



Doing it tough in paradise

TASMANIA Southern Ocean

C. A. Cranston PhD

C. A. Cranston is an associate with the University of Tasmania interested in bodies and the environment. Here, two narrative gardens resonate in the life of a white-collar, sole-parent immigrant.

Gardens are a means 'of examining our history, both personal and collective' (Timms, 1999).

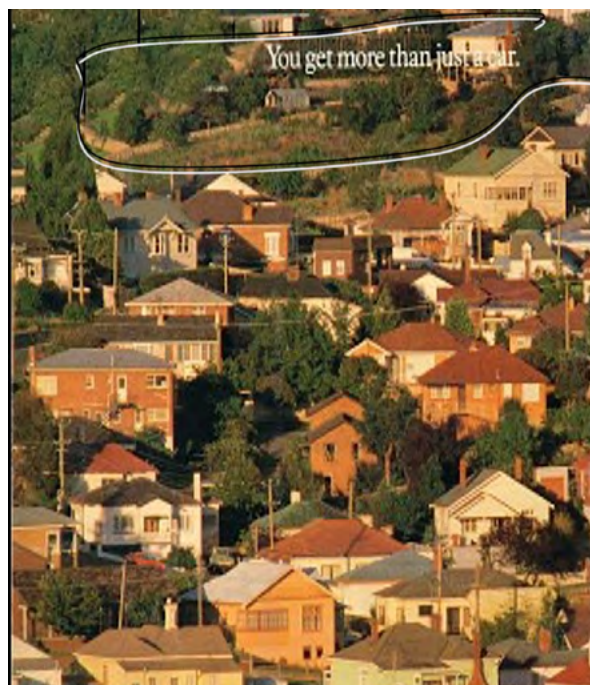
The back cover of the in-flight magazine of a now-defunct airline shows the leafy urban gardens of weatherboard and brick houses occupying the western side of an extinct volcano. It's an image of **kanamuluka**/Launceston, Australia's third oldest city, located on the island of Tasmania. Situated south of mainland Australia, the **palawa**/Indigenous name for this island is **lutruwita**. Settlers refer to it as 'the wilderness island'. To mainlanders it is the 'rural state'. Visible in the marketing image is a greenhouse and an expanse of grass. This block of land (half an acre, attached to the quarter acre block of the house to the right) became land-locked after World War II. A developer might today curse the city clerk responsible for this oversight; others might delight in the contradiction of practising 'rural' self-sufficiency in a marooned urban space.

The driveway to this administrative error is 50 metres long. Ingress is from the public space of a by-road fringed with houses in anxious attitudes facing Council Chambers. To the right of the driveway the bowered entrance hosts mostly Northern Hemisphere plantings by local horticultural guru, Peter Cundall (1927-2021). The fire-red of the *Photinia glabra* jostles with a liquidambar about to be ringbarked by rusting fencing-wire; beside it the bawdy pink and scentless heads of the South African King Protea (*P. cynaroides*) share the cool temperate climate of the 41st parallel, botanic emissaries careless of geographical or national origins.

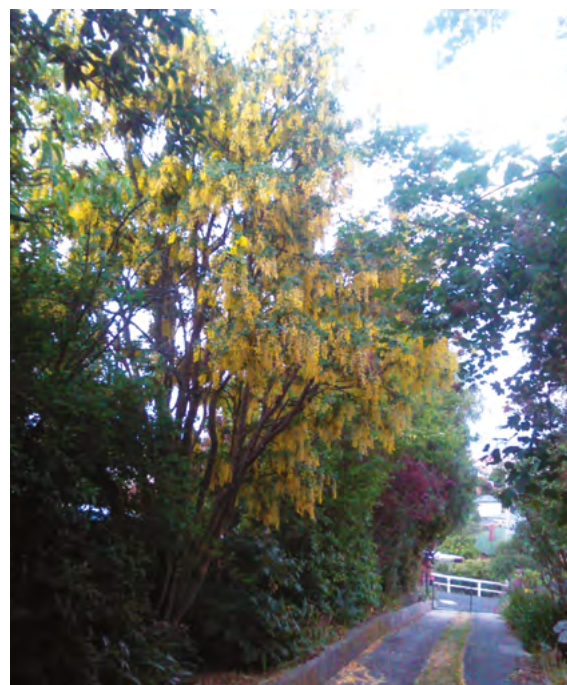
But to the left of the drive – separated by the euphemistic 'nature strip' of cape weed – Gondwanaland vocabulary articulates deep time

*OPPOSITE:
Persimmons provide a splash of vibrant colour in a winter garden. Selling this fruit helps buy chicken feed in a garden which has formed its own harmonious cycles.*

Eucalyptus globulus



ABOVE LEFT: A dated airline magazine advertisement shows a pleasant suburban scene, with the author's land-locked oasis and greenhouse visible in the distance.



ABOVE RIGHT: The driveway leading to this anomalous property is lined with trees, many of which have their own story tied to history, nomenclature and personal identity.

inhabitation. The golden wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) bears scars from tradies' vans, careless of the ideological battle between Australia and South Africa when both claimed the wattle as their national emblem (Robbin, 2007). Alongside is a burnt-yellow *Banksia serrata*, the genus that introduces children to the Banksia Men in the books of May Gibbs (1877-1969). Beside the hobgoblin tree is the state emblem, the Tasmanian Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*). Its trunk, three feet across, signals thwartedness. Amputated limbs sprout sprigs of circular leaves maturing into elliptical elegance, charging upwards to power lines. There they meet the annual axe that postpones council fines and keeps it, and its steward, under control. There are more trees (we're only 30 feet up the driveway) but let's introduce one more: a red bottlebrush (*Callistemon*), chosen for the similarity of its name, Hannah Ray, to that of my daughter's.

Hannah (Hebrew for 'Grace') inhabits the white weatherboard nestled in this forest of nomenclature. Launceston is our second attempt at immersive gardening. Had I been aware of the science of ecology back in the oxytocin-flush of early motherhood I would have realised literary representations of the pastoral are, like problem-free parenthood, ungrounded. The journey down the idiomatic garden path began with the idea of islands as 'escape'. Ideology drove me from Texas, or I like to say it did because it creates a kind of moral imperative. We (my husband

and a two-month in utero fetus) escape toward the 'wilderness island' at 'the end of the earth'. There, Romantic Primitivism beckoned, 40 kilometres east of the capital, **nipaluna** (Hobart).

Changing one's oikos (home) means changing one's biota. The land of the Roaring Forties presented unfamiliar animal and plant life that, for hemispheric transplants (familiar only with the Australian imaginary) promised vaguely threatening toxic and venomous encounters. We were intruders in a no-fuss 'garden' created by endemic – therefore self-sufficient – wildlife variously niched in the blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*) surrounds. Our bush habitat lacked reticulated water. Its iron roof channeled rainwater into holding tanks, usefully serving as an animal corridor and scat terminus for possums. All of which (including the occasional possum) went into the drinking water.

My embodied experience as an elderly primigravida now in her seventh month of pregnancy heightens the discrepancy between earth mother aspirations and the imagined joy of bush nesting – risks associated with age, distance, and competing water-borne biota. Post-partum challenges to the idyll include those inhabitants sharing the oikos with my newborn daughter and which, according to the deep ecology platform, had 'biospheric equality'. Huntsman spiders share our ceiling; imagined redbacks anticipate our bathroom visits; scorpions tip tails at the wood pile; venomous jack-jumpers colonise Hannah's prelapsarian sand box. And, as in the original imagined paradise, the garden includes a (tiger) snake keen on autonomous cats.



LEFT: The author and her late husband sought an idyllic new life on a distant island with their daughter. This was shattered by his death from cancer, prompting her to find solace in vigorous gardening activity.



ABOVE:
Pincushion proteas, native
to South Africa, grow
abundantly around the
author's house.

Two and a half years of bush submersion, the fallacy of self-reliance and escape into simplicity collapses when my partner dies of cancer. Like the biblical industrious ant, I was driven by manic bouts of activity. And read that Sir George Sitwell wrote *On the Making of Gardens* (1909) while recovering from a breakdown. With him I celebrate the power of cultivated gardens to bring about health through what he calls 'the recurring miracle of spring and of that eternal stream of life which is ever flowing before our eyes'. Sitwell's recovery is one of enforced calm; mine of activity. This 'bush garden' with its disregarding fauna and bedded-in flora has no need of me to tend its wildness. I seek employment in the north, purchasing the home (in the image), along with its land-locked garden surrounded by a sea of same-species neighbours.

Of all harvests, sky-harvesting is easiest. The 'bush garden' had taught me thrift as central to self-sufficiency. Despite having reticulated water, I install a water tank. Solar converters now occupy the iron roof, and the greenhouse shelters tomatoes and silver beet from night-stalking possums. Two Border Leicester cross ewes patrol the ivy and grass. As 'performing ranchers' my daughter and I run several head of Leghorn crosses (chooks) who aerate the earth, transforming snails, spiders and scorpions into deeply-orange yolks. Chickens teach

connectivity, swapping eggs for adages, and with pleasure I learn that, like 'Hannah', the word 'Hen' shares the Hebrew root for 'Grace'.

This active garden has space enough for cherished privacy. Space enough for an inter-species community – a miniature farm – where no one eats anyone else, and all loudly greet my daughter home from school. For an urban plot, it is a noisy garden: a sensory space favouring sound over spectacle – although Mounts Arthur, Barrow and Ben Lomond command the skyline even when urban smog creeps up the extinct volcano to settle on neighbouring roofs. I am indebted to the deceased owner (cultivator of the Lambert biennial onion) for grafting fruit trees, and for figs so big that finches disappear inside to feed; for the cash crop of persimmons (*Diospyros kaki*), their orange luminescence a radical affront to the early drab of winter. As testament to Sitwell's 'eternal stream of life' my predecessor's labour will finance the winter feed for our chooks. And there's a magnificent mulberry that I will dance around with my daughter, and which will yield an even madder wine and jam.

Our garden is our ecotopia. Having experienced practical hardships that defy island dreams of utopia, island dwelling teaches that 'ecotopia is not a fantasy but rather a statement of an ecological and ethical ideal toward which all can strive' (Devall, 1988).



LEFT:
A shattered idyll has
not stopped the author
from achieving her own
'ecotopia'. Harvesting
sun and rain adds to the
sustainability of her little
suburban farm.