

THE MAN WHO CULTIVATED CANBERRA

Judy Cannon relates how the spirit and work of landscape architect Harry Oakman have enhanced the lives of the countless people who enjoy Canberra's parks and open spaces

The vision of Harry Oakman has brought pleasure, relaxation and, at times, solace to most of us, but few know his name. As we stroll in parks among trees, shrubs and colourful flowerbeds, pass by ponds and fountains, or play bat and ball with the kids on large grassy spaces, we are giving life to his dreams.

For Oakman, now 95, is one of Australia's eminent landscape architects and while to dub him 'a man of many parks' is likely to appeal to his whimsical sense of fun, this is only part of his story. He is also an artist, author, photographer and former dance band clarinetist. And, unobtrusively, he is also a politician. He has as keen a nose for political winds as he has for a spring bloom. With an impish disregard for the bureaucratic status quo and a passion for open spaces, he was more than able to take up where Walter Burley Griffin had left off.

Harry Oakman was the first landscape architect appointed to the National Capital Development Commission, which from 1958 to 1989 was the agency responsible for Canberra's development. He previously worked on parks and outdoor areas on Sydney's North Shore, at Newcastle and Brisbane. Acknowledgement of his great contribution to the wellbeing of the people of those cities, especially Canberra, is particularly appropriate this year, the centenary of the Federation of Australia's separate States, whose coming together created the impetus to build a federal capital in the first place. The National Library has an interesting collection of photographs of early and developing Canberra and, incidentally, holds copies of Oakman's nine published horticultural works and one manuscript.



Born in 1906, as a young man Harry Oakman studied at New South Wales Agricultural College, Hawkesbury and Wagga Experimental Farm, and subsequently attended East Sydney Technical College art classes for many years. His first job was with a commercial Pennant Hills nursery which supplied picked flowers to the Sydney market and he subsequently spent over two years with Sydney's Gordon Shire Council, supervising 40 parks. He moved to Newcastle City Council and soon hit on the idea of beautifying the old industrial streets by planting trees on each side of the road. Starting from the city centre, planting gradually radiated to the suburbs. It transformed the city's image from an emphasis on tall smoking chimneys and fiercely functional factory sites towards a softer, greener cityscape where people might prefer



Richard Clough (b. 1921)
Commonwealth Gardens—Nerang Pool, Winter, 1977
From a collection of slides illustrating the design, construction and landscaping of Lake Burley Griffin and adjacent national areas of Canberra c.1909–1981
colour slide
Pictorial Collection P2214/243



Harry Oakman, December 1996, with his latest book, *What Flowers When*
Photograph courtesy of Dr John Gray

to live. When he left, the city had at least 100 parks. As we chatted at his Brisbane home, he recalled that open space, except for Newcastle's sports ovals, had been disregarded until there was political pressure for improvement:

Pressure for open space came from a political thrust towards the beautification of Newcastle which had been neglected forever. The accent had invariably been on sports fields. I suppose my influence would have been beautification by city and suburban tree planting along the streets. There had been no previous positive effort. It had been a scrap heap development.

In 1946 he got a call. Brisbane's Lord Mayor, Sir John 'JB' Chandler, who was extremely keen on public open spaces, was looking for a parks manager. Oakman stayed 17 years.

Chandler used to go home along Coronation Drive twice a day, 'so we made sure we looked after it!' Oakman grinned, as he told me the story. It was a challenge to transfer to a subtropical vegetation, especially as the job involved the design of a new botanic garden on the slopes of Mt Coot-tha—52 hectares of virgin bush, eight kilometres from the city centre. 'When I first came ... the architects [of buildings] wanted to be in charge of open spaces, but I soon chiselled them out of that,' Oakman chuckled. 'Funny thing about local government, the architects want to take charge of everything.' Parks, 'for [civil] engineers are an added responsibility and no way do they have the expertise,' he said. 'One of the important things for a parksman was that open space management become part of the council—a division in its own right,' he commented, adding with a laugh, 'some engineers were glad to be rid of it, others whinged like hell.'



Unknown photographer
View of Lake Burley Griffin from Black Mountain
photograph
Pictorial Collection



Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Fishing on Lake Burley Griffin, Canberra
silver gelatin photograph
From: Canberra Life Collection—
Canberra Life, Entertainment and
Recreation
Pictorial Collection P1745/7

The first thing Oakman had developed for Brisbane was the Mt Coot-tha lookout so people could view the whole city. His chief engineer, late in his career, insisted a memorial tree be planted right at the centre of the view. A coral tree, it was likely to grow 11 to 12 metres high and about 8 metres wide, 'plum in the middle of the view' and eventually obscure it. When the chief engineer left, 'the first thing I did was to dig out his tree and move it,' Oakman said. 'I saw it about 15 years ago. It was still thriving.'

Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens had to be designed from scratch. The land had been used during

World War II as a military base and vast explosives store and took two years to recover. The gardens opened in 1976 and now boast 20 000 plants of about 5000 different species, a lake, lagoon, melaleuca wetlands, temperate and exotic rainforests, fragrant plant and herb gardens, a bunya forest and a Japanese garden.

Harry Oakman also redesigned Brisbane's first botanic garden, established in 1828 on the city centre's riverbank. It was subject to flooding. He introduced an irrigation system, built wooden bridge walkways across a mangrove swamp, created pools and fountains to attract water birds, and designed walks to lead under tall, leafy trees offering pleasant shade on a hot Brisbane summer day. As he said: 'Landscape architects need ingenuity, beauty and design to delight people with bridges, and nooks and crannies—that's part of being a landscape architect.'

He also created landscapes for Eagle Farm Racecourse, the Sir John Chandler parks, YMCA Sportsground and Sherwood Arboretum. After 17 years, he left for Canberra. Oakman Park at the junction of Moggill Road and Union Street, Toowong, commemorates his work in Brisbane.

The scope of the Canberra job was enormous but he brought with him a great deal of expertise. Canberra required every bit of his political nous. He had the advantage of an easy charm and puckish humour to shelter a steely purpose. This boded well for the future of the public's pleasure and wellbeing, both functionally and aesthetically, for he held one of the most important and least appreciated jobs in Canberra's development.

The National Capital Development Commission had adopted an open space program with recreation as well as environment factors in mind. This matched Oakman's own passion. The planning of city buildings and housing attracts major attention and funds, but people also need somewhere to go, places to play, walks to amble along and spaces where children can let off steam. It was his task to landscape the capital, its growing suburbs, and create vital recreational areas within the territory's significant region, not forgetting coastal land around Jervis Bay. There was one exception to this: the immediate surrounds of Old Parliament House, to which, much to his amusement, the Parks and Gardens Department tenaciously clung.



Unknown photographer
Canberra, January 1967
photograph
Pictorial Collection

Oakman's attention turned early to Lake Burley Griffin environs, city parks and the Parliamentary triangle, including, eventually, landscaping for the then new National Library building, which opened in 1968. John Gray, who subsequently became the National Capital Development Commission's third landscape supremo, commented that Oakman's expertise was particularly valuable because he not only knew urban landscape and parks design and management, but was also an excellent horticulturist with a wide knowledge of both introduced and native plants.

Oakman's philosophy was maximum display, minimum maintenance, with an accent on nature. Minimal instructions were left by Burley Griffin, but his stress on open spaces further encouraged Oakman's own thinking. He needed to be an artist as well as a nurseryman, with an understanding of construction and engineering. Once designed and built, parks and public areas were handed over to the Parks and Gardens Department for maintenance. In time, he was involved in the design and construction of public parks, school grounds, cemeteries,

lookouts, and landscaping for shopping centres, car parks, golf courses, highways and city and suburban streets.

It became politically popular to upgrade native plant areas in the ACT during Oakman's time. 'To stay alive' it was sensible to follow the politics of the place and large areas were devoted entirely to native plants. 'Politics intruded at times,' Oakman laughed and continued:

I had to argue my way through—it was new. Landscaping was a recently introduced aspect. I had to fight people who had been [at the centre] for such a long time and the National Capital Development Commission intruded in their areas. The Commission always won anyway. It was very powerful.



Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Carols by candlelight at Stage 88,
 Commonwealth Park, Canberra 1996
 photograph
 From: Canberra Life Collection—Religion
 Pictorial Collection P1746/64

Oakman added that people felt so fiercely about some of his decisions that he was sure when he retired in 1972 they were happy they 'had got rid of the bastard'. But John Gray said Oakman was well liked and 'an incredible guy' with a number of major achievements. During his National Capital Development Commission time he had achieved recognition for landscape architects from the Commonwealth Public Service Board, a milestone for the then fledgling profession in Australia. When Oakman was appointed in 1963, Gray continued: 'There were quite a few challenges. Canberra was expanding at a very great rate: everywhere suburbs were being developed and new parks created. All involved substantial landscaping.' He regards Commonwealth Park as Oakman's major achievement because it became a focal point of horticultural interest as well as a recreational area. An Oakman planning report proposed that 'plant material would form an integral part of the design and provide a "living catalogue of plants" suitable for Canberra, for both information and enjoyment.' It is the park where Canberra's major outdoor events are usually held. When he started there was little to be seen in the park: 'He did an enormous amount of work,' said Gray.

An author himself, he however believes that Oakman's most significant contribution has been his horticultural writing.

So far Oakman has published nine books on home gardening, park and estate management and landscape architecture, which Gray said makes him one of Australia's foremost writers on these subjects. Beautifully illustrated, the books also display the work of Harry Oakman, photographer. His book on tropical and subtropical gardening became a bestseller, or as Gray described it, 'a gardening bible for Queensland'.

Harry Oakman was delighted when the Queensland Institute of Landscape Architects named an award after him. He is also a Fellow of the Landscape Institute (London), Fellow of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects and a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Parks and Recreation, which in 1973 presented him with an Australian Award in Park Administration.

Today he tends his riverside one-hectare garden by



Richard Clough (b. 1921)
Parkes Place—advanced trees planted
 From a collection of slides illustrating the design,
 construction and landscaping of Lake Burley
 Griffin and adjacent national areas of Canberra
 c.1909–1981
 colour slide
 Pictorial Collection P2214/84

himself. His wife died some time ago. He bought this former dairy country land some years before and, true to his philosophy, runs this extensive garden on a maximum display, minimum maintenance basis. It is a mass of trees and shrubs which attract the birds. He started the garden from scratch about five years ago. Starting from scratch seems to be the story of his life.

It was coffee time when I arrived for the interview, which had been a fascinating conversation with a lot of laughter. At nearly 2 pm, apologising for out-staying my welcome, I said I was leaving. His puckish sense of humour struck again. 'Good,' he said. 'Now I can have my lunch.'

JUDY CANNON is a freelance writer who lives in Brisbane



Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Royal Canberra Golf Course 1996
silver gelatin photograph
From: Canberra Life Collection—Canberra Life,
Health and Fitness
Pictorial Collection P1748/8

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