

### In appreciation of the old melaleucas in the RBG

No visitor passing by the Perennial Border can miss the age-defying Snow-in-Summer, (*Melaleuca linariifolia*), or Cauliflower Tree, as the old RBG gardeners called it, standing alone beside the path...I like its more earthy name because in summer the dome is bumpy like the florets of the vegetable, and not really white. Who planted it? Von Mueller's Systems Garden covered a large area here below the Director's residence from c.1865 ; either he planted it or else it was the work of Guilfoyle after he had dug up the Baron's garden some time after 1883 (it had gone by 1901). I would incline towards Ferdinand. According to Allan Gardiner who worked here from 1948 to 1984 the two steel rods and nine cables bracing it were put in place in 1972 to prevent further splitting of the many splayed branches which have replaced the former trunk. They are covered in bumps and burls and nobbles, and spreadeagled from ground level, creating a hollow place in the centre loved by children. Look closely - the branches are also clothed with strange fine adventitious roots, and thicker roots intertwine and disappear among the larger branches. Neville Walsh has seen them like this on the floodplain at Cooper's Creek and says this growth is to be expected in its often wet habitat - but here on the hill it is more surprising. It is the only melaleuca species to exhibit this behaviour.

If one walks down the hill past the Rose Pavilion three pale cream trunks stand out beside Eel Bridge - like a sentry on guard. This is the Prickly-leaved Paperbark, or *M.styphelioides*. It is a tall upright tree, its broad papery trunk bifurcated (or is this trifurcated?) into three at head height. Bark hangs from higher up like ragged old bandages. A very old photo looking up a young Princes' lawn shows part of von Mueller's old iron bridge in the foreground, the Directors' residence on the skyline, the remnant River Red gum, and the now-senescent Hoop pine as a pyramidal youngster, probably newly-planted from that wonderful reservoir, the Pinetum. Our Paperbark isn't in the picture, so we can deduce that it was planted by Guilfoyle, probably when his new rustic Eel Bridge was completed in 1875. Eel bridge, all five versions of it, was a favourite subject on old postcards, and the pale trunks of our tree can often be seen against dark foliage behind - a silent observer of the goings-on here for 132 years.

Walk on to the Princes' lawn and step into the shade of another *M. linariifolia*. This is a more seemly shape than the wanton one up the hill; it has a straight trunk, from which heavy branches come twisting quite low down, forming a broad thick dome like a very large market umbrella. It has the same thick masses of fibrous roots on the branches, and serpentine larger roots hugging the branches, and is also about to strangle an old tap. I'm sure that Guilfoyle planted it here to provide shade for generations of picnickers beside the lake. In his Guidebook to the Gardens published 100 years ago he refers to three of these melaleucas as "all handsome trees and beautiful objects, especially when densely covered with their massive heads of creamy white flowers". In his **Australian Plants** (1909), illustrated with brilliant photos by Nicholas Caire, there is a photo of this particular tree, already large and flat-topped. Dean Stuart sometimes ended his aboriginal walks here, serving Long Island Peppermint tea in mugs.

Just a little further west, on the left of the narrow gap between the Melaleuca and Ficus beds is another large creamy-trunked *M. styphelioides*. This stout tree, divided in two at chest height, stands firmly on a pedestal of encircling roots. Whoops! Another tap in danger! Folklore had it that it was Guilfoyle's intention for this tree, and the tall Lombardy poplar which grew opposite, to frame a glimpse of the Central Lake. However, I've just discovered that no.34 (listed as *Melaleuca styphelioides*) appears on E.B.Heyne's map of 1869 in this exact position, and so it seems almost certain that the Baron planted it. It is the tallest of our old melaleucas at c.17.20m and its DBH (diameter at breast height) is 4.30m. This one is also seen as a mature tree in **Australian Plants**.

Pressing on towards the Five-ways Rockery and looking left we see the oldest melaleuca in the RBG, *M.decora* or Ridge Myrtle, at the edge of the Fern Gully. We know that von Mueller planted this one because it also appears on the Heyne map (under its former name, *M.genistifolia*). One would hardly recognize the flourishing mature tree in **Australian Plants** with the poor battered (pun!) old survivor of to-day. The bats had their wicked way with it, denuding many of the upper branches, which now twist palely among the sparse foliage. Six screeching cockatoos found them a convenient perch when I was there. Seven cables secure the heavy sprawling lower branches; the huge girth is completely hidden by dense tall *Dianella*, and can only be comprehended when up close. Fittingly, it is on the National Trust's Register of Significant Trees

Detour around the Camellia Bed to the nether parts of the Oak Lawn; here is another *M.styphelioides* of similar size to the others. It was probably planted here on the lawn as a specimen tree.

At the Herb Garden, to the left of the von Mueller arch is a dark old Moonah, *M.lanceolata*, an aged specimen with only two trunks remaining – one upright and one almost horizontal. **Australian Plants**, yet again, shows this as a vigorous and very bushy domed tree with many trunks near ground level. Unlike the previous three it has hard dark grey corrugated bark - hardly a Paperbark! I wonder why Guilfoyle planted it here, as it has no known medicinal use, unlike its decorative companion to the left - *M.leucadendra* or Broad-leaved Paperbark, whose leaves yield an oil similar to "eucy oil", used in cough sweets etc.

You would swear that its whitish papery trunk was about to lie down on the bed! Its leaves are a lighter green than the other species. Was this an experimental planting of Guilfoyle's, as its distribution is in Tropical Australia, Indonesia and New Guinea? Interestingly, it was the first melaleuca species described, by Linnaeus, from specimens sent from Indonesia; it is said that these trees had white paper-like bark which had been blackened below by fire, hence the name - Greek melas, black; leucos, white.

Leaving the "home paddock" and travelling through New Zealand to the Guilfoyle lawn are two more venerable trees which are almost certainly Guilfoyle's work because this area was part of the broad strip of land added to the Gardens' southern boundary in 1875. They were probably planted around 1889 when he was creating the Mounds. They are tall, maybe because they have been growing up to the light, and they give the impression of leaning away from the north winds, to which their canopies have been

exposed here on the high ground. One is labelled *M.lanceolata* – wait a minute! This can't be right: the bark is reminiscent of thick reams of silvery-bronze cardboard, not dark and rough. There are three separate heavy trunks, one with a thriving 4' Moreton Bay fig growing from it! Neville Walsh is unable to identify this tree as the sparse foliage is high up, and no fruits are to be found. I wondered if it may be another *M.decora*, as the leaves and bark are similar, and it is a Queenslander, like the plants in the Queensland bed beside it, and most of the trees in the Guilfoyle lawn, including the *M.linariifolia* growing near it, again branching low down. These two are more imposing when viewed from the north, with the light on them.

Lurking beside the fence in the Australian border opposite the Nymphaea Lake is another very tall *M.styphelioides*, difficult to see because the four trunks are covered with thick intact bark of a dirty greyish cream. Its inaccessibility has rendered it untouched by human hand; and has pollution from Domain Road sullied it? Presumably it is about the same age as the two previous trees because the plantation of Australian vegetation along the southern boundary was commenced in 1887.

Trekking back to the Central Lawn we see a fifth *M. styphelioides*, standing alone on the grass just below the path. The tall cream and buff trunk is smooth, stripped of its bark by countless curious visitors, but thick cream folds of paper hang out of reach, about 8' up! Another tap is about to be enveloped. This is almost certainly younger than the other two of this species, as Guilfoyle makes no specific mention of it in the 1908 Guidebook. It isn't as tall (c.15.50m) or as wide as the others (3.15m). One is struck by two things: the straight pale trunk is echoed by the tower of G.H. behind; and the Eel Bridge Prickly-leaved Paperbark is clearly visible from here.

It is quite clear that Guilfoyle admired melaleucas and planted them as specimen trees in the Gardens - in particular the Prickly-leaved Paperbark for its lovely trunk and the Snow-in-Summer for its floral display; von Mueller, on the other hand, may have been experimenting with acclimatizing these particular species as they are indigenous to NSW and Queensland. I imagine they would be pleased to know that their wonderful melaleucas have been written about and photographed in every book written about the Gardens since: by Frank Clarke, Crosbie Morrison, Alex. Jessep, Richard Pescott and Joan Law-Smith; and glad that their legacy is deeply appreciated to-day, well over 100 years later.

Jenny Happell.  
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