

## **A Very Short History of the Friends of the ANBG**

or

### **'... *already a force to be admired*' (28 August 1990): The Creation and Subsequent History of the Friends of the ANBG.**

By Don Beer

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A couple of weeks ago I went to a lecture on the Ottomans. It was a lecture about the clash of empires, about mighty armies marching or riding back and forth across epic distances, about not-so-famous battles and occasionally famous retreats. The story of the Friends is a different kind of history altogether. One might call it micro-history. But it too has its big themes (and to me they're more meaningful and certainly more comprehensible): it reflects the growing longevity of Australians; their increasing prosperity; the spread among them of middle-class attitudes; the poverty of government in rich societies, which is a poverty of values as well as of money; urbanization, environmental destruction and the reaction against them; and the love of nature which is seemingly ineradicable in human beings. These are the social foundations on which individuals - enthusiastic, capable, hard-working people - organized to support a body devoted to the collection, study and promotion of our native plants. Together they made good decisions and achieved a lot while having a fair bit of fun.

The Friends of the ANBG was formed in 1990. For 10-20 years before then there had been a growing movement (in Australia) towards community involvement in museums, botanic gardens and similar institutions, a movement that reflected the sort of changes already mentioned. This phenomenon presented a challenge to the ANBG, which was a laggard in the

area and was at least as conscious of the dangers as of the benefits of public engagement.

Nevertheless, pressed by its political masters (notably the Ministers Tom Uren and Gordon Scholes) and by its director, Dr Robert Boden, the Gardens began to show genuine interest in increasing its public engagement in the early 1980s. This interest expressed itself in three directions. The first was the creation of an Advisory Council. The Advisory Council, composed of eminent, independent figures, was to advise the Minister, among other functions. Such a Council was formed – its first meeting was in 1986 – but it proved too successful for its own good. So regularly and effectively did it oppose the minister's policies that he – the Minister was now Senator Graham Richardson - refused to renew its mandate when its term expired late in 1989. A second Advisory Council was created soon after but was also short-lived.

The second direction involved volunteers. By the 1980s all national institutions in Canberra and all capital city botanic gardens in Australia used volunteers. So did the ANBG. It had 20 on its books (1987) but 19 of them worked in the Banksia Centre for therapeutic horticulture. The ANBG was also the only national collecting institution NOT to have a written policy on volunteers or to allocate at least some paid staff time to their coordination.

This situation prompted the Interpretation Officer, Rod Harvey, to draw up a discussion paper proposing that the ANBG establish a volunteer program (1987). The staff divided almost equally for and against Harvey's proposal. The division of opinion was considered too great to allow action in 1988. Measures to educate the workforce on the use of volunteers and to identify and recognize existing volunteers were proposed instead. This discussion, these measures, proved important for the Friends later because they facilitated the Friends acting as volunteers in various capacities.

The third way in which the Gardens' interest in community participation expressed itself was in the formation of a Friends organization. Experience elsewhere was deemed to demonstrate that to be successful, attempts in this direction required a leading public figure, an 'identity', who would take up the task of creation and attract support to the new organization. In the early-mid

1980s the ANBG lacked this requirement and to this lack was ascribed the failure of the efforts then to form a Friends organization.

Alternatively an enthusiastic group might perform a similar function. This was tried in 1987. The Gardens entered into discussion with the ACT branch of the Society for Growing Australian Plants to assess the degree of support for a Friends organization. The result was encouraging. Unfortunately Robert Boden fell ill, he was off work for some months, and progress came to a standstill for a year or more.

That was a crucial time for the Gardens, a time when events moved very quickly so that circumstances affecting formation of the Friends changed significantly. There is some evidence to suggest that the NCDC proposal to construct a multi-lane highway between the ANBG and CSIRO, the John Dedman Parkway, made more apparent than ever the Gardens' need for community support. The devastating cuts to staff and funding and the damage wrought by almost constant administrative reorganization, real or foreshadowed, must have had a similar effect. There seems also to have been a major change among staff in their attitude towards volunteers. At any rate the new Director, Dr Roger Hnatiuk, considered formation of a Friends group a priority and he had the support of the Minister, Senator Graham Richardson, who declared in October 1989 that the project would be 'a particular focus for effort by the ANBG in the immediate future'. By then Hnatiuk had broached the issue with Murray Fagg, the Assistant Director, Visitor Services. Murray had the advantage of a long membership of the Museums Association and was well aware of the immense amount of staff time required to make the project succeed. He insisted on an extra staff member for the task and he carried his point. The position of Public Relations officer, the first in the history of the Gardens, was created and it was part of the good fortune of the Gardens that it was able to appoint Anne Joyce to it.

Anne is here tonight. Anne had a background in PR and volunteering. She applied for the PR post at the Gardens when it was advertised in 1989, heard nothing for a long time, and finally was called to an interview in May 1990. She had wondered whether to take up an offer if it was made. She left the room – the interview was held in a demountable, probably where the Seed Bank now is. It began raining, she was walking down through the rainforest under her

umbrella, and it suddenly struck her that this might be a really special place to work. Now she says that 'it was the best job in the world'.

If any one person is responsible for the creation and continued success of the Friends, it is Anne Joyce. She worked tirelessly and effectively for 12 years to ensure that the organization prospered and that those involved enjoyed themselves. Of course there were others who made important contributions, and some of them will be mentioned as we proceed.

Anne was thrown in at the deep end. Fortunately, Rod Harvey had been keeping a register in the Visitor Centre of the names of people who might be interested in supporting the Gardens through a Friends organization and he had a list perhaps of 300 potential members. He also was sending out a double-sided A4 sheet advising of progress towards the formal creation of the Friends of the ANBG. So the main task then was to organize, to plan, so that when a public meeting took place, it would actually lead to the formation of the Friends. A series of 6 steering committee meetings was held between the end of June and the end of August. Anne managed to get a powerful list of participants. Perhaps the most outstanding was Gerry Gentle, who became the first President of the Friends. Dr Geraldine Gentle was an economist and at that time a leading public servant, Assistant Commissioner in the Industries Assistance Commission, which is to say what became obvious in her work at the Gardens, that she was a person of strategic vision; she was also very well connected, well known, and inspiring. She had been a frequent visitor to the Gardens and, being aware of its problems within the bureaucracy, she thought it needed public support, a lobby group. With a leader and a group like this the steering committee meetings were highly productive. Most (if not all) of the crucial issues were resolved: the aims of the Friends –there seems to have been little or no conflict in the end about the definition of aims although there had been differences of opinion in the 1980s; charging for membership; the draft constitution (Julia Playford and Gerry Gentle wrote it together); and so on. It was during this process, in fact on 28 August 1990, before the Friends had even been formed, that the *Canberra Times* declared it to be '*... already a force to be admired*'.

In all of this Dr Roger Hnatiuk was very much involved. He wanted to progress slowly but surely, putting enough resources into the task to ensure success. He

tried not to push the organization too quickly for its own or the Gardens' good into fund-raising.

The upshot of the steering committee meetings was a public meeting on 2 September 1990. On that date about 100 people attended; the officeholders and Council of the Friends of the ANBG were elected. On 14 October 1990 Professor Lindsay Pryor, the founder of the Gardens, formally launched the organisation at a ceremony held in the Nancy Burbidge Amphitheatre on the Eucalypt Lawn (during Biota '90, a sort of Open Day). It was almost exactly twenty years after the official opening of the Gardens (20 October 1970).

Over the next three years or so the Friends became an established well organized body. In broad terms it assumed the shape that we know today. Let me mention a few aspects.

Membership started out very healthily. At the end of the first year the Friends claimed 385 members. Numbers went down thereafter – to 262 – and that prompted an 'action plan' which reversed the trend, though it took till 1998 to achieve the original figure again. The early members were more middle-class than the rest of the population in this most middle-class of Australian cities. Women and over-55s were over-represented compared with the general population of Canberra. Most of the members came from the Belconnen and central-inner northern parts of Canberra. The other striking feature of the Friends' membership was the presence of staff of the Gardens, either retired or still employed. This was a significant demonstration of the more favourable view that the staff in general took of the Friends as the organization developed.

The Growing Friends were formally named in 1993; that year they got their own propagation igloo (for growing on rather than actually propagating plants), which was erected at first up by the top cottages, and the following year began operations as a group. Malcolm Fyfe, Ros Cornish, Kath Holtzapffel, Karin Fyfe, Doreen Wilson, Pauline Wicksteed, Doreen Godtschalk and John Wilkes were among those involved.

The volunteer guides were planned from the first year but did not operate until the second (1992). David Young was much involved here, as in other Friends activities. Rod Harvey, Sally White, (the late) Alison McKenzie, Pauline Wicksteed, and the rangers (John Jervis, Kurt Thaler) were also active – it was a joint staff-Friends effort. The guiding service allowed tours to be led more frequently, initially Wednesdays, Fridays, and weekends. The guides in particular proved a productive source of new members.

From the start money rolled in. The Friends have been extremely fortunate in their Treasurers, as Anne pointed out to me, beginning with Arthur Court and Kath Holtzapffel; in 1993 Bev Fisher, a retired company secretary, began her long (16-17 years) and careful stewardship. Having money and having it in increasing amounts allowed the Friends to support the Gardens in a very material fashion. In the first year they gave \$2000 for staff bursaries, set up a Botanical Book Fund for the purchase particularly of rare and valuable works, and set aside \$2000 for landscaping around the new Crosbie Morrison Building. Later (1992) \$2000 was given for the little amphitheatre on the southern side.

A very successful program of monthly meetings began in 1991: it featured talks, walks, visits behind the scenes at the Gardens and excursions, for example to the Jervis Bay Annexe and to Mt Annan Botanic Garden.

There were a number of special events, notably the Spring Fling, an attempt to capture and continue the success of Biota '90 Open Days - only this time directed entirely to the Gardens rather than to the Gardens and CSIRO. In each of 1992, 1993 and 1994 10,000 visitors attended the Spring Fling. Poetry readings by the Poet Laureate and other performances were considered. Concerts and entertainments of various kinds proved so popular that, I would like to be able to say, the organisers were able to turn their noses up at an offer from Elton John to perform here. In fact, the real reason Elton's offer was politely declined was that the Gardens simply did not have the space, facilities or staff to handle the crowds that would have attended.

So that's the first three years of the Friends.

In the ensuing 20+ years the Friends have developed very successfully. Recently our membership topped 2000 for a time; we have provided \$.75

million for Gardens projects, including major contributions to the new Asteraceae Garden and the Red Centre Garden; we have accumulated funds to a level unimaginable by the early members; we have more sub-groups than ever with a thriving Botanic Art section, the Photographic Friends and the Plant Science group; and from 1991 we have had our say on Gardens management plans, as Roger Hnatiuk and other directors have wished.

One may reasonably conclude that the Friends has fulfilled the expectations that its members and the Gardens began with. We have been the front line of the Gardens' interaction with the public, spreading knowledge and understanding of the institution and extending its services in areas like guiding and plant sales. At the same time the Friends have given material and moral support to promote the Gardens' main objectives, most obviously in the form of funding and volunteer labour, support that is increasingly important as government funding diminishes. And from all these activities it is fair, I think, to say that we have gained a great deal of satisfaction, of enjoyment. As we look forward to our second quarter of a century we can hope to get bigger and better and to have even more fun.