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Sifting horticulture from botany: John Lindley's 'A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony' (1840)

British botanist John Lindley (1799–1865) published *A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony* (1840) to promote western Australian plants in European gardens, in the process revealing vivacious opinions about antipodean species.

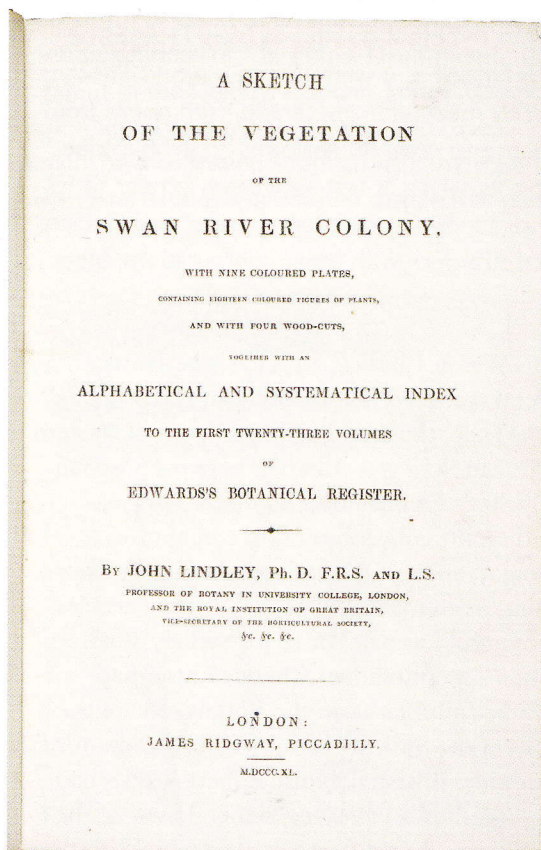
The anatomy of Lindley's *Sketch*

British botanist John Lindley's *A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony* (1840) based on collections received in England by numerous influential botanists is one of the foundation documents of Australian garden history. Yet today it languishes in relative obscurity. Lindley's *Sketch* disseminated sound information to the world about colonial Perth's flora. Significantly for gardeners and horticulturists, it provided the most succinct portrait to date of the flora of the Swan River settlement (established in 1829 before Western Australian statehood). Aiming to demystify this confounding flora, Lindley wanted to kindle the introduction of attractive Swan River plants to Europe—his pursuit was for 'horticultural objects'. In the process he treated his readers to an intimate glimpse into the novelties of antipodean nature.

John Lindley was Professor of Botany at University College in London and only 40 when the *Sketch* was published. It was issued as an appendix to Edwards's *Botanical Register* during November 1839 to January 1840 and also separately published on its completion. Established in 1815 by natural history artist Sydenham Edwards, the *Botanical Register* was an illustrated magazine with horticultural as well as botanical intent.

Robert Dale, artist (born Winchester, England, 1810; died Bath, England, 1853); Robert Havell Jnr, engraver (born London 1793; died Tarrytown, New York, 1878), *Panoramic View of King Georges Sound, part of the Colony of Swan River*, 1834; steel engraving, aquatint, and watercolour on three sheets (18 x 271.4cm)

The University of Melbourne Art Collection (Gift of the Sir Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973)



Title page from Lindley's *Sketch* (1840)

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Lindley wrote inexhaustibly about horticulture. The reformation of plant names also preoccupied his writings. He urged gardeners to become familiar with his *Sketch* to 'avoid the vexation of buying plants of no value under high sounding and imposing names'. In promoting Swan River plants, Lindley's *Sketch* would help gardeners 'to judge on the one hand what to send home, and on the other, what to ask their correspondents to collect'.

Royal Horticultural Society
Lindley Library, London



Nine hand-coloured lithographs by an unidentified artist, along with four wood-cuts, illustrated Lindley's 58-page discussion. Through the worldwide distribution of such botanical tracts, the Swan River environs and its distinctive vegetation was ushered onto the global stage. Lindley explained the need for his account:

The frequent arrival of seeds from this Colony, the excellent state in which they are received, and the facility with which further supplies can be procured, appear to render some Botanical account of this remarkable country a desirable appendage to a work which, like the *Botanical Register*, forms an original record of new plants introduced, or worthy of introduction, to our Gardens.

Western Australia's enigmatic plant life

The plants of Western Australia are specially adapted to harsh conditions, namely low soil nutriment and high solar exposure. As such, this flora exhibits astounding diversity, uncanny growth forms, and often bizarre, yet elegant, means for coping with its climate. For European botanists in Australia, such novel flora confounded their taxonomic footings. British botanist James Edward Smith had published the first book on Australian flora, *A Specimen of the Botany of New Holland*, in 1793. A colleague of the cosmopolitan botanist-explorer Joseph Banks, Smith forewarned prospective botanists that the beliefs of naturalists trained to see plants with European eyes would be jarred:

When a botanist first enters on the investigation of so remote a country as New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any certain fixed points from whence to draw his analogies ... Whole tribes of plants, which at first sight seem familiar to his acquaintance ... prove, on a nearer examination, total strangers, with other configurations, other œconomy, and other qualities ...

In his *Sketch*, Lindley gathered together the 'several scattered notices of Swan River plants'. At the time, the only notable account of western Australian flora was Austrian botanist Stephan Endlicher's *Enumeratio Plantarum* (1837), based on the collections of his compatriot, diplomat, and naturalist Carl von Hügel. Prior to that, accounts had appeared as brief articles in botanical journals. In 1830, Sydney Botanic Garden superintendent Charles Fraser had published 'Remarks on the Botany, &c. of the Banks of the Swan River' in Hooker's *Botanical Miscellany*. British botanist Robert Brown had also published a vignette, 'General view of the



botany of the vicinity of Swan River' in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* (1832), basing his observations on 142 plants supplied by Sydney-based savant Alexander Macleay and British collector James Mangles (who had travelled to Swan River in 1831).

Although some of Lindley's judgements were based on live plants growing in English gardens, the vast majority of his observations were of dried specimens, certainly influencing his judgment. He decided, for instance, that the genus *Tribonanthes* were 'plants of no beauty, as far as can be ascertained by their appearance in the form of dried specimens'. Lindley freely acknowledged his reliance on such secondary sources: 'The materials from which the following sketch has been drawn up are the foregoing documents, and an herbarium of about 1000 species, formed by the communications of Mr. James Drummond, now resident in the Colony, Captain James Mangles' and others. Lindley's *Sketch* was also based largely on a collection supplied by early colonist Georgiana Molloy's in her first dispatch of plants

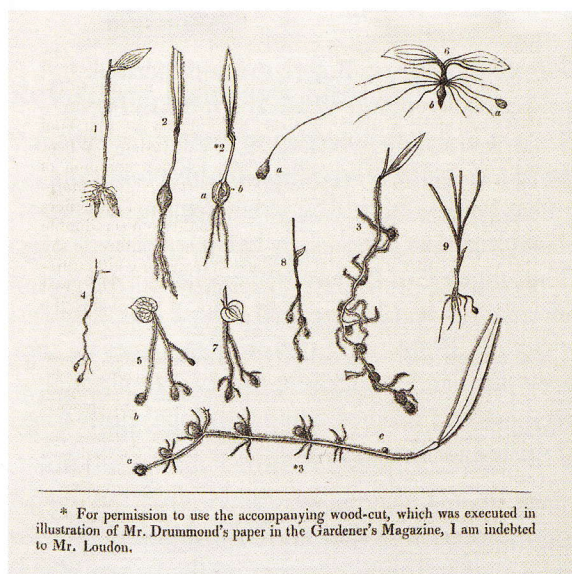
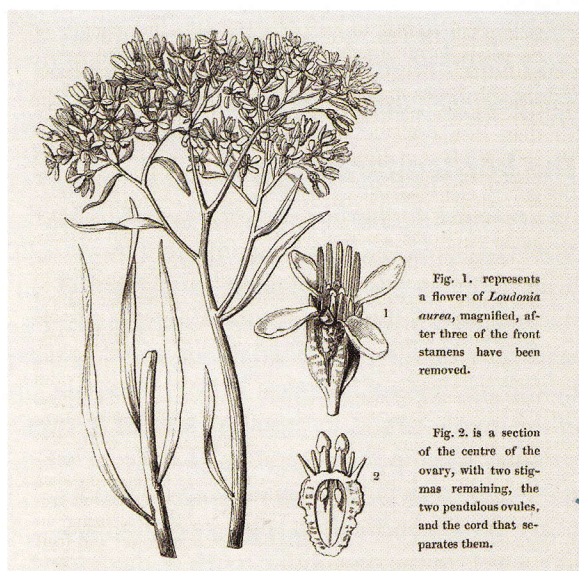
to England in 1838.

Lindley's intrigue for the eccentricity of some Swan River plants is clearly evident. *Calothamnus* was 'so peculiar as to deserve to become the subject of special enquiry'. Falling outside of botanical conventions, others were strange and befuddling: '*D. Quadrilatera* has leaves which look more like objects prepared to puzzle a geometrician than any thing already known in the vegetable kingdom'. The leaves of hakeas and grevilleas were 'so varied and peculiar that a young Botanist might be excused for mistaking them for ferns'. Even today, a young botanist—especially one whose taxonomic training has taken place outside of Australia—could be forgiven for such an understandable error of judgment.

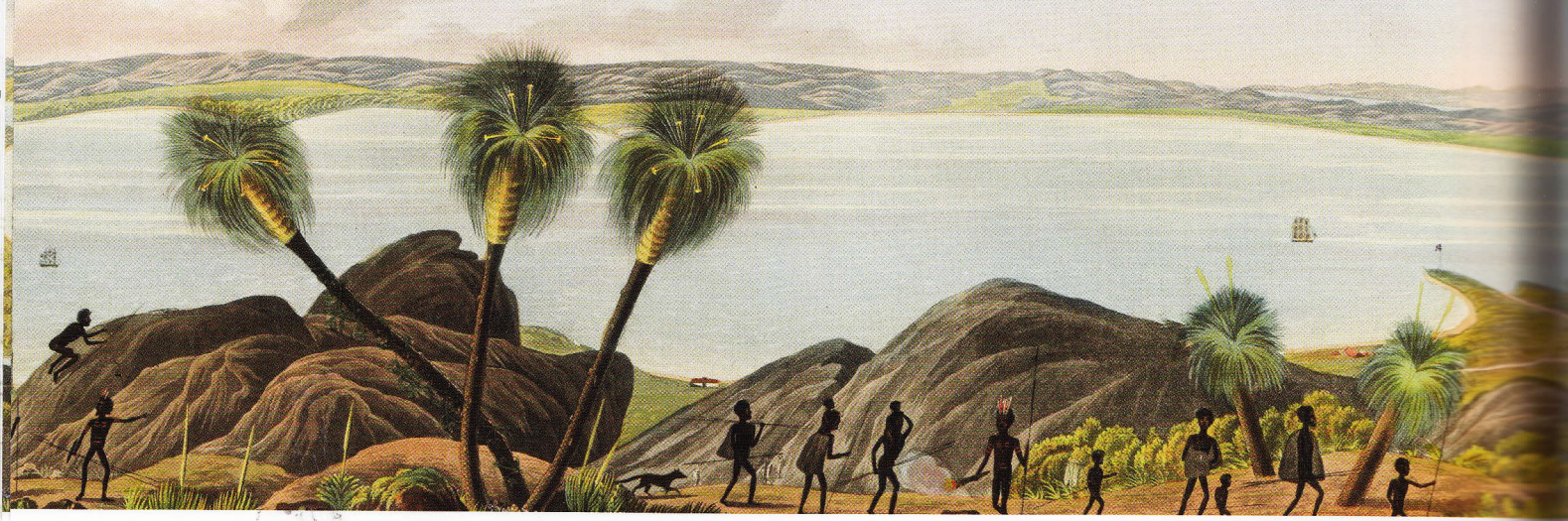
A crisis of naming

Before the arrival of European colonists, the plants of the Swan River were denoted by Aboriginal names specific to the region. In an Aboriginal sense, names are intimately connected with the plants themselves and the habitats in which the plants grow. Name-granting is also an essential

Before Lindley's *Sketch*, coloured prints such as Dale and Havell's *Panoramic View* (1834)—depicting King Georges Sound, at Albany—had begun to make an impression on the European botanical imagination. In its representations of colonial realities were set alongside *Kingia*, *Xanthorrhoea*, *Nuytsia* and other typical genera, albeit with artistic licence.



Colonial networks were clearly evident in Lindley's *Sketch*, with these engraved illustrations invoking the names of colonial botanist James Drummond and British gardening author, editor, and publisher J.C. Loudon. Special Collections, The University of Melbourne Library



Lindley extolled the beauty of Swan River Colony orchids. He was optimistic about their future cultivation, opining that it would be 'a libel upon the science of horticulture, to say that in the cultivation of these plants there are any difficulties which patience and skill ought not to overcome'. (Macdonaldia has since been renamed *Thelymitra*.)

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practice for science. Before the horticultural market could communicate about Swan River plants, Lindley first needed to standardise what the species were to be called. Yet his profession suffered many misattributions since the naming of plants varied so enormously between hemispheres. 'The language of Botany is marvellously in want of reformation' he lamented in his book *The Elements of Botany*. Problems of two or more names for the same plant and imprecise terminologies plagued botanists and also hampered the global cultivation of Australian species.

Lindley sought to remedy the crisis of communication so that his readership could more readily decide 'whether particular species

are worth possession, either for the sake of their beauty or singularity'. His strategy involved comparisons with familiar European plants using associations—ones that are still encountered in the common names of Western Australian taxa. The Swan River mahogany (*Eucalyptus marginata*) is a good example. *Cyclogyne* called 'to mind the European species of *Onobrychis*'. A kind of sundew bore 'bright scarlet bulbs the size of the largest kind of hazel nut'. *Synaphea* was 'a strange oak-leaved plant ... whose leaves seem as if they were intended to be larger, but starved into hard dry lobes'. In his *Sketch* Lindley drew word pictures to bring the Swan River's strange configurations into more familiar corridors.

Much naming commemorated figures in the history of botany. *Manglesia* was 'named by Endlicher in compliment to Captain James Mangles ... to whose exertions the country owes the greater part of the plants as yet introduced from this colony into our gardens'. The genus *Loudonia* was a tribute 'to the eminent services rendered to Horticultural Botany by John Claudius Loudon, Esq. author of the *Arboretum Britannicum*, and of many other valuable works well known in every part of the civilized world'. Like the names of mountains, deserts, and lakes, plant names often honour explorers and notable figures in the history of horticulture and botany.

The horticultural object

As a resource for horticultural markets, Lindley's *Sketch* titillated the European imagination with beautiful images and intriguing descriptions of the antipodean flora. Not content to rely only on taxonomy Lindley promoted select colonial plants by using notions of botanical beauty. A member of the myrtle family, for instance, formed 'a most striking object in the vegetation'. Lindley even presented some of the flora as beautiful works of art: certain horticultural objects glimmered like jewels in the monolithic rough of the remote



colony. *Thomasia*, he enthused, ‘bear fine showy flowers and deserve a place in a conservatory’.

While some plants were praise-worthy, others were ruled out. Lindley referred to the family *Goodeniaceae* in largely dismissive terms as ‘not at all suited to the objects of cultivators’. With the exception of the fine royal blue *Leschenaultias* and the indigo *Dampieras* in the family, ‘all the other species, and there are many’ were ‘by no means beautiful objects’. Similarly, the *Stackhousias* were set aside as ‘species of no beauty’. The genera *Roea* and *Dichosema* were two others—in Lindley’s opinion—‘of little beauty ... neither of which possess the slightest interest for horticultural purposes’.

Although not showy horticultural objects, some plants were strongly aromatic. The myrtle family was ‘not in general so handsome as those already mentioned’ even though ‘the fragrance of which exceeded any thing’. Two species of *Lyperanthus* had ‘no pretensions to beauty, but have a very singular appearance with their dingy sad-coloured flowers, and are very fragrant’. Lindley speculated about the potential economic importance of these odorous plants. The fragrant leaves and half-ripe fruits of *Hedaroma* ‘might be worth collecting for the use of the perfumer; and if so they would furnish a new and most agreeable article of luxury to Europe’.

In parts of *A Sketch*, Lindley showed an interest in making Swan River plants into global exports. The Sundew family, for instance, appeared ‘likely to be in some cases of commercial value as dyer’s plants’. The bulbs of other species possessed ‘a deep scarlet powder secreted by the scales of the bulb ... more like the colour obtained from Archil than any thing else to which I can compare it’. This violet dye (from lichens of the Canary Islands) connected the Swan River flora with commercial values intelligible to a European audience.



Lindley described the hemi-parasitic Christmas tree as ‘a beautiful shrub, with very large thyrses of bright orange-coloured flowers ... it has gained the name of “Fire tree”’. In 1842, Georgiana Molloy reported a ‘small harvest’ of seed in her dispatches although throughout the nineteenth century *Nuytsia* would prove challenging to cultivate. Special Collections, The University of Melbourne Library

Revisiting Lindley’s *Sketch*

While a foundation document in Australian garden history, Lindley’s *Sketch* was also about the perception of place. Images of distinctive plant families evoked the general sense of Swan River terrain in the imaginations of distant audiences. Lindley concluded that some species, more than others, represented the landscape’s antipodean character. The abundant, water-loving and carnivorous sundew or *Droseraceae* were ‘evidence ... [of] the springy nature of the soil at Swan River’, he opined. In his assessment, the colony was the ‘headquarters’ of the *Haemodoraceae* family, including the iconic kangaroo paws



'to which the expression *nullibi copiosae* [not widespread] recently applied to it, is no longer applicable; for at the Swan River they seem to form about one-fiftieth of the species'.

Lindley's *Sketch* demonstrates a burgeoning European appetite in botany and horticulture for colonial flora. It also presents a record of emerging networks between the western Australian colony and Europe. The exchange entailed plants, seeds, and dried specimens, but also ideas about Swan River plants and place. Lindley was interested in

the beauty of the flora based in standards formed outside Australia.

Yet for readers today, Lindley's *Sketch* lacks crucial information about the growth habits and climactic requirements of the novel plants. Just how would these 'horticultural objects' survive outside of their habitats? This burning shortcoming of Lindley's *Sketch* highlights the wonderful complexities of Western Australian flora, complexities that are still being unravelled by botanists and horticulturists alike.

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For a more comprehensive treatment of this subject, please see my paper 'Values and evaluations: reading for beauty in John Lindley's *A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony* (1839–1840)', *The New Critic*, 10, 2010, pp.1–17.

Originally from the eastern United States, **John Ryan** moved to Western Australia in 2008, and has since developed a fascination for the cultural history of the state's diverse flora.