

Review:

# Habits of inclusion

Reviewer:

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Australia's unlikeliest television presenter, Peter Cundall, recently conducted viewers of the ABC TV's *Gardening Australia* on a tour of his garden in the Tamar Valley, Tasmania. After war service in Europe, Cundall enlisted in the Australian army in order to emigrate. The army sent him to Korea, but subsequently he settled in Tasmania. Now nearing 80, he has established an ornamental garden, orchard and vegetable paddock on a scale that recalls the enterprise of an earlier immigrant, John Glover, whose farm was the subject of his picturesque landscapes and sketches. In 1830, aged 64, Glover and his wife joined their sons in Van Diemen's Land. His decision to leave behind a career that had won him critical and commercial success puzzled his contemporaries, as it has art historians since. Glover, the son of a tenant farmer, spent the last 12 years of his life establishing his own farm at Patterdale.

In 2004, Glover's work and career were commemorated in an exhibition, *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*, at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. His Tasmanian works not only represent his conservation and transformation of the conventions of landscape painting, they also document practices of agriculture and animal husbandry. Light saturates the southern landscape and discloses the detail of its human occupation: Aborigines and convicts, the artist and his animals. Like Glover's paintings, Cundall's program documents the labour of adaptation, as well as the products of that labour. The primary purpose of Cundall's garden is to provide food. It also allows experimentation in practices that regenerate the soil, conserve water and encourage biodiversity. He shares his practical knowledge with his audience and they respond with tips and advice. This exchange extends to a kind of moral wisdom: for Cundall, who grew up in Manchester in the Depression, gardening is what it is to be alive. On television, he exhorted his viewers to "forget jogging, start digging". Many Australians must agree, as gardening is a flourishing pastime across the country.

The "sea change/tree change" phenomenon has attracted a lot of attention in recent years. In the television program *SeaChange*, Sigrid Thornton's character looked for a solution to personal unhappiness and career anxiety in the idea of community. *SeaChange's* opening credits rolled against images of the city, tall buildings and a tangle of freeways. This is the iconography of an anxiety that centres less on means than on ends. In what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called "the individualised society", the question of choice has changed

its character. Where an earlier generation (like Cundall's) faced scarcity and inequality, aspirations for a different life had first to deal with the means to that end. Securing the means entailed a politics of solidarity. In the contemporary world of apparently expanding choices, insecurity centres not on the capacity to choose but on where the choice might lead and what it might mean. In the essays collected in *The Individualised Society* (Polity Press, 2001), Bauman repeatedly cites Pierre Bourdieu: *La précarité est aujourd'hui partout*. This precariousness, the sense that one does not have a grip on the present, much less the future, undermines confidence in oneself, in others and in institutions.

Yet, at the same time, people manage this insecurity by focusing on personal projects, particularly the search for identity. The appeal of "community" has never been stronger. The dangerous temptation of identity, its implicit non-identification with the other, produces "them" and "us". According to Bauman: "Identity owes the attention it attracts and the passions it begets to being a *surrogate of community*: of that allegedly 'natural home' which is no longer available in the rapidly privatised and individualised, fast globalising world."

Community founded on identity divides and separates. It also preserves hierarchies and established networks of power. And it denies the complexity of associations that shapes individual lives. We all belong to dispersed groups. Some of these attachments are temporary; some involve formal membership; others depend on processes of mutual recognition. Bonds may be strong or weak, and some memberships intersect. Gardeners and artists can be regarded as communities of this kind. Cundall's gardening, for example, overlaps with his membership of organisations as diverse as the Organic Gardening and Farming Society, peace groups and his work as an envoy for the Save the Children Fund. Studies of national and ethnic communities have exposed problems of boundaries and exclusion. In the case of dispersed groups and "particle communities", to use Sam Fleischacker's term, habits of inclusion are critical to their continued existence.

A spate of recent publications in Australia have taken up the issue of inclusiveness and the dissolution of boundaries between "them" and "us" from the standpoints of political theory and social history. Much of this work, nevertheless, locates the problem in the frame of race and ethnicity. Another strand explores connections between land and belonging. But what of ordinary encounters with strangers and newcomers? How does the daily work of learning to be at home in a new place proceed? Some recent books about gardening offer insights into habits of inclusion. As Jane Brown has observed in *The Pursuit of Paradise* (HarperCollins, 1999), a social history of gardens has shifted attention from aesthetics and design, from scientific expertise, to the ordinary people who get dirt on their hands. These people and their gardens leave few traces, yet their practices persist. Uncovering their histories also reveals a great deal about the way their work was implicated in social life and class relations.

In *Green Pens: A collection of garden writing* (The Miegunyah Press, 2004), Katie Holmes, Susan Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi have drawn on archival and literary sources and oral history to allow gardeners to speak about their joys and disappointments, and about the way gardening features in their family, social and economic relationships. Many of these sources are fragmentary, so the book is organised around themes that place gardens in a wider context of public life and national identity. Gardening has been seen as a means of building character, incorporated into education programs designed to produce good citizens; and gardens have long been designed to cultivate civility and other virtues.

The writings in *Green Pens* reveal common concerns and shared hopes, and show that gardens, like other cultural formations in Australia, are a locus of ambivalence about boundaries. These are boundaries between the old and new worlds, the natural environment and land under cultivation, city and suburbs, the living and the dead, secular modernity and its various others. The cultures of cultivation that successive waves of immigrants brought with them saw the replication of plantings and garden design, and the adaptation of ancient forms to modern purposes. The walled garden, for example, is found in Australia in the design of religious houses, psychiatric hospitals, prisons and internment camps. Walled gardens derive from Islamic and Christian traditions of enclosure. In monastic houses and in the busy precincts of cathedrals like Notre Dame, they incorporated spaces for the varied dimensions of human existence. In particular, design elements such as the bower, the reflective pool and the labyrinth were designed to allow withdrawal from worldly distractions, contemplation and communion with God. *Green Pens* characterises its Australian examples as places of confinement and exclusion, inhabited by the marginalised and oppressed. In these institutions, therapy, rehabilitation and productive work take priority over contemplative repose. Here, the *topoi* of the monastic walled garden have been relocated to the garden cemetery.

Cemeteries, as opposed to poignant lonely graves and public mausoleums like the Australian War Memorial, have an uneasy place in Australia's cultural landscape. Nineteenth-century garden cemeteries, designed as places for family remembrance, were quickly overtaken by all manner of urban developments. One writer to a local paper in 1895 described Boroondara cemetery in Kew: the stream of mourners in black sashes and feathers joined by gay young things, "drest in all the gaudy clothes which a cut-throat competition among drapers can give them - vieing for brilliancy with the very growing flowers upon the graves - and bubbling all over with high spirits and laughter and merriment", the young women with bright hair and white shoes. Population density and the hygiene movement's support for cremation saw the relocation of cemeteries to the suburban fringe. Low-maintenance lawn cemeteries displaced the cemeteries of the often-neglected family plot.

To return to Tasmania (a rich source of material for *Green Pens*), the poet Margaret Scott has described her restoration of a derelict house and garden on the Tasman Peninsula. Scott was born in Bristol, emigrated to Tasmania in 1959, and bought the Federation house Tara in 1987. Its original owners were orchardists, who built the house on the profits from their first crop of apples, exported to the United Kingdom. The interior walls and ceilings were panelled with fashionable and practical Wunderlich pressed metal, each room featuring a different decorative floral design. This floral abundance was matched in the home garden. Scott's inquiries about the garden revealed a newspaper profile of Xenia Alene Jenkins, the "home industrialist", whose labour produced some 250 different items of food, including fruit and vegetables, preserves and cheese, fish, fowl and bacon. This accomplished woman was a local legend who still inspired respect long after her death. As Scott comments:

*In all this she was seen not simply as winning personal glory but as typifying a way of life, so enabling her neighbours to take pride in themselves and what they did. She gave them hope by pointing the way through a desert of hard labour to a timeless paradise of milk and honey, tennis courts and preserved fruits, whether metal or crystallised. And she gave the lie to anyone in the big city who looked down on country people as rough, stupid or dull, by showing what could come out of a small remote community, by taking the ordinary stuff of the lives of Peninsula women and transmuting it to something magical. People still talk about the sensation Mrs Jenkins created when, like a sculptor or painter, she mounted a one-woman exhibition of her garden's bounty sealed in shining turrets of preserving jars.*

Scott restored the house, though her efforts in the garden fell well short of those of her predecessors. But, like Jenkins, she was to exemplify her moral strength and her connection to the peninsula community through her work. In 1996, Martin Bryant murdered locals and visitors, including people known to him, at Port Arthur. This event had profound repercussions, nationally and locally. The debate about the regulation of gun ownership produced a town and country divide. At Port Arthur, picking up the pieces involved a tension between reparation and revenue that centred on appropriate commemoration. Scott published a book about the massacre, *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage* (Random House, 1997). This work, no less than Jenkins's home industry, represented the community to itself.

Scott did not like Tasmania when she first arrived and it took her years to feel at home there. Her essay on Jenkins's house Tara, "Prospects from a metal garden", published in 1999, documents both her acceptance of her community of fate and its acceptance of her. It details habits of inclusion centring on work and civility. Sadly, fire destroyed the house Jenkins built and Scott restored. Scott's attachments to the landscape and community of the

Tasman Peninsula have been preserved in her poetry and in *Changing Countries* (ABC Books, 2000), a partly autobiographical work. Her intersecting membership of her adopted local community and the republic of letters connects private life and public commitment.

In *Wildflowering* (University of Queensland Press, 2004), Margaret Somerville has described the life of Kathleen McArthur, which was devoted to the identification and conservation of the plants that secured the dunes of Queensland's Sunshine Coast, from Caloundra to Cooloola. McArthur, a botanical illustrator, also championed the cultivation of Australian plants in suburban gardens. The emergence of the bush garden was a feature of Australian suburbs in the 1960s. Key figures in this development, Ellis Stones and Graham Ford, worked together after the war in the Diamond Valley, north-east of Melbourne, where a close-knit community centred on the artists' colony, Montsalvat. In Queensland, McArthur published her drawings so that the beauty of these relatively unknown plants would be more widely appreciated. She also wrote short dramatic pieces, performed at the local community centre, to publicise conservation issues and other public concerns. Together with her friend Judith Wright, she worked to make conservation a popular movement. Kings Beach, where McArthur lived, is rapidly being overtaken by high-rise, but a few gardens like hers remain, along with a wildflower reserve at Tooway Lake. Somerville's biography is subtitled "The life and places of Kathleen McArthur". Her narrative shifts attention from the conventional biographical interest in family history and private life to the affiliations that shaped McArthur's civic involvement.

Gardening, as Peter Cundall and his devoted television audience agree, is a way of life as well as a means of survival. Histories of gardeners and gardening suggest that gardening may cultivate other things such as an ethical disposition and habits of inclusion that might go some way to eroding the boundaries of "them" and "us". ■

## References

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