

FRIENDS OF THE ST KILDA BOTANICAL GARDENS

Transcript of a speech given to the members by Patricia Convery

Ferdinand von Mueller (1825-1896)

Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller could be described as a renaissance man so extensive were his interests and output.

Apart from being the director of the Royal Botanic Gardens from 1857 to 1873, for which he is most famous, he was also the Victorian Government Botanist from 1853 to his death in 1896. He was a botanical taxonomist but also made contributions in the fields of geography, agriculture, horticulture, forestry, palaeobotany and pharmacy. He is credited with discovering and tabulating more flora than any other person.

He was an intrepid explorer (very often alone) of parts of Australia previously unknown to Europeans. He also encouraged and helped the leading explorers of his time, including Forrest, Gregory, Mcdougall Stuart and Ernest Giles. Indeed he was on the organizing committee of the Burke and Wills expedition. However he did not want Burke as leader of the expedition.

He was also a dominant figure in the scientific and intellectual life of his adopted country.

Von Mueller was the founder of the Royal Society of Victoria, chairman of the Philosophical Society and President of the Victorian Geographical Society.

In addition it has been estimated that 3000 letters from him in one year was not an unusual number. His incoming and outgoing correspondence over his lifetime is said to have been in the order of 300,000. And it is said that the post office required two men to pick up and deliver his mail. There are 20,000 letters in existence alone between von Mueller and his international network of collectors.

He published over 800 papers and major works on Australian botany and lectured on subjects ranging from rust in cereals and the calibre of tea in Victoria to an historical treatise on the advancement of the natural sciences thru ministers of the Christian Church.

He was a major contributor to international science. He was internationally renowned for his knowledge of Australian flora. Medals and awards from around the world bore witness to the recognition of his achievements: honorary memberships of scientific societies, a British Knighthood (1879), fellowship of the Royal Society of London (at age 36) and awarded their Gold Medal in 1888. The title "von" (1867) and an hereditary baronetcy (1871) were both from the King of Wurttemberg. These last two honours were in recognition of his large donations of botanical specimens from Australia.

His official title was Baron "in the order of Olga" (Olga was the Queen of Wurttemberg).

The mountain range, now known as Kata Tjuta (near Uluru) was originally named the Olgas in Mueller's honour by the explorer Ernest Giles. Giles was not the only one to name something after the von Mueller. There are nineteen place names in Australia commemorating von Mueller, ranging from rivers to city parks.

Von Mueller was ultimately awarded knighthoods by over 20 countries. (He was however lampooned by the press for his love of receiving honours. It was said that he spent too much time in pursuit of honours, to the detriment of the Botanic gardens).

Ferdinand Jacob Heinrich von Mueller (or Muller as he was born) was born in 1825 in Rostock in Germany

Both parents died of consumption while he was young, but he was given a good education by his grandparents. He received the degree of doctor of philosophy when he was 21 for a thesis on the Common Shepherd's Purse. He had also been studying for a career in medicine, but coming from a tubercular family he was advised to go to a warmer climate. He and his sisters, Clara and Bertha arrived in Adelaide on Dec. 18 1847. Von Mueller found work as a chemist, but also collected botanical specimens. In 1852 he sent a paper to the Linnean Society in London on "The Flora of South Australia". Von Mueller continued to contribute papers to scientific societies for the rest of his life. In this year he moved to Melbourne, armed with a

letter of introduction to the Lieutenant- Governor of Victoria, Governor LaTrobe. LaTrobe was impressed by von Mueller's knowledge of and contribution to the field of botany. In 1853 he appointed him to the prestigious position of Victorian Government Botanist. (This position was fifth in order of precedence in the Victorian colonial hierarchy).

This was a new position with no collection as a basis on which to build. It was von Mueller's task to establish a collection, which in effect required him to do the collecting. Within days of his appointment he set off to the then almost unknown Buffalo Ranges. From there he went to the upper reaches of the Goulburn River and across Gippsland to the coast. The neighbourhoods of Port Albert and Wilson's promontory were explored and the journey of some 1500 miles was completed along the coast to Melbourne. In November (of that year) he made another expedition to north-west Victoria, going up the Murray to Albury, to Omeo along the Tambo River and to the mouth of the Snowy River. When Mueller reached Melbourne again he had travelled about 2500 miles and had increased the number of known Victorian plants by about a fourth.

Towards the end of 1854 he again explored north-eastern Victoria, ascending and naming Mounts Hotham and Latrobe. On July 18 1855, he started from Sydney as a naturalist to the exploring expedition led by A.A. Gregory to the Northern Territory. The expedition was successful and Mueller for his part found nearly 800 species new to Australia. He published that year his "Definitions of Rare or Hitherto Undescribed Australian Plants". In 1857 Rostock University gave him the honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine, such was his growing international reputation. Von Mueller was very liberal with his specimens and dispersed many to other herbaria around the world. There is scarcely a major herbarium in the world that does not possess something from von Mueller. And in the same year (1855), at the age of 32 he was appointed the Director of the Botanical Gardens in Melbourne (and at no additional salary, but a residence did come with the position).

He was the gardens third Director, but first full-time one.

These gardens were established on 5 acres of land in 1846, only 11 years after the founding of the city, an indication of the priority given to gardens and gardening by the citizenry.

Von Mueller had worked closely with the second director, John Dallachy who had taken an interest in collecting Australian plants, both for use in the garden and for herbarium specimens.

Von Mueller immediately on his appointment as director petitioned the government for space to house his 45,000 specimens. It did not happen until 1861, (although the Herbarium had in theory existed since 1853) when the first herbarium was situated on the Domain near the Shrine of Remembrance. The new building had room for 160,000 specimens and this was filled in the first year. This herbarium was in use until 1934 when it was demolished to build the Shrine. The collection was transferred into the present building in Birdwood Avenue, completed in 1934 and was a gift to the state from Sir Macpherson Robertson to mark the Centenary of Melbourne.

Von Mueller also started a Library there. When he was appointed as the first Government Botanist there were very few botanical books in Victoria to which he could refer. Throughout his career he collected many of the texts needed for his work of discovering and naming Australian plants. Today the library contains one of the most comprehensive botanical libraries in Australia. The oldest published document in the library is a "Herbal" from 1531.

As director of the Botanic Gardens from 1857-1873 von Mueller was directly involved in their laying out and planting.

During his directorship the area of the botanic gardens was increased to the south and west and this added approximately 50% extra land. The formal system garden was added, experimental plots to the west of the lake were established, the nursery was developed, new areas of exotic planting were established, the earlier path system was retained but extended and adapted to suit the site and there was an erection of many more structures (including

pleasure buildings, such as the Orchestra Stand). The creation of zoological gardens to the north of the river occurred during his tenure. The erection of a bridge across the river connected with the zoo and the botanic gardens railway station. For the two years, (from 1859) that the zoo remained in the Gardens, the garden's title was Botanical & Zoological gardens. It reverted to Botanic Gardens when the animals were removed to Royal Park. (It was decided that there was not enough space in gardens for the grazing animals (such as dromedaries, goats, deer, alpacas and llamas)). Islands were added to the lagoon and a short-lived fountain was installed. This constituted the first steps into the transformation of the lagoon into a lake. An aviary was also installed and this remained one of the features of the Gardens of which von Mueller was most proud (along with a geyser, (a fountain which became inoperative after a while, as it was connected to the Yan Yean domestic water supply), a glasshouse, a pinetum (the conifers on the slopes of the Hopetoun Laws are today the remnants of this pinetum), and the *Victoria amazonica* water lily. Von Mueller was intensely proud of the successful growing and the subsequent flowering over four successive seasons of this royal water lily, cultivated in a special heated tropical house. The leaves of this plant are 2 metres across. Relatively large amounts of remnant indigenous vegetation were retained within the Gardens. But von Mueller also planted a multitude of exotics.

The Gardens were used for von Mueller's experimental work. Von Mueller now had the opportunity of pursuing a line of research in which he had always been interested, acclimatization, with special reference to economic plants.

Von Mueller was very interested in the transfer of plants and animals from one continent to another. He became a major figure in the "acclimatization" of plants and animals, their adaptation to new environments. The introduction of new plants of possible and special horticultural interest was foremost in von Mueller's mind, not only for the Botanic Gardens, but also to be spread through the various parks and reserves throughout the state.

During his time an extremely wide range of plants was introduced, eg. Cork trees from the south of France, acacias from India (for shade purposes), the Canadian blackberry, cedars of Lebanon, rhubarb, bilberry, several thousand Deodar cedars, hundreds of Washingtonia palms, various species of bananas, some of which when treated produced manilla fibre.

On the introduction of the blackberry, Mueller, championed this plant as a source of food for the bush. (However we now know how disastrous this introduction has proved to be). But he was very interested in the introduction of utilitarian plants. He expresses some faith in the white mulberry, not only as a hedge plant but also with the possibility of furnishing “a new branch of industry in the rearing of silk worms “.

But von Mueller also greatly valued native vegetation. He co-operated with the Field Naturalist Club of Victoria in its campaign to preserve Wilson's Promontory and the cabbage palms of East Gippsland.

In the arrangement of plants his approach to planting was, as he explained ‘to arrange them in their impressive living forms for systematic, geographic, medical, technical or economic information’

The idea of botanical gardens “were under pinned by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thought was based on the belief that as scientific knowledge expanded and truth were revealed, society would correspondingly progress, as exemplified by the Industrial Revolution”. (The Victorian Naturalist vol.113 (4) 1996 p211)

Von Mueller was very much of this thinking, “the botanical gardens being a place where the marriage of genteel learning and utility took place. One could observe the wonders of nature with the aim of unravelling its secrets”. (ibid)

The systematic garden was of most interest to him, a kind of living scientific exhibition, with exotic species arranged according to rigorous principles of classification.

But he also planted great avenues of trees, including Blue Gums, silky oaks and Illawarra

flame trees, as well as assorted oaks, some of which can still be seen on the Oak Lawn today.

The Domain was controlled by von Mueller during this period and the area was densely planted with avenues of mainly exotic trees , including among other the Oriental Plane tree.

During his time as director there was great horticultural expansion and the scientific basis for the collection was established. All the while he had an inadequate staff and a deficient water supply.

During this period von Mueller supplied the highest quality plants to the regional botanic gardens throughout Victoria. 31,455 plants and 34,474 cuttings were supplied to public reserves and gardens.

In the financial year 1857-58, 57 being the year of his appointment, Von Mueller was able to report that 39 public institutions in Victoria and 53 abroad, as well as 206 private applicants, received supplies from his department, the actual no of plants distributed within the colony being 7120 and 22,438 packets of seeds. This was an effort of considerable magnitude, keeping in mind the acute shortage of staff. And there was no payment to the Gardens for these plants and cuttings. In a 10 year summary prepared by Von Mueller recording his distribution of plants and seeds to public institutions from 1858-1867 he provides an insight into the various botanic gardens which existed in that period.

Those gardens listed in his summary and the year in which they first received plant material from Mueller are Geelong , Portland(1858). Ballarat. Warranmbool,Belfast, Beechworth (1859) Williamstown, Alberton, St Kilda (1860), Sale (1861) Kilmore, Newton, Chilwell Chreswick, Sandhurst (1862), Malmsbury (1863), Castlemaine (1864), Woodend Stawell,(1865) Ararart and Keynton (1866) And from these dates on , plant material was sent out annually.

Other gardens to benefit from von Mueller's interest were: the Hamilton botanic gardens which, in 1870 received 452 shrubs and trees,; Geelong Botanic gardens (1851) an aviary was built in 1864 which followed the 1857-8 construction of the aviary in the Melbourne botanic

gardens : Bendigo's White Hills Botanical Gardens were laid out in the 1870's , following von Mueller's rigorous principles of classification.

Von Mueller was also a patron of the Port Fairy Gardens for many years. He espoused the use of native plants and suggested that casuarina and lightwood replenish the dunes.

Casuarina still remain in the Gardens .The gardens also contained a line of stone pines (pinus pinea) vonMueller's favourites, but in spite of his many plant gifts precise records of species have not been found. Port Fairy Councillors often visited von Mueller in Melbourne and in July 1859 the council passed the first of many votes of thanks. Von Mueller continued to give plants and advice in spite of losing office to William Guilfoyle.

Von Mueller used the gardens he supplied as a trial ground. One of his primary focuses was the search for suitable species for the establishment of a softwood timber industry and naturally conifers were a prominent part of his distribution. He would get and make reports on their progress.

In September 1861 a report to the St kilda Council states that " a considerable proportion of the walks and paths in the Public gardens have been formed and gravelled and the beds laid out and several hundred plants and shrubs, principally contributed by the botanical gardens, and also by private gentlemen, have been planted and a gardener is now kept at work, the government having contributed 100 pounds as a grant in aid"

In their work the Planting committee of the St Kilda council consulted Von Mueller and it is thought he had an influence in the design and choice of tree species, in particular the pines, cypresses and Moreton Bay figs.

There is little documentary evidence of the original design of the gardens, their layout and detailing. However it is believed that the basic formal layout, major paths and many of the mature trees that still exist today are original". (Blessington St Gardens Redevelopment Study, September 1983. City of St Kilda).

“So prominent a role did von Mueller play in the supplying of free plants to regional gardens that there is strong evidence that the professional nursery lobby had some influence in his dismissal as Director of the Botanical Gardens. (The Victorian Naturalist Vol.113(4) 1996 p212). Indeed one of the Commissioners inquiring into von Mueller’s directorship of the Botanic Gardens was a nurseryman and von Mueller strongly objected to his inclusion on the board of inquiry.

“...However this did not stop von Mueller from performing what he considered a public duty and he was still supplying plants to the Castlemaine Botanical Gardens with plants as late as 1880”, (ibid)” seven years after his dismissal as director of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens.

Von Mueller was primarily a man of science. For him as stated, a botanical garden ‘must be mainly scientific and predominately instructive’. Von Mueller’s rigid scientific approach to design and layout of the Botanic Gardens was not to everyone’s liking, however.

Von Mueller’s limited design skills were amusingly encapsulated in 1872 by Anthony Trollope “the Melbourne gardens are the most scientific, but the world at large cares little for science. In Sydney the public gardens charm as poetry charms. At Adelaide they please like a well told tale. The gardens at Melbourne are as a long sermon by a great divine whose theology is unanswerable but his language tedious.”

A demand arose for more attention to be given to the aesthetic side of the gardens.

Following an inquiry began in 1870, which included William Sangster, as one of the three commissioners, (Sangster was the leading landscape gardener in Victoria. He later designed and carried out the making of the Exhibition Gardens), von Mueller was removed from the Directorship in June 1873 and replaced by William Guilfoyle. The gardens that we know today with the ornamental lakes, the broad lawns, the massed flower beds and the ornamentation, statuary etc are largely the work of Guilfoyle.

Von Mueller remained government botanist and suffered no pecuniary loss but felt his

dismissal from the Gardens was an injustice and he reputedly never entered the Gardens again. (He had to vacate the residence he had occupied as director, moving nearby to 28 Arnold St, South Yarra, so it is hard to believe that he did not peek over the fence every now and then).

He never married, though he did briefly contemplate marriage to a Miss Euphemia Henderson, but broke off their engagement, claiming ill health. (Euphemia is buried in the St Kilda Cemetery, but not near von Mueller)

He died in 1896. And as a testament to the high esteem and affection in which he was held, many thousands of people turned out for his funeral. The impressive stone monument over von Mueller's grave in the St Kilda cemetery was funded by public subscription and features a tall column with a brass medallion of the famous botanist.

Sources: Australian Garden History Vol. 7 (5) March/April 1996 p7
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