUR YARD

HISTORIAN KATIE HOLMES FEELS A NEED FOR DEEPER DIGGING IN
TWO RECENT BOOKS ON POPULAR OUTDOOR SPACES

WHEN the anticipated parcel carrying Lynne Strahan's book *Gardens of Light* arrived, I viewed it with a touch of surprise. It was big and heavy. Having committed myself to reviewing the book sight unseen, I was now confronted with the prospect of reading a much larger, weightier tome than I had envisaged. My daughter, excited by the arrival of anything resembling a present, was pestering me: 'Open it, Mummy! Open it!' Once the contents were revealed, her

REVIEWED Lynne Strahan, *Gardens of Light: The Making, History and Meaning of Gardens* (Penguin, Melbourne, 2002, \$35.00); Cheryl Maddocks, *Australian Backyards: How to Create Your Ideal Backyard* (Penguin, Melbourne, 2002, \$55.00).

disappointment was evident, as was my relief. Inside was a glossy, coffee-table-sized book: *Australian Backyards: How to Create Your Ideal Backyard*, by Cheryl Maddocks. Full of useful advice on any style, problem or design feature for the back garden, it was not quite the reflective, engaging book I was hoping for.

When Strahan's volume finally did arrive, its size and style immediately set it in that other category of gardening books; call it gardening literature if you will (as others have): not 'how to' manuals, but books written by gardeners about their passion. It should not surprise us that Lynne Strahan, writer and former assistant at *Meanjin*, should turn her literary attention to gardens. 'The garden is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves,' notes Jamaica Kincaid, the Antiguan-born writer now living in Vermont; or as the North American writer Michael Pollan puts it: 'Writing and gardening, these two ways of rendering the world in rows, have a great deal in common.' As with other books in this genre, Strahan's book is a bit like a garden, drawing its influences from all over the place; from actual gardens, from literature, art, garden catalogues and memory. We travel with her to some famous Italian gardens, to rose-sellers in Turkey, or to a gallery with Dutch flower paintings. We learn the history of the camellia, wonder at the effect of colour in the garden, and observe the play of light on moving flowers. And, of course, we become quite well acquainted with Strahan's own garden, its making, its meanings, its triumphs and failures, and the imaginings that brought it into being.

Towards the end of her book, Strahan notes that 'developing a way of seeing is the end of all gardening'. Garden-writing in Australia has only recently turned to reflecting on the meanings of a space that consumes significant amounts of the time, energy and money of large numbers of the population. Traditionally, the writing has been celebratory, marvelling at the beauties of particular gardens, enthusing about plants, or styles, or recounting the authors' own relationships with gardens past and present. These authors have also shared a 'similar social origin',² although this is rarely acknowledged or seen as relevant. Indeed gardening is frequently seen as a classless activity. There has been little to challenge us to think beyond ourselves, to consider and question the role of gardens in the historical and contemporary landscape of Australia, or their role in the continuing imperial landscape. The genre of garden literature, however, has moved on, with the best examples exploring themes that reach beyond the front fence to reflect on what gardens tell us about ourselves and our culture.

Gardens, let us be clear, are not neutral spaces. They are imbued with personal and cultural meanings that require some digging to bring to light. The very idea

of the garden is a cultural one, brought to this country by Europeans, adapted, changed and challenged by successive waves of immigrants. In gardens we find attitudes to nature revealed, ideas about class displayed. Talk to gardeners and read gardening books or catalogues, and you will similarly discover concerns with gender, and a great deal about national identity. As Pollan states, 'just beneath its placid surface, the garden is buzzing with social and political controversy'.³ What we plant, and how we tend this space, matters, for it reflects back to us something of the way we see ourselves, and the ways we wish to be seen.

The subtitle of Strahan's book, 'the making, history and meaning of gardens', promises much, although the dust-jacket blurb should give us pause: 'a celebration of gardening in all its aspects ... an exuberant, life-affirming observation of the natural world in all its wonderful detail'. Strahan has a passion for gardening, a sense of humour and an ability to bring to life the images, colours and moods of her favourite garden places. Her description of the 'treeless waste' of Port Fairy's main street will register smiles and nods of recognition, although we may note the sense of superiority that sharpens her humour: 'only the visually impaired or the aesthetically void could find [it] attractive. These are intersections that echo with desolation.'

Most readers will also share her sense of rage at the axing of trees because of their falling limbs, although the accompanying analogy might raise an eyebrow: 'It is passing strange that a new fascination with nature and its works should be accompanied by the ridiculous idea that it should behave like a suburban housewife, tidying her house until it is completely safe and soulless.' Strahan suggests that there is something lacking in a culture that could allow such destruction, citing several countries where old trees 'are revered and loved'. But what is it that is lacking, and why? How might we explain the cultural absence Strahan identifies? These questions are not addressed. Instead, like so many garden-writers, Strahan implicitly becomes an arbiter of good taste in the garden. Where is the recognition that aesthetic sensibilities are entwined with our class, ethnic and racial backgrounds? It is far easier to judge and dismiss, or indeed to ignore, than to ponder the reasons why, to seek to understand. After all, the felling of trees has a long history in Australia, one that Roger McDonald sees as a 'continuation of the pioneering spirit: a tree is there to be cut down'.⁴

Strahan's interest, however, is not with Australian gardens, and the landscape they spring from is given only passing mention. She does write about the landscape surrounding her own garden in Victoria's south-east, near Port Fairy. Her evocation of its seasons and its mood is sharp, even haunting, and it is clear that

nine years after moving to Fingerboard Road she has developed the sense of place she had not initially seen as important for garden-making. Gardening itself is a crucial way of developing a sense of place and indeed this has been an important function of gardens in Australia's history. But such activity has not necessarily been accompanied by a recognition that the land itself had a history prior to white settlement, or that Australia's history was other than white.

Strahan retains a curious silence even about the relationship between Australian gardens and their European heritage. For the colonisers, the idea of the garden provided a way of seeing the landscape, a reference point that contributed to their assessment of that landscape as lacking: endless, featureless, barren, empty.⁵ In turn, gardens became a tool of possession, a way of claiming the land, of rendering it more known and familiar. In planting gardens colonists both changed the landscape and invested it with new meanings. And as they wrote about their gardens—in letters, diaries, notebooks, newspaper columns—those meanings became part of the way of seeing and experiencing the garden.

It has not been just a matter of being derivative from European models. The exhortation to 'grow more natives' has been around for over a hundred years, and this too is not a simple matter but has harnessed different arguments in support. For some it has been about utilising existing plants rather than levelling the lot and beginning again. Others frame their arguments in terms of national identity and the importance of recognising where it is we live, while for others again the practical considerations about water consumption are paramount. In recent years a further perspective has been added: the plants we grow in our gardens should not just be native, it's contended, but also indigenous to the area—a position that seems extraordinarily purist and ahistorical, not to mention impossible to achieve. The language used in these debates ('natives', 'indigenous', 'exotics') should alert us to the possibility that there is more going on here—in particular concerns about who and what should be kept in and out⁶—than a discussion about plants might initially suggest. Despite a century of encouragement, however, most gardens, particularly in south-eastern Australia, are still predominantly made up of exotics. This is not because native plants are not suitable for the garden, but because of our dominant understanding of how a garden should look. No doubt the exhortations to change our gardens will continue, but the cultural shift necessary for such a revolution does not appear imminent.

The garden has been a site for other controversies in recent years. One of the most heated of these revolved around a claim in 1997 by the Howard government that freehold land might be subject to native title claims. Suddenly, it seemed, our

treasured back yards, the subject of Maddocks's book, were under threat. There was no basis to the claim, but the fear thus aroused highlighted the intense investments we have in this space and revealed the assumption that, by definition, it belongs to whites. The back yard is part of the garden, but demarcated from the front garden by different uses. Fenced in, one of its purposes is to keep some things in (such as children) and undesirable things out, including most things native: plants (apart from the odd eucalypt), animals and people. The back yard marks a boundary between the familiar and the strange, the familial, and everyone else. Unlike the front garden, the back yard is not on display. It mediates the landscape, providing a safe haven from the land beyond the fence and those who walk upon it.

Back yards, and gardens more generally, have functioned as evidence of our civilisation, preserves of 'whiteness'. The idea that Aborigines may have claims over this space disrupted that sense of certainty and comfort. Most significantly, it suggested that ownership of this title, this space called the back yard, may not be legitimate. For if native title exists over the back yard, the space is not what we thought it was. Not only is it not safe *from* blacks, it may, in fact, *be* black.

As its title inadvertently suggests, considerations of this kind are a long way from the discussion in Strahan's *Gardens of Light*. Much as I enjoyed the book, with its illustrations by painter Brian Dunlop, it left me hungry for a more reflective, analytical engagement with the themes she addresses. The subtitle of Cheryl Maddocks's book, with its focus on the so-called 'ideal', is yet more revealing of its limits. What an ideal it offers! It just may come in handy if we ever do get around to making a cubby-house.

NOTES

1. Jamaica Kincaid, *My Garden (Book)* (London, 2000), p. xiii; Michael Pollan, *Second Nature. A Gardener's Education* (London, 1997), p. 6.
2. Belinda Probert, 'How We Shape the Garden', in Peter Timms (ed.), *The Nature of Gardens* (Sydney, 1999), p. 70.
3. Pollan, p. 223.
4. Roger McDonald, *The Tree in Changing Light* (Sydney, 2001), p. 52.
5. See Jay Arthur, 'The Eighth Day of Creation', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 61 (1999), pp. 66–74.
6. Kylie Mirmohamadi, "'Wog Plants Go Home": Race, Ethnicity and Horticulture in Australia', forthcoming 2003, in Australian Garden History Society, *Studies in Garden History*. My thanks to the author of this article for her thoughts and suggestions on my own article here.