Colonial Landscape Gardener

Alfred Buxton of Christchurch, New Zealand 1872 - 1950

RUPERT TIPPLES
Cover photograph: Lyndon, the property of M Macfarlane near Waiau, Canterbury, landscaped by Alfred Buxton sometime early this century. The photograph is from the set of panoramic photographs by R P Moore taken about 1926.

Alfred William Buxton in 1902
(Cyclopaedia of New Zealand)
Colonial Landscape Gardener

Alfred Buxton of Christchurch
New Zealand
1872 - 1950

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For
Rita
Ruth
Daniel
and
Rosemary

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.
Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

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THE MIDLANDS OF ENGLAND

The Midlands in England, during the nineteenth century, showing principal towns, rivers, railways and coalfields as they were during the period of the Buxtons emigration.

4 inches = 50 miles approximately.

Railways = 

Coalfields = 
MAP 2

WALSALL

Source: Part of Walsall from the Walsall Red Book 1875.
MAP 3

This map has been taken from Alfred Simmons book Old England and New Zealand, 1879, of his experiences travelling in New Zealand to examine the success of his Union's emigration policy in the 1870s. Simmons was founder and organiser of the Kent and Sussex Labourers' Union and editor of the Kent Messenger. His book might have been read by prospective emigrants such as the Buxtons.
MAP 4

BOROUGH OF ST ALBANS 1902

Source: Canterbury Museum
AUTHOR’S PREFACE

When Charlie Challenger read through the first five chapters of this book for me he questioned whether it was a family history, a social history, a trade evolution study, or a record of New Zealand’s first landscape gardener and his landscape firms. At the time he did not have available to him this preface which is in part a response to his question.

In 1984 at the first conference of the Stout Centre at Victoria University Keith Sinclair suggested that biography was like removing Salomé’s veils. He suggested that there were six and the biographer removes them layer by layer. The first reveals the face that the public sees. The second exposes the stock of ideas that a person had, their philosophy of life. The third is one of the more difficult to remove completely - that exposing the subject’s private life, their relationships with family and friends. The fourth shows their growing up, when their character was formed, the forming of their goals in life and their sense of identity. Sinclair particularly drew attention to a psychologist’s comment he had noted at a conference, that one’s world picture is formed by the age of twelve. The biographer should reveal the process of socialization, of learning attitudes such as the relative prestige of different occupations, and of habits, for instance of hard work, he believed. The fifth veil revealed people’s self communings and how they saw themselves and the sixth exposed the answer to the question ‘What is the inner man?’ Sinclair himself admitted that he had made little progress at removing the last veil and analysing the inner psychology of the subjects he had studied.

Biography as a subject did not escape criticism at the same conference. J C Davis, from a background as a European historian, offered four major criticisms. He did not attempt to answer any of them. First, he criticised biography because current historiography and social science emphasized the determinative power of social forces over individual agents. Secondly he pointed out the tendency for biography to be restricted to the powerful because only they leave abundant written sources. Thirdly, he suggested biography tends to reflect the narcissistic individualistic culture of the west and be inappropriate for other cultures. Last he queried whether biographers can really capture a real personality, a coherent self. These criticisms were answered to some degree by Charles Sedgwick speaking of the life history method in sociology. The elitism of traditional biography is overcome through in-depth interviews which help the researcher to reconstruct the life experience of ordinary people. Further the tension between private perceptions and social context is kept open so that the life history can reveal why individuals do not define their personal difficulties in terms of social change. C Wright Mills distinguished between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. He argued that this was the most fruitful distinction of the sociological imagination. Mills referred to the sociological imagination as a ‘quality of mind’ enabling us to ‘grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’.

My study of A W Buxton came about before I was aware of these issues and was directed by other research models derived from previous applied research. However, this study fulfils what Antony Alpers in a discussion of literary biography at the same conference called the ‘primary biography’. He described primary biography as a process spread over several decades leading to the emergence of an historical view and the publication of a book, the primary biography. Subsequent books follow which do not have to argue over the historical facts and are thus more readable and widely read. They do not suffer from the impossibility of being satisfactory books as does the primary biography in Alpers’ opinion.

My interest in A W Buxton came about in an unusual way. I had arrived in New Zealand at the end of 1977 to take up a lectureship at Lincoln College in the employment aspects of horticultural management. Over the next couple of years a question began to concern me. Why in New Zealand were there different wages awards for different sectors of the horticulture industry? Those awards were different to the remainder of agriculture and again different to the remainder of commerce? So began an interest in the history of labour relations in the primary sector in New Zealand. Previous to the Agricultural Workers Act 1936, one of the first primary industry groups to obtain recognition, was the Christchurch Gardeners’ Union which obtained an award from the Arbitration Court in 1903. It was a direct ancestor of the New Zealand Labourers’ Union of today and the Gardeners’ Award has been succeeded by the current Nurserymen and Landscape Gardeners’ Award. While exploring the early history of labour relations in the nursery industry
I became aware of the name, A W Buxton. He had been involved in the discussions of that period and cited in the awards because he was a significant employer.

At about that time I also became interested in alternative sociological research methods. I had had several years experience of social survey research methods but was finding them increasingly limited. Students who had worked in Sociology at the University of Canterbury reported using the life history method and this seemed to have considerable potential. At that point serendipity played a part. I mentioned A W Buxton to Charlie Challenger, who was then the Reader in Landscape Architecture at Lincoln College, and one of the few people to have explored New Zealand's landscape history. He knew the name and said he had a tape recorded by one of his employees. He had recorded this conversation with Edgar Taylor in May 1977 shortly before the latter died. The tape proved to be most informative and initiated other lines of enquiry. Traditional lines of enquiry, through the archive sources on industrial relations, were frustrated by the destruction of many of the documents sought. They had been destroyed either by the Hope Gibbons fire at the National Archives in 1951 or by the policies of the Labour and Justice Departments not to keep many of the items I requested. However, a series of extension lectures by Len Richardson of the History Department of the University of Canterbury on the development of the Labour movement provided further ideas on how to pursue the research. Then another event took a hand. I had a research assistant, Catherine Hurley, who one day had a slack period in her work. She had majored in History and French at university. I suggested she might like to look at how my 'historical' project was going. She came back with an idea from a letter she had seen in the newspaper. She suggested I should write to the newspapers to ask readers for assistance with the research. As it was her idea I asked her to draft a suitable letter to local editors. The response was beyond our wildest dreams. People wrote in from all over the country with many little but extremely useful bits of information and particularly photographs. A journalist from The Press wrote a feature article on the research and managed to get certain key details wrong. As a result of the mixup surviving members of the family contacted us and eventually I interviewed them in Wanganui. Mrs Merle Kirkwood and Raymond Buxton were extremely helpful about their father and his businesses but they found it difficult to understand why somebody should be interested in him and his work. Catherine extended her letters to the editor to all provincial newspapers in areas where we knew Alfred Buxton had worked.

Further information and photographs poured into my office.

About this time the nature of the project began to change. While we had found out much about the industrial relations situation in the business, we had obtained a lot of other interesting data about the places landscaped. The project began to become a life history of a dead landscape gardener - in effect a biography of Alfred William Buxton 1872-1950. While there were many sites landscaped in Canterbury by Buxton, we became aware of his work further afield. I began to use a tactic which was to prove very useful. Being aware of the need for cost economy, I started using College Student Field Tours and conferences as a cheap way of getting to areas where I knew there were Buxton landscapes. We regularly had Student Tours to Nelson and to Hawkes Bay and there were features I wanted to investigate in each. Then in 1984-5 I became due for sabbatical leave, but just before I went away I bought a copy of Rollo Arnold's book The Farthest Promised Land. This book gave me a great insight into the type of information available in Britain on emigrants before they left their homeland and was to prove most useful during my leave. 8

By this time Catherine Hurley had finished her employment and gone overseas. Research was proceeding very slowly as teaching had to be completed before going on leave and it was also delayed by other short term research projects which needed immediate attention. The refresher leave was taken in England because the necessary academic facilities were available at Wye College, University of London, and because that was close to my family. It also had a further advantage not previously foreseen. I wrote to the editors of all the local newspapers in Staffordshire, where I knew Alfred Buxton had been brought up before emigration, to ask their readers' assistance in much the same way as Catherine Hurley had initiated for me in New Zealand. Again the response was very good, although for a time I followed a red herring with an unrelated group of Buxtons. Again family relatives noticed the correspondence and contact was established with Warwick ('Buck') Buxton, who has provided much of the family history outside New Zealand. One advantage of Wye College was ready access to St Catharine's House, Somerset House and the Public Record Office in London where nineteenth century census returns and genealogical records may be viewed. Sabbatical leave also provided an opportunity to visit rural and urban Staffordshire from where the Buxtons had come, and to visit the Staffordshire County Record Office and Walsall Borough Archives. Another fortuitous event at
Fig 1 Entry and Passage through the career decision making process according to Jones and Peberdy.

Purposive elements: Choice.

Chance elements: Opportunities, jobs available.

the shipping list I noticed the similarity of certain of the Buxton family names in the Census returns for Wootton and those recorded in the shipping list. Part of my problem was a mistake in the Canterbury Museum’s transcription of the original shipping lists. Comparing the two lists I found that three groups of Buxtons had preceded Alfred Buxton’s family to New Zealand.

Another lead was obtained by using Popper’s philosophical idea of falsification to find Alfred Buxton (senior) at the 1871 Census of Population. The key part of Popper’s idea was that the researcher sets up an hypothesis, falsifies it, and then refines it to a less falsifiable form. This process of falsification is claimed to help science to make real advances because you can select more radical hypotheses than you would be inclined to if trying to prove them. I knew that Alfred Buxton had been married in Hanley in 1871 from an apparent address in Well Street. He was not resident there just one month earlier at the 1871 Census of Population. I knew he was familiar with horses and that his brother’s wedding had been witnessed by a farmer, another Buxton. I hypothesized that Alfred Buxton was working for this relative prior to his marriage and learned his horsemanship skills there because of the many family linkages I had already discovered between Walsall and Ellastone. I had obtained possible addresses of the farmer from Directories of the period. It seemed likely that an address in the Parish of marriage might have been
chosen to reduce the fees for the wedding for individuals from out of the Parish. How was I to falsify the hypothesis? Finding the Buxton relative without any sign of Alfred Buxton would falsify the hypothesis. I searched the Census returns and could not find the farm of the Buxton relative there. Then I had a brainwave, perhaps I was looking in the wrong place. Perhaps I should be looking not in the Parish of Hanley but in the neighbouring rural part of the Parish of Burslem. Perhaps the farm was the other side of the Parish boundary. There the family was! Listed with the farm servants was Alfred Buxton! That was one of the best moments of my research while in England.

England also provided an opportunity to start writing and by the time we left England I had drafts of the first two chapters and several ideas which I could not investigate until we returned to New Zealand. At the back of my mind, while carrying out the research on the family history and background, I had a model of sociological origin, which colleagues had developed in research for the Agricultural Training Board into the career selection plans of young entrants to agricultural and horticultural occupations. This approach looked at factors influencing entry and passage through the decision making process of taking a primary industry career. The critical aspects of the model are illustrated in Figure 1.

After our return research and writing was delayed by another task. I was commissioned to write a centennial history of the Canterbury Fruitgrowers’ Association. The latter had to be completed by February 1986 so Buxton research was put on hold for a spell. Later in 1986 I was hosted by John Macfarlane at Waetaranui near Hastings and by Peter and Norma Murphy at Panikau Station near Gisborne. I had just completed a student field trip in Napier. Both of their parents had had their gardens landscaped by A W Buxton Limited. Their hospitality helped me to understand better the respect with which A W Buxton’s name was remembered up and down the east coast of the North Island. Later in 1986 I was able to visit various properties landscaped in the Depression in Otago and Southland. These helped to form a clearer impression of Alfred Buxton’s work without the involvement of Edgar Taylor and Trevor Buxton. During the early part of 1987 writing continued along with teaching. In October I had the chance to visit properties landscaped in the Wellington area, while attending a conference, and then Mrs Barbara Matthews home at Waikanae and Mrs Elsie Morgan at Otaki. On the next day I had made an appointment to see Mrs Merle Kirkwood, again at Wanganui, to check various details. A useful session ensued, but on driving back to Palmerston North my car was rammed and I was left unconscious and critically ill in hospital for two months. I never did get to see the former residence of Edward Short at Parorangi near Fielding or that of Robert Tanner at Longburn. When I regained consciousness my wife did get the chance to visit both properties and was able to give me her view of them but I was only able to visit Longburn on a later trip.

Without the care and skill shown by the medical fraternity at Palmerston North and the willing assistance of colleagues at Lincoln College during my rehabilitation this book would never have been possible. It was greatly facilitated by the understanding of the Rehabilitation Officer of the Accident Compensation Corporation and of Professor Bruce Ross, Principal of Lincoln College, who made arrangements for me to borrow the word processor on which this book has been written as part of my rehabilitation.

While researching and writing this book I have been asked many times what will happen to specific Buxton gardens. I have asked myself the same question. Garden conservation consequently became a subject of interest although it is not a familiar one in New Zealand. My thinking was given a major boost by the visit of John Sales, Chief Gardens Advisor of the English National Trust, in November 1988. Others had seen an opportunity to extend a visit he was making to Australia. Sales provided an approach and much practical advice from his long British experience at a one day seminar in Auckland which I was fortunate to attend. This facilitated greatly the writing of Chapter 12 and helped with assistance I was able to give to a Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture submission to the 1989 review of Historic Places legislation.

The story of how this book came to be written does not end there. After I had started back at work I read Eric Olssen’s Dominion Sunday Times review of Miles Fairburn’s book The Ideal Society and its enemies and noticed his comment on the value of gardens to settlers in combatting the worst effects of loneliness. Although the book was nearly finished this idea offered an explanation for a Buxton landscape such as for Roger Murphy at Panikau Station near Gisborne. Fairburn’s theory provided the first coherent explanation of why many New Zealand farms have elaborate gardens although they are in remote situations. Such a useful idea had to be incorporated even if it could not be explored as fully as might be desired. One further fact came into the evolution of this work. Early in
1989 I was asked to be the principal speaker at a reunion of the descendants of Alfred and Anne Buxton on Labour Weekend 1989. There is nothing like an absolute deadline to stimulate activity! I am grateful to the Buxton family for giving me the opportunity to share my conclusions and the stimulus to finish what has not yet taken a decade, but is quite long enough for my wife and family.

My research has been greatly enhanced by countless informants, who are named in the endnotes where their information has been cited. I owe my thanks to them and the many others whose information was not cited. I am particularly indebted to those who enabled me to use their photographs, including the following: Merle Kirkwood, Raymond Buxton, Frank Neate, Edward Buckingham, Peter Murphy, Lynn Stewart, and Peter Murray. David Wood of the Department of Horticulture, Massey University, visited Hato Paora College for me and took photographs, as did Graham Densem in the Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay. Copying photographs would have been much more difficult without the technical expertise of David Hollander and Gaynor Vettner of the Educational Services Unit, Lincoln College, to whom I am also grateful. There are so many photographs because of the urging of Graham Densem, one of the College’s Landscape Architects. He helped me to review the photographs assembled, with teaching in mind I think, for which I am grateful. Brenda Gissing guided me around the technical complexities of the MASS11 word processing package on which this book has been produced and should not be blamed for any technical inadequacies which are my own responsibility. The Lincoln College Research Committee provided the most substantial part of the funding for the project for which I am also grateful. To carry out research which is like a hobby and be paid and funded to do so is a privilege which I have been fortunate to enjoy. Charlie Challenger read through the manuscript for me and provided pictures of Thomas Abbott and his son. I am grateful to him on both counts. Finally, without the aid of my wife, her patience and tolerance, and that of my children, this book would never have been completed within a decade let alone several. To them this book is dedicated.

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