

BOOK REVIEW



Lost Gardens of Sydney

by Colleen Morris

ISBN9781876991296

Publisher: Historic Houses Trust, Australia

Paperback

Available from: shop.hht.net.au

As soon as you pick up this book and flick through it, you know, if you are in England as I am, that you are looking at a different land. The illustrations of gardens and landscapes all have space: above, around and beyond.



Space above, around and beyond: Tempe Estate by Conrad Martens c.1839. In C21st the house remains, but is surrounded by tall buildings. From a Private Collection.

You notice the shapes of the trees: the grass tree, for example. We know this plant as a piece of 'exotica', available at a high price, in the book's drawings it is as common as the hawthorn is here. When you see the drawings of a house, with 'Jane Austin' characters in front, and kangaroos on the lawn, and read several times in the introduction the words 'bush' and 'bushland' you know for certain that you are in Australia.



Drawing of the grass trees, John Thompson 1832. Reproduced by permission of the Dixon Library, State Library of NSW

Colleen Morris takes us from the first settlers at the end of the eighteenth century to the present day: two centuries and two decades of gardens. The speed with which the gardens are changed according to fashion seems faster than that in the UK, where a history of gardens last for many hundreds of years. So, for someone immersed in English and European gardens, this book is a fresh new world. Gardens were made out of rough land which had never been cultivated. What the Australians cottoned on to, seemingly earlier than the British, was that British style planting did not thrive in the climate, and they made their gardens from native wild plants. The gardens of the first settlers, i.e. the ones in charge not the convicts were influenced by William Gilpin's book *'Remarks on forest scenery'* published in England in 1791. In 1836 one Thomas Shepherd wrote of 'British concepts of landscape design for an Australian climate', with ornamental ponds and islands, decorative cottages and caves Colleen Morris says 'the early colonial gardens...are exceptional for more than just their beauty. Collectively they demonstrate the interaction of the European settlers with the Australian landscape'. The English influence was, for wealthy families, overtaken by the Italian influence in the late nineteenth century.

The book is divided into generic chapters such as *'Villa gardens and nurseries'*, and *'Rusticated fantasy and outdoor living'*. One enjoys the process of finding out, for example, that Sir John Jamison built terraces to grow vines: "Where stones cannot be had, the front of each (terrace) must be supported by wood"; sees the quiet seat in a woodland setting that

could be anywhere – except for the enormous *agrostichum grande* (a large tropical stags horn fern) in the tree branches; the villa house, Drummoyne, named after a Scottish estate, built in 1856 employing 70 artisans from France in its building.



Annandale: a 'geometric plot'. Reproduced by permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

Then one becomes aware of the repetition of statements about families being unable to maintain the gardens. Aware of the break-up and sale of large gardens in separate lots: of suburban Sydney encroaching on those large spaces around the houses, with their sea views, and gardens, One picture of 1936 shows a house, once in the centre of a large and beautiful garden, surrounded by six feet of planting in the centre of a square of roads, One arrives at the last chapter 'Under threat' with an alarm that has grown over several pages. while another house, without any land, is dwarfed by skyscrapers. Sydney is of course a prosperous and desirable location and people need somewhere to live but the heritage of gardens has suffered. Colleen Morris, heritage consultant that she is, combines the study of the 'lost gardens' with the need for open-air public space which the gardens could have provided (a few have). The gardens of Sydney become 'lost' not in the romantic way of being restored and recreated as they often are in Britain, but lost for ever. This book combines a fascinating study with a warning about the conservation, or otherwise, of heritage .It is at the end of the book that one sees the truth of the quotation used in chapter one quotation from Australian author Kylie Tennant, talking about a bid to protect an area of bush in 1971, 'The unborn Australian will ask for his birthright and he handed a piece of concrete'.

© words: Bella D'Arcy

See also the [Interview with Colleen Morris](#) under [GARDEN PEOPLE](#)