

Charles Weston and the Greening of CANBERRA

As a modern capital city, Canberra has an international reputation for its unique landscape. This landscape is a reflection of the inherent beauty of the site's plains, fringing wooded hills and distant mountains, combined with the skill of a horticulturist and a landscape architect.

The establishment of Canberra as a 'city in the landscape' owes much to three people: Charles Scrivener, who selected the site for the capital in 1909; Walter Burley Griffin, who provided the prize-winning design for the city in 1912; and Charles Weston, who pioneered the 'greening' of the area and its surrounding hills between 1911 and 1926.

The most physically demanding job fell to Weston, an English-born horticulturist. It was a challenging task to establish trees on the open, wind-swept, largely treeless site for the capital. The climate was harsh and the soils relatively poor. An added problem was the conflict between Griffin and Weston over choices of suitable species. In all, between 1913 and 1926, Weston was responsible for the planting of two million trees and shrubs.

European settlement after the 1820s had a significant impact on the site for the capital. Of principal concern was the destruction of tree cover on the hills surrounding the site and the consequent degradation of the shallow soils in these areas which created widespread water and wind erosion. Rabbits, in plague proportions, added to the problem.

In 1911-12, the Australian Government proceeded on Weston's advice with an 'experimental and testing nursery' at Acton (on the site of the National Museum of Australia). This work, which reflected new 'conservation' thinking in Australia at that time, led to Weston's permanent appointment, firstly as Officer-in-Charge (Afforestation Branch), later as Director, City Planting, and finally as the Superintendent, Parks and Gardens.

When Weston arrived in May 1913 to take up his Canberra appointment, his initial priority was experimentation. He assessed the suitability of a wide range of exotic and indigenous trees and shrubs for the site and devised the best methods of planting and establishment. On a 160-hectare site at Yarralumla, Weston supplemented the Acton Nursery with a much larger nursery and arboretum. Both are still in use today. The nursery served not only as a place for experimentation but also for the production of plants. The arboretum, to test the growth of trees, was commenced in 1914. By 1920, almost 45 000 trees had been planted there.

Weston next turned his attention to measures to rehabilitate degraded hill areas. Between 1915 and 1924 he treated over 1 000 hectares of public land. Some of this work was successful commercially and Mt Stromlo, in particular, became the first step in the establishment of a major pine plantation industry.

Weston took the first steps in the conservation of the Australian Capital Territory's rural landscape. He laid down a set of conditions to achieve control over the lopping of vegetation for fodder and the killing of trees by ring-barking. In addition, he issued trees free-of-charge to landholders.

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With the Government's decision in early 1921 to transfer the Commonwealth Parliament to Canberra, Weston turned his attention to creating a landscape for the growing city on the treeless plains. Over the next six years, with dense plantings of indigenous and exotic trees and shrubs, he created a special landscape character for the streets, avenues and parklands of the emerging city. His work, which was influenced particularly by new 'garden city thinking at that time in Australia, achieved strong seasonal colour effects and provided protection from the bitter cold and hot dusty winds. The planting in the vicinity of Old Parliament House and Government House, and in the inner suburbs of Braddon and Reid, are fine examples of his work.

Charles Weston's successful 'greening' of Canberra in its foundation days made an unparalleled contribution to the achievement of a unique national capital. The Weston legacy is the creation of Canberra as a 'city in the landscape'.

Dr John Gray

