

Australian Garden

HISTORY



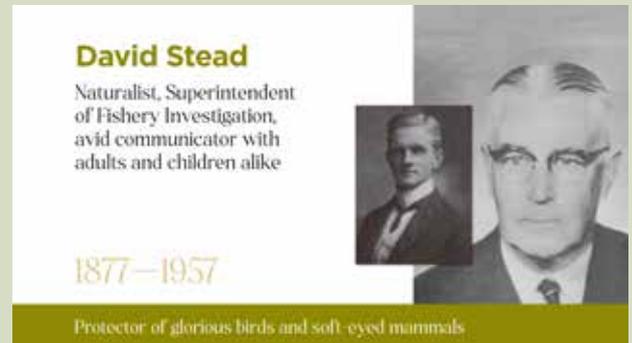
Sydney's cosmopolitan conservationists – honouring the value of their vision

At the AGHS's 2021 annual conference, Janine Kitson spoke about figures who were prominent in Sydney's 20th-century environmental movement. Here is her chronicle of eight pioneer conservationists.

Environmental historian Peggy James (*Cosmopolitan Conservationists, Greening Modern Sydney*, Australian Scholarly, 2013) describes Sydney's 1920s conservationists as 'cosmopolitan' because they participated in the international exchange of environmental ideas. They were an elite group who also pursued reforms relating to women and children, progressive education, prisons, peace, town planning and recognition of Indigenous Australians. These 'cosmopolitan conservationists' operated within influential networks in the media, government, legal circles, academia and the arts.

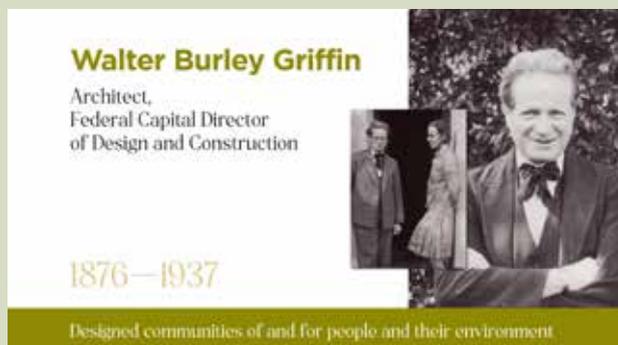
Dreams for Greater Sydney

Each had their own unique motivations for environmental protection – education, health, fitness, beauty, wildlife – but they all shared one dream: a Greater Sydney with abundant gardens, bushland, parks, playgrounds and national parks that stretched from Sydney Harbour across the Cumberland Plain to the Blue Mountains, to the Hawkesbury River and Broken Bay in the north and to the Royal National Park in the south. James' research describes how these cosmopolitan conservationists were interconnected with each other, not only through their mutual dream of a green and beautiful Sydney but through shared principles, for example about planning and civic engagement, and the organisations they belonged to.



DAVID G STEAD 1877–1957

Stead emerged from the 19th century naturalist movement to lay the foundation for wildlife protection based on strong environmental laws. In 1909 he established one of Australia's first environment protection organisations, the Wildlife Preservation Society, to stop the culling of Australia's birds for the plume fashion trade and koalas for the fur industry. Stead understood that legislation was key to protecting the environment and spent his energy building the architecture of environmental law through the post-Second World War Fauna Protection Authority (FPA), which became the precursor for the National Parks and Wildlife Service ACT of 1967. Stead was involved in many organisations such as the Aquarium, Naturalists', Linnaean and Geographical societies of NSW, the State branch of the Australian Forest League, the Town Planning Association, the Gould League of Bird Lovers, the Royal Zoological Society of NSW, the American Fisheries Society, and the Linnaean Society of London. He enthusiastically shared his fascination for the natural world in the hope that it would convince the public to protect the natural world.



WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN 1876–1937

In 1912 Griffin, US architect and landscape architect, won the international competition to design Australia’s federal capital, Canberra. His professional partnership with his wife Marion Mahoney Griffin was immense. Together they worked not only to plan Canberra as an expression of the values of democracy but also to create harmonious designs between the built and the natural environment, notably at the Sydney suburb of Castlecrag. As Glenda Korporaal pointed out in her article in the April 2021 issue of *Australian Garden History*, the couple fell in love with the Australian bush and, soon after their arrival, Mahoney joined the Naturalists’ Society of New South Wales.



CHARLES BEAN 1879–1968

Bean is well known as Australia’s preeminent Anzac historian who never forgot the sacrifice of 60,000 men and women who died in the First World War and the 150,000 wounded. He believed in the power of education for equality and the importance of protecting the natural environment, arguing that children’s health and fitness were the key to making the nation great.

Bean dreamt of a healthy and fit post-war Australia promoted through his Parks and Playground Movement. He advocated for abundant parks, playgrounds and legislated green spaces to circle suburbs in greater Sydney.

Threats to the vision of the bush capital

The AGHS has actively campaigned in recent years to maintain the spirit of both Griffin’s plan for Canberra and Bean’s for the War Memorial. The lakeshore landscape in Canberra is now seen as a place for city ‘renewal’ with the ACT Government allowing a redevelopment that will mean loss of lakebed, erosion of the lake’s symmetry, infill of parkland and restricted public access. The plan makes no provision for heritage values (which have been investigated and publicised) and neither the ACT nor federal governments has shown support for a proposed National Heritage Listing of Lake Burley Griffin, its parklands and views as part of the wider overall designed landscape of Canberra.

Charles Bean imagined the Australian War Memorial as ‘a perfect, simple, solemn, exquisite building’, a temple to the fallen, not a celebration of militarism. In 2018, the Federal Government committed \$498m to expand the War Memorial’s floor space – inter alia to allow the display of large military machines – thereby fundamentally changing the character and purpose of the building. AGHS joined many voices to object to this development. It focussed on trying to prevent significant tree removals and to preserve the landscape history of the site. Very sadly, already at least 60 trees have been removed and in November 2021, the National Capital Authority declared that it supports the redevelopment proposal, which it found was not inconsistent with the National Capital Plan.

Advocacy

Thistle Harris
Biologist, botanist, author,
conservationist, educator



1902–1990

Adept at getting people's backs up

THISTLE HARRIS 1902–1990

Harris was a leading botanist and educator, and the life partner of David G Stead. Her 1938 book *Wildflowers of Australia* was transformational in promoting the study and preservation of Australian plants. Following her retirement as a botany lecturer at Sydney Teachers College and the death of her husband she worked to establish the David G Stead Memorial Wildlife Foundation of Australia. This foundation went on to establish and manage one of Australia's first environmental education centre, *Wirrimbirra*, at Bargo, south of Sydney.

Norman Weekes
Architect, landscape architect
& planner



1884–1972

Living areas should protect habitats and the national interest

NORMAN WEEKES 1884–1972

Weekes, engineer, architect, landscape architect and town planner is best remembered for his design of Sydney's Hyde Park with its magnificent avenue of fig trees, remarked upon favourably by the Australian Forest League, which promoted the preservation and use of Australian forests and trees. Weekes saw the merit in good planning. His had input into the 1951 amendments to the Local Government Act that gave legal effect to the Cumberland planning scheme for a ring of green belts around the Greater Sydney region. His experiences during the Second World War (the Japanese held him in prisoner-of-war camps in Java and elsewhere for three and a half years), led to his involvement in the development of Buddhism in New South Wales.

Marie Byles
Conservationist, pacifist,
mountaineer, bushwalker,
writer, NSW's first practising
female solicitor, explorer



1900–1979

Sentient beings are bound together in suffering as well as in blood

MARIE BYLES 1900–1979

Byles, mountaineer, bushwalker, traveller, writer, NSW's first practising woman solicitor and advocate for the economic equality for women, was also an influential conservationist, and a Buddhist. She worked with Paddy Palin, the well-known Sydney bushwalking equipment entrepreneur, to establish the Youth Hostels Association. Byles did pro bono legal work for many conservation groups through her successful legal practice at Eastwood. She found peace through meditation and pioneered the concept of sustainability where humans needed to tread lightly on the planet.

Myles Dunphy OBE
OBE for Service to Conservation,
IUCN Packer Award for
Long Merit in National Parks



1891–1985

Must redraw their boundaries for nobler and more humane purposes

MYLES DUNPHY 1891–1985

An intrepid bushwalker, Dunphy led the way in putting forward proposals for national parks and wilderness areas. He taught architecture at Sydney Technical College and was someone who loved escaping into the bush as an antidote from claustrophobic pressures of office work. Dunphy's dream for the protection of Greater Sydney's wilderness areas was realised when he secured the Blue Mountains National Park. Fifteen years after his death, in 2000, the Greater Blue Mountains National Park was World Heritage listed in 2000.



ANNIE WYATT, 1885–1961

Wyatt was the founder of the Ku-ring-gai Tree Lover's Civic League that became a force across Sydney, calling for tree protection. She described herself as 'an ardent tree lover' and was committed to stopping what she described as the 'jackhammers turning Sydney's history to dust'. In 1945 she established Australia's first National Trust (NSW) in the hope that it would protect places of beauty for perpetuity. Her son Ivor followed her dream and became a president of the National Trust. He secured the protection of Byles home *Ahimsa* and *Wirrimbirra*. In 1965 the Stead Foundation gifted the *Wirrimbirra* land to the National Trust (NSW) so that it would be safe for perpetuity. For the next 50 years, the Foundation leased back, managed and financed *Wirrimbirra*. In October 2019 the National Trust terminated the Foundation's lease and transferred it to the Australian Wildlife Sanctuary, thus severing the connection with Thistle's dream of a working legacy for her husband.

Nightmares

The flip side to dreams are nightmares and these conservationists had many. They feared for the survival of Australia's unique wildlife and plants, its forests, its historic buildings and its Aboriginal heritage. They opposed the construction, beginning in 1953, of the Caltex oil refinery at Kurnell, Botany Bay but lost that battle. They feared that the post-Second World War mantra of 'progress' and 'growth' would decimate the beauty and fragility of the natural world with dire consequences for the future. Today we are living through their prescient warnings of a degraded world.

Why is their vision so important?

The relational biographies of these 20th-century Sydney conservationists reveal how today's environmental crisis is a history of cumulative failure to heed their warnings. Despite this, they inspire many to continue their conservation work. Some of their legacies of protected national park and urban spaces remain with us today. Their dream of greening Sydney has never been more important in this age of climate crisis and biodiversity extinction.

AGHS's advocacy work

From its inception, the Australian Garden History Society set out to be a conservationist group, concerned for the protection and good care of Australia's historic gardens to ensure their future.

Forty years on, we have 'jumped the garden fence' expanding our concern for and interest in landscapes which might be designed such as a city park or streetscape, evolving such as orcharding or grazing farmland or cultural such as Uluru – Kata-Tjuta / Ayers Rock and the Olgas having been actively managed by Anangu Aboriginal people for millennia.

We advocate to see the best conservation practices applied to gardens and landscapes as an equal 'type' of heritage, to buildings, archaeology or museum or gallery artefacts and strongly encourage the use of industry standards and best-practice guidelines, such as the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*.

For examples of current advocacy work that AGHS is involved in see *Garden History Now – Advocacy* and the Society's branch newsletters, also published on the website.

The AGHS also maintains a 'Landscapes at Risk' register. The criteria for 'at risk' are as follows:

- active current threat (development approved/ lack of heritage listing or consideration of landscape heritage, lack of protection during development)
- potential future threat (development, neglect, poor management)
- lack of champions (community protest, unaware, Council/manager uninterested).

Janine Kitson is a Sydney-based environmental educator and activist, working on projects and campaigns that had their beginnings with the dreams of these Sydney cosmopolitan conservationists. She has served as the Colong Foundation for Wilderness Deputy Chair; National Parks Association of NSW Vice-President, National Trust (NSW) director and Ku-ring-gai Councillor.

