



An Interview with Professor Richard Clough

Jo Hambrett

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Last year Professor Richard Clough, architect, landscape architect and educator, presented his outstanding collection of garden books to the Historic Houses Trust's Library.

He began collecting books in London, influenced by the example of one of his teachers, and inspired by reading Christopher Tunnard's "Gardens in the Modern Landscape" 1938. This seminal work on modernist landscape design, featuring modernist houses designed by Australian expatriate Raymond McGrath, had an historical perspective, with unexpected references to 19th century garden writers. Clough sought out these gardening books, then little valued and inexpensive. He collected for his own education and bought books on all aspects of garden design. When he was appointed to the University of NSW as Professor of Landscape Architecture and Head of School, he encountered teaching based on unfounded assumptions about Australian gardening and Australian attitudes to gardening. So he began to gather a collection that would give proper historical background to the subject.

Megan Martin, Library & Research Collection H.H.T. NSW

Richard Clough was the first landscape architect to be employed by the National Capital Development Commission in Canberra. His major landscape design projects included Anzac parade, Government House Grounds extensions and Lake Burley Griffin and surrounding parklands. He also advised as a consultant on several school and University campuses. The Kings School, Parramatta and Macquarie University Ryde are of particular interest. Both are outstanding designs, incorporating indigenous eucalypts and rock forms, and have withstood the test of time magnificently. Hopefully Prof. Clough can be persuaded one day soon to record their design history. Prof. Clough also had input into the design of the Valder family's "Nooroo" at Mt. Wilson NSW. It is a most serene and logical landscape, I would strongly suggest a visit if you haven't been and are interested in garden design.

When I read the above article (Spring 2004 edition of the Historic Houses Trusts "Insites" magazine), I thought that "teaching based on unfounded assumptions about Australian gardening and attitudes to gardening" would be of interest to GDSG members. I contacted Prof. Clough who gave his time most generously for the interview which appears below. I am sure, like me, you will be diving for the reference books after reading it.

It was a real privilege to be able to spend time with the professor, a man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of not only gardening history but Australian history as well.

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Professor Clough finds both the oft repeated mantras; that early colonial gardeners disliked and were intimidated by the native flora, and that they tried to recreate a British landscape in the colonies, baseless and annoying!

Whilst teaching at University he felt that the substantial achievements of early Australian colonial gardening was being unwittingly downgraded.

There were widespread inaccuracies taught about colonial *attitudes, availability* and the *use* of plants.

Many of the first educated people to settle the colony had a wide world experience. Informed by the Georgian era of enlightenment, they were full of curiosity about the land they were living in (more so than many subsequent settlers).

The first currency lads and lasses knew little of Britain as their birthplace was Australia. They were influenced by the land of their birth. There was a large variety of plant species available to the early colonists.. Trading with India, China, the West Indies and Dutch East Indies the very early colony had a great variety of fruit and vegetable species - possibly more than we now enjoy! Camellias were brought to Australia over a decade before Mrs. Macarthur, commonly thought to be the first, imported them.

The broad assumption that people found the bush monotonous is clearly incorrect. The Sydney bushland is fascinating and has

inspired people from the very beginning of the settlement, as proved by the countless writings, paintings, sketches and scientific expeditions of the time.

Prof. Clough cites Mr. Ross, Tasmania's equivalent of Thomas Shepherd, as typical of the period. Ross advocated, in his Hobart Almanacs, using the existing Australian bushland to fit house garden and property. Clearing and retaining, not altering and introducing - using what is there and building out.

Clearly there were many influences at work on the early colonial gardens. Global and internal. Perhaps, as Prof. Clough suggests, our ancestors were far more practical and proactive and demonstrated much more initiative in their gardens than subsequent generations. A quick look at the very early historic gardens will demonstrate their almost exclusive use of drought tolerant species - no water on tap to take for granted then. Miles Franklin's "Childhood at Brindabella" gives a very accurate picture of country gardening of that time.

It would seem then we have done the early colonists and ourselves, a great disservice in the teaching of our gardening history. We have neither learnt from the mistakes of our forbears, nor from their numerous successes.

I was interested in Prof Clough's thoughts on matters pertaining to design with Australian plants and the Australian plant garden.

Hailing from the Riverina Prof. Clough does not share the attachment to the Sydney flora of fellow landscape architects Bruce McKenzie and Harry Howard. He comes from an area where extensive clearing has produced a "Hans Heysen" landscape and the variety of native plants is smaller.

He calls himself a Functionalist - integrate the desired function into the landscape and work with what is there. If its poplars and willows so be it. He is a believer in Utility. Why are you building the garden? What are your needs? The function will vary from person to person. Gardens are the transition between the larger landscape and the areas people use. All sorts of gardens have validity, he will not condemn a garden even if he doesn't like it.

He feels that just using Australian native plants does not necessarily make it an Australian garden.

Speaking with the confidence of a true Modernist, he is irritated by strong environmentalists who, he feels, have given up the struggle to create anything that is truly worthwhile. Man can create environments that are just as effective as natural ones. To refuse to build dams because of the environment is foolish. Man can create something else with the water that is saved. Fruit bats in the Botanic Gardens should be removed as they are destroying the very reason the gardens are there ie; the plants.

He is strongly influenced by British landscape architects Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin who were concerned with the man made environment and developed an ecological approach to landscape design in the inter war years. He is a great admirer of Mrs. Molly Gibson, later Grassick, a contemporary of Edna Walling, who had a strong social conscience and was interested in non domestic spaces - workplaces, playgrounds and such like. Among her major landscape projects were the Shell Refinery at Geelong, the vacuum Oil Terminal at Altona, the Glaxo factory at Bayswater and the Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel.