

“A MAN OF A THOUSAND OCCUPATIONS” AND HIS EARLY MELBOURNE GARDEN

Caroline Davies

When I first came to live in Melbourne in 1975, I became intrigued with the story of Charles Joseph La Trobe, the first Superintendent of Port Phillip District, twelve years before it became the Colony of Victoria, throwing off its subservience to the Colony of New South Wales. La Trobe became Lieutenant- Governor of the new colony in 1851, but was never accorded the full title of Governor which was given to his successor Sir Charles Hotham, nor was he given a residence in Melbourne or land on which to build a house during his tenure.

I soon acquired a copy of *Letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe* which had just been published by the Government of Victoria as part of its “Victoriana Series” and read of La Trobe’s interesting life before his Australian appointment. He had not been a naval or military officer, as most Australian colonial governors were, but had taught and travelled extensively, also writing a number of books on his travel experiences. In America he had met Washington Irving who has left this picture of the young man: “He was a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions; in short a complete virtuoso...” Then in 1837 La Trobe was sent to the West Indies by the British Colonial Office to report on how the recently emancipated slaves were adjusting to their freedom. His work impressed the authorities and very likely influenced their decision to send him to Melbourne two years later.

Edith Haeuser’s excellent article “A Herbarium with Australian Plants in Switzerland” in *TMG* 90, October 2017, was the catalyst for my writing about La Trobe’s gardening experiences in Melbourne, and I discussed my idea with her when we met again at the recent AGM in Southern California. I also owe a great deal to the C.J. La Trobe Society, particularly to Helen Armstrong, on its Editorial Committee and its Website Editor, who provided me with

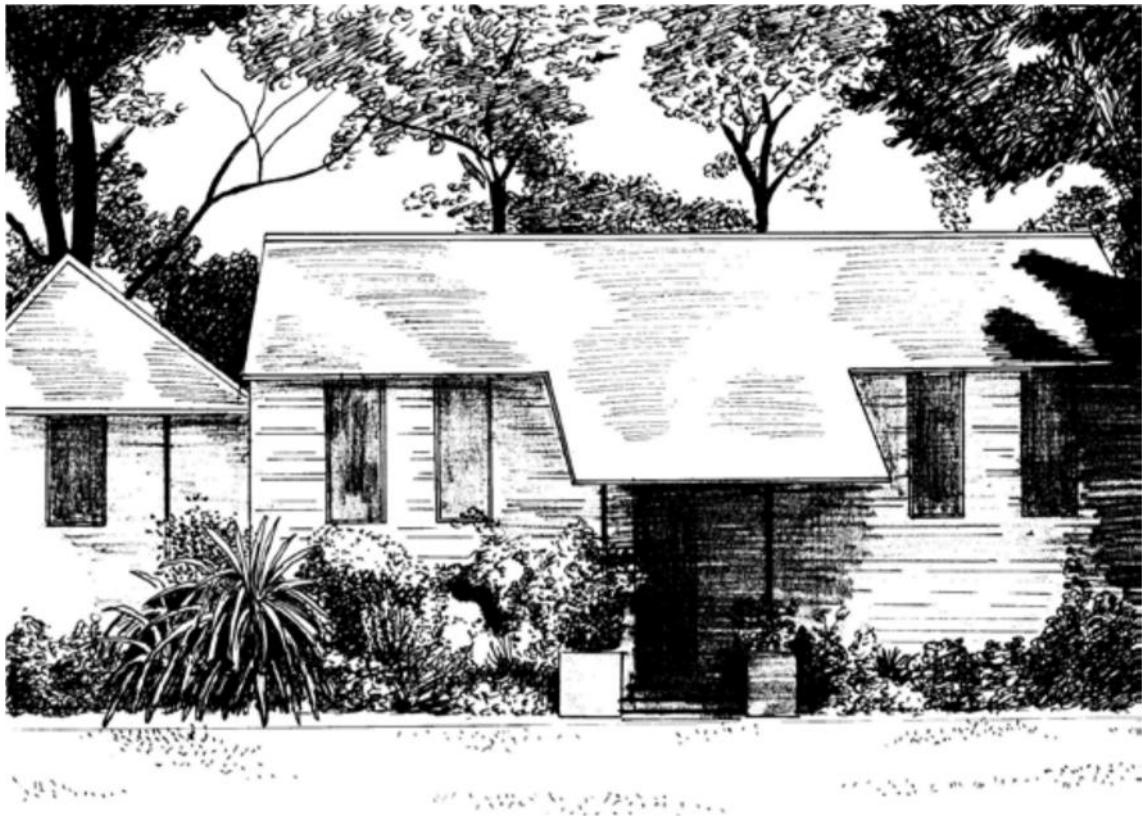
copious references and links to letters, articles and books, as well as to Sandi Pullman, Horticultural Consultant and Garden Writer, who is in charge of the present gardens which now surround La Trobe's Cottage and who accompanied me around them on a summer's morning before the heat set in. The Society had also asked if they could create a link to Edith's article which was gladly agreed to by both the author and the editor of *TMG*.

The Temple of the Winds stands high in the north-western corner of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens and was dedicated to Charles Joseph La Trobe in 1901 by William Guilfoyle, Director of the Gardens, recalling La Trobe's selection of the site in 1845 for botanical purposes. The dome of this classical structure is supported by ten Grecian columns, but native staghorn ferns decorate their capitals, a fitting tribute to a man who grew interested in Australian native plants, appointed our first qualified Government Botanist, the German scientist and botanist Dr Ferdinand Mueller (later Baron von Mueller), and sent many plant specimens to the Swiss botanist Dr Carl Meisner at Basel University which form the basis of the herbarium at Neuchâtel (see Edith's article). In addition, we owe to La Trobe the hundreds of acres allocated to parkland and gardens which still make Melbourne a 'garden city' and offer refuge from the ever-increasing concrete sprawl.

In 1839, Melbourne was a primitive town with bush tracks, few houses and a population of some 3,500. It would have been a daunting picture not only for La Trobe but also for his delicate Swiss wife Sophie (de Montmollin) and their young daughter Agnes. At first the family stayed with Captain Lonsdale, the former Commandant of Port Phillip, in his wooden cottage while a small pre-fabricated house, which La Trobe had brought out from England, was erected. Before leaving England, he had purchased three pre-fabricated houses from H. Manning of Holborn, the best-known London manufacturer of wooden houses for overseas colonies.

At public auction La Trobe purchased twelve and a half acres on the north-west corner of "Government Paddock" which today is known as the suburb of Jolimont. Other purchasers who attended the land sale made no bids against the Superintendent, following

the appeal of John Pascoe Fawkner, the city's founder. The general feeling among the settlers was that La Trobe had not been given a fair go, and he acquired his land at the bargain price of £20 an acre. The property was named Jolimont after a wooded hill near Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland where Sophie's parents had a summer residence and where the La Trobes had spent their honeymoon. The cottage was erected in a park-like setting with tall eucalypts, acacias and native grasses, facing down to the Yarra River, which in those days was closer to Jolimont. In the words of an early visitor, "It stands in a very pretty garden and is surrounded by trees on every side. When you come out of his gates you would imagine yourself in a gentleman's park...".



The cottage
drawing by Freda Cox

I thought of this description as I approached La Trobe's Cottage from the tram stop in St. Kilda Road, walking up to the house, now framed by tall trees and looking over parkland of the Kings Domain just as it had once looked down towards the river. During its life,

the cottage has been relocated first from Jolimont to the edge of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne in 1964 and then to this setting, across the road in the Domain in 1998, when a children's garden was created on its previous site. The garden has dwindled in size from the original twelve and a half acres to a mere quarter-acre block, so the present layout by Sandi Pullman can only be a symbolic recreation of the first.

The original garden was a forerunner of the gardenesque style in Victoria, based on the theories of John Claudius Loudon whose aim was to display "the art of the gardener" with ample space around individual plants to allow appreciation of their natural form and beauty. A painting of the cottage by W.F.E Liardet made before 1850 reveals geometric flower beds cut into the lawns, curved pathways, a shady arbour and native trees. Creepers decorate the house and climb the fences. If there was a utilitarian section, as in most early Australian gardens, it is nowhere to be seen.

The garden evolved over the years, as demonstrated in numerous sketches by La Trobe's cousin Edward La Trobe Bateman who arrived in Melbourne in 1852. The collection now held by the State Library of Victoria has proved invaluable in recreating the present garden, as explained by Sandi. The sketches depict a much wilder romantic rambling garden than the earlier paintings and are what she has chosen to emulate. Various factors would have accounted for the change in character, including a scant water supply. La Trobe was obliged to buy water in barrels for his household's use, so that watering the garden would have been an indulgence. He soon learnt that the summers were long, hot and dry, and by 1853 there would have been a shortage of workers for the garden with so many men taking off for the gold rush in central Victoria. It is tempting to believe that he learnt from trial and error that only the toughest plants would endure our harsh climate patterns. A description of the beautiful display of flowers in the spring of 1847 ends with: "...but since the hot weather set in all has disappeared...". Above all, the garden offered La Trobe a refuge from the stress of his government responsibilities, as illustrated by the "saucers of seeds" noted by Georgiana McCrae in his study and the mentions of his garden when he wrote to his daughter Agnes, who had been sent back to school in Switzerland.

Sandi is very particular in sourcing the right plants, based on what is evident in the paintings and sketches, also using the Colonial Plants Database on the Caroline Simpson Library of NSW website which lists plants known in Australia before 1870, thus ensuring that they would have been available to La Trobe and avoiding hybrids and cultivars whenever possible.

Letters are another source of information including those from La Trobe's friend in Tasmania, Ronald Campbell Gunn, who listed oleanders, New Zealand flax and *Hibiscus syriacus* among the plants he was sending over in 1844 – all of which are replicated in the present garden. A peppermint geranium, *Pelargonium tomentosum*, was grown from cuttings from the first garden. La Trobe loved roses, with a preference for yellow and red, but never mentioned which, and Georgiana McCrae's diary mentions the cuttings she received from Jolimont, including geraniums and roses. In full bloom as we walk around is the old Bourbon rose 'Louise Odier' bred in 1851 (Margottin, France) with a warm-pink double flower which is extremely fragrant. In a letter to Agnes, La Trobe wrote of the progress of his "geranium hedge" and Sandi shows me her token hedge along the fence line with pelargonium varieties donated by the Pelargonium Society, based at Geelong Botanic Gardens.



The geranium hedge with day lilies
drawing by Freda Cox

An all-succulent border is netted, as protection from possums, and grows well under the trees where other plants would not prosper. These varieties would have been available to La Trobe and he certainly mentioned his fine “cactus tribe” and many in full flower. Some of the succulents came from the railway cutting at Jolimont and according to Sarah Guest, MGS member and resident of Jolimont today, were probably from his garden.

La Trobe’s interest in Australian native plants increased, as witnessed by his letters, including the mention of “many golden wattles” in 1845. A number of Australian plants are evident in today’s garden, including the native mint-bush, *Prostanthera lasianthos*, which he grew at Jolimont and which flourishes at the new site with its highly aromatic leaves. One of his plant discoveries when riding around Victoria, *Veronica perfoliata* (syn. *Derwentia perfoliata*), diggers’ speedwell, grows in front of the house and *Eremophila latrobei*, one of the few plants still to bear his name, grows in the garden next to *Acacia acinacea* which was once named *A. latrobei*. *Correa lawrenceana* var. *latrobeana*, mountain correa, stands tall behind the National Trust “La Trobe’s Cottage” sign. It is interesting to read of Ferdinand Mueller’s dismay, in a letter to William Hooker, on learning that *Tecoma latrobei* (now known as *Pandorea pandorana*) was going to be renamed *Tecoma australis*, as the botanist had wished to acknowledge his great debt to his patron.

Half-moon and diamond-shaped beds at the side of the house are a gesture back to the garden of the 1840s, offering a delightful medley of foxgloves, lupins, evening primroses, columbines and pinks at the time of my visit, and Sandi shows me her favourite spot – a veranda set behind a curtain of banksia roses and jasmine. Sandi feels the entire garden may be too cottagey, but she is restricted by the limited space. My feeling is that the character of the garden is compatible with the simple residence, in contrast to the grand houses of subsequent governors of Victoria.

I leave after a fascinating morning surveying a garden where virtually every plant has a history and inspired by Sandi Pullman’s love of her subject and dedication to its integrity and beauty. My thoughts return to La Trobe, who left Melbourne in 1854 with the sad news that his wife Sophie, who had departed for Europe before

him with their children, had died at her parents' home at Neuchâtel before they could be reunited. He was leaving a city larger than Sydney with a population of 80,000, a centre of great wealth generated by the gold discoveries. His vision for the Colony had never faltered and he would later write in 1870 "It is sure that the Colony must go thro' a process of fermentation and working before the scum can be handled and skimmed off. In the long run I hope the liquor will run clear and bright." I also hope that when visitors come to see his delightful home they find some time to walk around his garden.

An excellent book by Helen Botham, a fellow member of the MGS as well as a member of the La Trobe Society, is *La Trobe's Jolimont: A Walk Round My Garden*, published by the C.J. La Trobe Society and Australian Garden History Society, 2006, with Edward La Trobe Bateman's drawings and letters from La Trobe to his daughter. Copies are available from La Trobe's Cottage which is open on Sundays from October to April 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Tours are also available for Government House and La Trobe's Cottage year-round on Mondays and Thursdays, bookings@natrust.com.au, tel. (03) 9656 9889.