

Cultivating the Maidenhair and the Maiden Fair — the social role of the late nineteenth century conservatory.

Introduction

When Soames Forsyte, in John Galsworthy's *A Man of Property*, first realised the potential of Irene Heron as a wife they were standing in her step-mother's conservatory. The nineteenth century conservatory offered a respectable separation from the formality of a drawing room with the supervision of young people still possible but at a discreet distance. An outer door to the grounds might even provide a means of escape as Irene needed when Soames proposed to her later in the conservatory.

As Jessie Serle notes in her article on conservatories in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardening*, the daughter of the house could be displayed as well as birds, statuary, fountains, ornamental furniture and ferns.¹ Government House, Melbourne had a small conservatory off the drawing room. Well-known conservatories survive in Melbourne at Rippon Lea, Mandeville Hall, Villa Alba and Labassa but they also graced homesteads in the Western District. Cororooke, Glenfine, Kongbool, Murndal, Narrapumelap, Purrumbete, and Trawalla have, or used to have, conservatories which were directly accessed from their drawing rooms. The conservatory at Werribee Park is accessed from the billiard room. Perhaps the best example of a 'suburban' conservatory is at Barwon Grange, Geelong which is modest and rather charmingly makeshift.

There were three types of conservatories: stand alone conservatories, usually taking the form of a glasshouse or hothouse; attached conservatories, usually a pre-fabricated standard design in iron; and enclosed verandahs which ranged from the simplest to the most elaborate glazing arrangements. Some properties had more than one type. The types covered different scales and a range of social status. If you couldn't afford an imported conservatory, *Castner's* offered a simple local design.²

When young Lady Agatha, in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, accepts Mr Hopper's proposal of marriage and life in Australia, she does so in the conservatory while in the drawing room the older generation discuss the decline in London's Society. Well might a maiden fair linger longer amongst the maidenhair.

Geelong and Warrnambool Botanic Gardens

Some men had a personal and a professional interest in ferns as collectors. The Hon. Sir Frederick Thomas Sargood, MLC developed perhaps the biggest and the best private fernery in Victoria at Rippon Lea. We shall meet the Hon. T. H. Payne, MLC in his conservatory later.

The fernery in the Geelong Botanic Gardens was opened in October 1885 during the curatorship John Raddenberry (1872-1896). He had superseded the first curator, Daniel Bunce who died in 1872. It was 120 feet (37 metres) long, 60 feet (18.5 metres) wide and was located where the George M. Hitchcock Fountain now stands. The fernery was extended in 1886 by an octagon 60 feet (18.5 metres) high, with a pond located underneath. A third

¹ 'Conservatories', Jessie Serle in Richard Aitken and Michael Looker, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*, p. 158. See also Terence Land and Jessie Serle, *Australians at Home*, p. 106 for the caption of illus. 72 and pp. 188-190 for illus. 189 & 190 and their captions.

² Terence Land and Jessie Serle, *Australians at Home*, p. 30.

section was added in 1887, taking the total length to 300 feet (92 metres). By 1920 the ferns were becoming overgrown, and the fernery was demolished soon after World War II because the wooden structure was falling into disrepair. John Raddenberry is of special interest because he compiled an extraordinary book, a collection of fern specimens which is now held at the Geelong History Centre. The book is extremely fragile and awaits not just careful conservation but also appropriate research.

Charles Scaborio, (1859 - 1905) the curator of the Warrnambool Botanic Gardens planned a fernery from at least 1888 but it was not completed until the early 1900s.

A Regrettable Incident

But some maidens came to grief in ferneries and conservatories. As Sue Bennett writes in *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens*:

In 1847, at the age of twenty-one, the witty, vivacious and beautiful Dorothy Walpole was compromised in a Hampshire summer-house by George Smythe, an experienced rake and Tory politician. He suffered no long term effects from the incident but Dorothy's reputation was ruined. Queen Victoria refused to receive her at Court, and with her marriage prospects damaged beyond repair, Dorothy was hastily married off to her cousin Reginald Nevill, who was twenty years her senior."³

All was not lost, as we shall see. Cousin Reginald happened to be rich, very rich indeed. They went to live at Dangstein, West Sussex where Dorothy consoled herself with gardening, lots of gardening of the smartest sort. We don't know if she cultivated maidenhair ferns but she certainly cultivated a great deal. Her plant collection ended up as the best private collection outside Kew Gardens. She also continued her interest in conservatories.⁴ 'In total, Dorothy built thirteen greenhouses, together with peach and orchid houses, and melon and cucumber pits. ... The plant collection at Dangstein became famous, and new specimens were sent from all over the world.'⁵

Some Practical Advice

The social role of the conservatory in colonial Victoria, including the Western District, was derived from British sources. Although American texts were available, perhaps the most pervasive 'how-to' book was John Claudius Loudon's very well-known *Encyclopaedia of Cottage Farm and Villa Architecture*. Loudon was a Scot but lived most of his life in London. There was a copy of his *Encyclopaedia* at Warrock Homestead in the far west of the Western District. A simple detached glass house survives at the rear of the main house. Robert Kerr, the Professor of Architecture at London University tells us in his helpful book, *The Gentleman's House, From the Palace to the Parsonage*. He starts simply enough, 'The conservatory ... is merely such a structure as may be attached to the House by way of an adjunct to the Family-rooms, to accommodate potted plants, and perhaps a few creepers to

³ Sue Bennett, *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens*, National Portrait Gallery Publications, London, 2000, p. 86.

⁴ See W. R. Trotter, 'The Glasshouses at Dangstein and Their Contents', ; http://www.parksandgardens.ac.uk/component/option,com_parksandgardens/task,site/id,5205/tab,history/Itemid,292/

⁵ loc. cit.

cover a wall or run up a pillar.’⁶ There should be plenty of light and steps or stages to house the plants. Writing for the British public, he mentions the need for heating by hot water piped from the Boiler House. He also advises that aspect is important, that winter sunlight should be maximised, and, preferably, that morning sun should strike the conservatory.

Kerr also cautions against the problem of humidity. This is a serious problem faced today in the authentic presentation of the conservatories in historic houses. The conservatory at Rippon Lea has just been restored including plants watered under a strict protocol but the conservatory at Mandeville, located on the north side of the house, cannot have plants. Even the windows and door dividing the conservatory from the drawing room are heavily draped to protect the precious silk wall hangings. Warm humid air smells and spoils furnishings.

It must never be lost sight of that for a Conservatory to be too directly attached to a Dwelling-room is inadvisable. The warm moist air, impregnated with vegetable matter and deteriorated by the organic action of the plants, is both unfit to breathe and destructive of the fabrics of furniture and decoration. On a small scale, however, and when used only for comparatively hardy plants, it may be a very pleasant adjunct, provided it be never overheated and always well ventilated. It need scarcely be remarked that the sashes, of whatever kind, ought almost all to open, so that in summer weather there may be no difficulty in the admission of air precisely as required

Kerr reinforces the social role of the conservatory as an adjunct to the family’s living rooms as he continues.

The intercommunication most usual for a Conservatory is with either the Drawing-room, Boudoir, or Morning-room; or, what is probably better than all, with a Saloon, Vestibule, Gallery, or Corridor, immediately adjoining any of those apartments.

And he also mentions the importance of an ‘escape hatch’ for the maiden fair. ‘An outer door to the grounds is of course indispensable; indeed a small Conservatory is probably best of all when constituted to form a floral porch.’ This is just the route that Irene took when she fled from Soames. And the floral porch sounds just like the classic Australian closed-in verandah.

We know that Kerr’s book was available in colonial Victoria. There are now several copies in the State Library. There was a copy in the library of Wooriwyrite, built in 1885 near Camperdown, the home of the Shaw family.⁷ Almost certainly William Wardell, Inspector-General of Public Works owned a copy personally or there was a copy in the professional library of the Public Works Department. In any case, the Minister for Public Works took a copy of the book, pointed to the vignette on the title page and directed Wardell to design a new Government House for Melbourne ‘Something like that, on a scale slightly reduced’.⁸ The conservatory off the drawing room at Government House, again now used for the purpose, was surprisingly small.

Many of the mansions of Marvellous Melbourne had conservatories. The well-known conservatories at Government House, Rippon Lea, Mandeville Hall and Labassa have been mentioned. When ‘Laurderdale’, a journalist from the *Melbourne Punch* visited Sir Henry

⁶ Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman’s House, from the Palace to the Parsonage*, p. 126.

⁷ Mary Turner Shaw, *On Mount Emu Creek*, p. 146

⁸ Geoffrey Blainey, ed., *Oceana*, p. 30.

Wrixon, KCMG, the President of the Legislative Council at his home, Raheen, Kew, he was photographed in his library.⁹ Lady Wrixon allowed herself to be photographed with their daughter in the conservatory. The Hon. T. H. Payne, MLC also interviewed by 'Lauderdale', at Leura, Toorak, with not much prompting, was able to boast of his conservatory that 'Yes, I think it is the largest one in Melbourne, public or private, You know one of my hobbies is the collection of different varieties of palms, ferns, etc., and I am always on the lookout for fresh specimens, and wherever I go I manage to add something fresh to my collection.'¹⁰

There were many other conservatories, both of the purpose built type and the enclosed verandah. Bundalohn, Tennyson Street, St Kilda, the home of Henry Gyles Turner, Esq had an elaborate enclosed verandah. Iona and Southdean in Toorak, two Italianate villas designed by the architect, F. M. White, have very similar house plans. They appear to have identical purpose built conservatories. The front and rear conservatories at Rippon Lea were identical and used a prefabricated modular cast-iron system. The rear conservatory went for the construction of the new ballroom in the 1930s. It seems reasonable to assume those at Iona and Southdean were also standard designs. Another pair of identical conservatories can be found at Burswood, the Portland home of Edward Henty, and his Melbourne home, Offington, 499 St Kilda Road. Comparing an early photograph of Burswood with William Tibbits' famous watercolour of Offington, painted in 1878, their conservatories are identical. Edward Henty left his wife and daughter in Portland to tend to the maidenhair ferns when he went up to Melbourne in his capacity as MLA. Both conservatories are gone now but Burswood still has its splendid enclosed verandah.

Conservatories allowed ladies, including the daughters of the house, to participate in the hobby of gardening. 'Lauderdale' found Mrs Sachse watering her plants outside the glasshouse, when he interviewed the Hon. Arthur Sachse, Minister for Education.¹¹ And you can easily imagine that the three generations of fair ladies in the household of the Hon. Walter Manifold, MP photographed on their verandah at Woolaston, Warrnambool were interested in the health of the hydrangeas around them.¹² The verandah is not enclosed but it is a 'floral porch'. One of the last examples of an unidentified lady photographed in a conservatory just before the First World War comes from Murndal, south of Coleraine.¹³ She is likely to be Miss McKinnon, niece of the Hon. Samuel Winter-Cooke, MP and companion to Mrs. Winter-Cooke.

The Victorian novelist, Ada Cambridge (1844–1926) places much of her more intimate action in conservatories and ferneries. The maiden characters in her novel, *The Three Miss Kings*, foil seduction but find romance in the conservatory. In another Cambridge novel, *A Woman's Friendship*, serialised in the Age newspaper in 1889, she remarks how, at even such a public resort as Melbourne's great Centennial Exhibition, the fernery 'was a very good place in which to enjoy the society of your special friend ... few private premises licensed by [the famous chaperone to an Empire] Mrs. Grundy could furnish such nooks and corners, such opportunities for comfortable retirement'.¹⁴ Later in the same novel, at Yarrock, the

⁹ Michael Cannon, ed. *Victoria's Representative Men at Home*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Michael Cannon, ed. *Victoria's Representative Men at Home*, p. 30.

¹¹ Michael Cannon, ed. *Victoria's Representative Men at Home*, p. 37.

¹² Michael Cannon, ed. *Victoria's Representative Men at Home*, p. 52.

¹³ Terence Land and Jessie Serle, *Australians at Home*, p. 351. The photograph may have been taken as part of Lauderdale's visit to Murndal, 22nd October 1903.

¹⁴ Ada Cambridge, *A Woman's Friendship*, p. 9. Mrs Grundy is a character in Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1798). 'What will Mrs Grundy say?' became a touchstone for mid-Victorian respectability.

fine squatting residence of the tall, handsome and very rich widower, Mr. Seaton McDonald the invitation was clear: “Then come into the conservatory and look at my ferns ...”.¹⁵

A young lady could become seriously preoccupied collecting maidenhair ferns. There are more than 200 species of maidenhair and many more cultivars of the genus *Adiantum* in the family Pteridaceae, though some researchers place it in its own family, Adiantaceae.¹⁶ They are called that from the ancient Greek word *adiantos*, which means not wetted, referring to the way maidenhair fern fronds repel water. According to Burke’s Backyard, the most widely grown maidenhair in Australia, and one of the easiest to grow, is the *Adiantum raddianum* 'Fragrans'. The wild Australian native species, *Adiantum aethiopicum*, is a tough species that grows well outdoors in moist, shaded locations. The rough maidenhair, *Adiantum hispidulum* found in Australia and New Zealand also prefers being outdoors. Wikipedia notes that ‘There is a rich *Adiantum* flora in New Zealand with three endemic species (*A. cunninghamii*, *A. viridescens* and *A. fulvum*) in a total of ten recorded species. Many of these are common especially in the west and south of the islands.’ Species native to North America include: *A. pedatum* (Five-fingered Fern) and the closely related *A. aleuticum*, which are distinctive in having a bifurcating frond that radiates pinnae on one side only; *A. jordanii* (California Maidenhair) is native to the west coast; and one, named after the goddess of Love, *A. capillus-veneris* (Venus-hair fern) which has a native distribution that extends into the eastern continent.¹⁷ It’s enough to make a Botticelli Beauty blush.

The collection of plants in one woman’s garden has recently come to light. The widow, Mrs. Mary Moriarty (1820-1912) helped her brother Henry ‘to design and furnish a rather splendid two-storey house on the ridge above Inverleigh’.¹⁸ She lived with him at Lullote from 1856 and developed a garden retreat on the bank of the Leigh River below the house, which became famous as ‘Mrs. Moriarty’s Garden’. Her brother died in 1884 and her niece, Isobel Maud Willis became her live-in companion in later years. When Mrs. Moriarty died in 1912 her executors sold up everything. The inventory of the clearing sale gives a snapshot of her rural lifestyle.¹⁹ Most of the items appear routine but, perhaps to protect Isobel’s honour, she did have two double-barrelled guns and pea rifle in the sitting room. One of the most detailed parts of the inventory is the list of 56 plants, all apparently potted. The list includes typical plants such as begonias, cyclamen, fuchsia, geranium, gloxinia, and hydrangea. More or less topping the list are ten maidenhair ferns, two of which are noted as ‘very fine’. The location of these within the household is not certain. An historic photograph, probably with Mrs. Moriarty in the foreground, shows a small glazed enclosure at the western end of the verandah but only one pot plant is mentioned on the verandah in the inventory and the enclosure would be too small to accommodate such a long list. There was a timber stove-house at the rear of the house which may have been a more substantial conservatory. There was a fernery to the east of the house which is visible in early photos. Otherwise, the pot plants and hanging baskets could have been distributed around the house. There was a jardinière in the drawing room, for example. In any case, the long list indicates an interest and perhaps success in gardening even if the types of plants with its emphasis on ferns, palms and brightly coloured plants is thoroughly conventional for the time. We can only guess what young Isobel’s life was like at Lullote and only wonder if she was allowed gentleman callers.

¹⁵ Cambridge, p. 90.

¹⁶ Christopher J. Goudey, *Maidenhair Ferns in Cultivation*.

¹⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adiantum#Species>, accessed 27/11/09.

¹⁸ Derek Beaurepaire, *The Stepping Stone*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Norman Belcher & Co., “‘Lullote’ Inverleigh, Executors’ Clearing Sale’, copy held by present owners of Lullote. The list includes pots of jam and every cow in the dairy herd is named.

Young couples were hard pressed to find some privacy anywhere. The lithographer, Garvani summed up their plight in a caricature, a copy of which is held by the National Gallery of Victoria. He shows a young couple bending over pretending to be interested in a gold fish in a pond. One says to the other 'I love you' and the other, the maiden, replies in automatic agreement while a servant, or spy, in a fez looks on.

Meanwhile, back at Dangstein, West Sussex, Cousin Reginald had died and, worse for the garden, the conservatories and Lady Dorothy Nevill's plant collection, the money was running out. 'In 1879 she was forced to sell the house and plant collection, now the finest outside Kew. The prices were disappointing, though the great and the good came to buy.'²⁰ There is a happy ending, of sorts, to the story of Lady Dorothy Nevill. Queen Victoria finally died and, on Edward VII's accession in 1901, she was finally forgiven her early indiscretion. But, as Sue Bennett asks, 'was acceptance at court any compensation for the loss of her plant collection?'

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²⁰ Sue Bennett, *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens*, p. 86.