

TRN Lothian OBE, VMH (1915 – 2004)

Thomas Robert Noel Lothian, Director of the Botanic Gardens, Adelaide, from 1948 to 1980, was born in Melbourne on Christmas Day, 1915 in the suburb of Mont Albert. He was born into a successful business family well established as printers, publishers and publishing agents. The business, Thomas C. Lothian & Co. was established by his grandfather and at the time of his birth was managed by his father; both men oversaw the running of the business and the family was close knit. It was anticipated that the young Noel, as he was known, being the first born son would go into the family business. However, other influences were also at play within the family; Noel's mother and grandmother were keen gardeners, as was his grandfather who was also a very keen bush walker and field naturalist. From an early age he accompanied his grandfather on walks and naturalists expeditions into the bush, and gardened alongside him.

Education and formative experiences

Noel's primary education took place at Mont Albert Primary School and after passing the Qualifying Certificate he was educated first at the progressive Mont Albert High School and then at Scotch College with the sons of other well-to-do families. He would have been a participant in the traditional college curriculum based on the English Public Schools model – a balanced mix of Classics, Maths and Sciences, English, History, Religion and Games. At the time Scotch was resolutely Non-Conformist Presbyterian and Establishment but a few years later Lothian declared he 'had no religion' when he enlisted in the Australian Infantry Forces very possibly influenced by his mother who was a practicing Christian Scientist. An apparent discrepancy exists between published accounts of Lothian's secondary education. McKinnon¹ records four years at Mont Albert High School and four years at Scotch College based on Lothian's memories as an eighty year old. Such a length of time seems very unlikely. School records may

throw some light on the apparent discrepancy. Whatever the case it seems that like many families the benefits to future careers appeared linked to the prestige and polish bestowed by a private school. There is no available record of how young Lothian fared at school but he graduated and arrived at the point of having to decide, with his family, what course his future would take. A clue to his scholastic aptitude may be found in old crammer's texts for Leaving Certificate studies that are in Lothian's archive at the ABG. He was cramming for Geology, a component of the Science curriculum.

Clearly there would have been some expectations of further studies to fit him for the world of business. At this time TRNL took a turn that is at first rather surprising. With the financial support of his grandfather he determined on a two year course in horticulture. He enrolled at Burnley Horticultural College in 1932 and after graduating in 1934 he undertook practical, professional training in Fitzroy Gardens under the Parks and Gardens supervisors of the Melbourne City Council. At that time the traditional English apprenticeship training system for gardeners was beginning to break down and instead of accepting the lock-step promotion offered by that system Lothian decided to steer a different course. In 1935 he applied for, and won, an exchange traineeship at Christchurch Botanic Gardens in New Zealand commencing in 1936. This position introduced him to a more scientific approach to gardening. In fact it called for more classroom study, more field-work in the NZ bush with a strong focus on collecting and preparing botanical specimens, recording site details, describing plants in botanical terminology and identifying them. The modern focus at Christchurch on further study and book-learning led Noel into the world of book hunting and collecting, a pastime he enjoyed all his life. Thus it came about that Lothian was transformed from a gardener to an horticulturalist and finally to a budding botanist.

At this time Lothian was encouraged by colleagues at the botanic gardens and contacts at Lincoln College of the University of New Zealand (Christchurch) to apply for a two year trainee scholarship at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in the UK. Such a bold step in moving so far from home shows that Lothian had a strong sense of self-determination and a good deal of confidence in his abilities to steer his own course and thrive. The traineeship commenced in 1938 so Lothian returned from New Zealand to Melbourne to wait the result. While he waited he returned to work with the Melbourne City Council. He sailed for England on the P&O vessel 'MOULTAN' and after an apparently relaxed voyage arrived and made his way to Kew where he took up student digs nearby. Typical of Lothian he took minimal luggage; no stowed luggage, just one suitcase, an overnight grip and a compendium in his cabin. From train tickets preserved in the ABG archive Lothian travelled during his down time from Kew going to Edinburgh and elsewhere. While his records for this time are very sketchy, even more brief than usual, it seems likely that he followed the patterns set while he was in New Zealand: hiking and walking, camping, seeing local botanical sites, gardens, and arboreta, noting plants seen and usually accompanied by a fellow student from Kew. The final year of the Kew traineeship required a period of work in another institution of similar high repute. Lothian, typical of his adventurous approach to life chose the botanic gardens at Munich for his final practicum and sought placement for a time at the attached alpine garden Garmisch Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps.

When war was declared in 1939 Lothian and his fellow Kew exchange trainee at Munich had to make a mad dash before the borders were closed. Apparently Lothian had some good connections in London as he received a note from the British Ambassador to Berlin warning him to leave at once before hostilities were announced. Having already observed the increasingly hostile and militaristic

posturings of the Nazi party and the Third Reich Lothian had no hesitancy in making a quick departure for Holland and a train-ferry back to England, but not before he had hosted a going away party. Given that his German was pretty patchy we can only guess at the feelings of growing apprehension he felt as he made his run for a border crossing, all of which were already crowded with hordes of others making their escape from potential arrest and imprisonment, or worse.

Into the Army, leadership, management and experience

Somehow Lothian managed to secure passage back to Australia on the M.V. LARGS BAY which in itself was quite an achievement in the rapidly escalating conditions of war and the very tight controls on private travel in force at the time. The adventurous details are revealed in a Living History (oral) recording made by Noel and Pauline Payne which has been partly transcribed and is held in the archival collections of the Botanic Gardens of South Australia at Adelaide. His escape from Germany is described briefly but with considerable energy, even surprise that he made it out just as tanks were beginning to roll through the streets of Munich and his German workmates were leaving to answer their call-up papers. Back in Melbourne with his family and armed with his Kew Certificate Noel enlisted in the Australian Army as a regular recruit and undertook basic training as a rifleman. His Army records reveal that he was discharged unfit for service on medical grounds before he had completed his training. He had injured his left arm in a tram accident years before. Some months later he was able to re-enlist in the Army Medical Service which may have required a lower level of fitness than the fighting units. Shortly after his return to duty he heard the Army was looking for people experienced in cropping vegetables and applied for a transfer. His first duties were to obtain and maintain the necessary supplies of equipment and seeds. He must have been very effective as he was soon appointed a lieutenant in

the Army Farms Unit. This seems very remarkable but also an indication of Lothian's emerging reputation in high places. His records do not give any details of the reasons for his remarkable commission but in retrospect it seems typical of his adventurous life, and there would have been few who could match his training and experience.

In between these global comings and goings Noel courted and married Ngaio Chaffey in 1940, she was a grand-daughter to one of the Chaffey brothers who established the irrigation scheme at Mildura. It must be remarked that Ngaio is barely mentioned in any of Lothian's archived material; a reflection perhaps on his habit of briefly recording plants, tasks, events and people that formed the substance of his professional career. If he maintained any other material on personal matters is not known.

His first posting was to the Northern Territory where he was responsible for securing supplies of seeds and equipment for producing fresh vegetables to supply forward battalions in operational areas in Papua-New Guinea and the Pacific theatre. His success as a supplies officer was noticed as was his success as a broad acre farmer. He was soon appointed to command his own base in New Guinea in the area around Wau. Here he was charged not only with growing food in extremely difficult conditions but also with responsibility for instructing the local population in making huge improvements in growing techniques and changes in the crops that were grown. Without doubt he would have had to take charge of soldiers and local labourers, some interested and some experienced and others indifferent or even slack. Surviving note books from Lothian's time in New Guinea reveal that, while coffee growing was a key goal intended to prepare the locals for post-War economic opportunities with Australia and Great Britain there was a background expectation that the natives would be trained in plantation work that could be transferred to grow rubber, tea, quinine and other useful crops. 'Useful' is used in

the sense that the products would serve the British Empire. A newspaper clipping kept by Lothian suggests that some natives had the skills and aptitude to learn more advanced things such as motor mechanics, driving, operating machinery, operating telephone switch-boards etc. The coffee referred to soon became known as 'Blue Mountain' coffee – a most prestigious and profitable label. Abbreviated though they are it is evident from his notebook for his New Guinea years that while his troops and the natives grew cabbages, beans, peas, lettuces and other edible crops Lothian also cultivated many flowering plants: cannas, iresines, crotons, coleus, foliage plants and bedding plants. His success was such that before the war ended he was discharged and deployed to New Zealand to establish a new course of horticulture at Lincoln College, University of New Zealand. Such are the abbreviated records kept at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra that it is impossible to know in greater detail the background story to this development. It would seem most unlikely for a serving officer to be removed from an active command during a war to be 'loaned' to another nation for civilian purposes. The question remains; was he? Indeed, there is some uncertainty on this point created by his abbreviated military records and by entries in various potted biographies available on-line and elsewhere. To clarify matters information was sought from the Office of the University of Canterbury (Christchurch). Referred to the University Archivist the above situation was confirmed with reservations; there is no linking documentation which accounts for the reason behind Lothian's career change and relocation to New Zealand. (pers. com.) Was there a diplomatic request for his services? Subject to the Official Secrets Act Lothian makes no comments anywhere in his diaries and papers. It remains a mystery wrapped in war-time priorities and exigencies between allied countries as does the process by which he was transformed from soldier/demonstrator to a student and teacher.

While very little is confirmed by documentation the most likely explanations appears to lie in the fact that all Allied countries involved in the Second World War were actively preparing for the future when de-mobilisation would return tens of thousands of soldiers to the civilian work force. By and large these men and women had missed out on education and training that would meet the needs of employers in the brave new world, so plans were advanced to prepare as best as could be done to have new education and training programmes set up and ready to go once Peace was declared and the troops started to sail home. Enconced among former colleagues and friends in the college and the university Lothian set too with a vigorous will to complete what surely must have been an accelerated diploma in horticulture while virtually at the same time sketching out a new National Diploma in Horticulture. For his efforts as a student, which must surely have been strenuous and enthusiastic, he was awarded the Cockayne Gold Medal. Immediately following he was appointed senior lecturer at the University of New Zealand with his tenure running from 1945 – 1947. His duties would have called for a man of unusual energy and clear purpose. Part of his role would have been to co-opt writers for the course of studies and deliver most of it while co-ordinating other lecturers as needed, supervising assessments and student progress and generally administering the whole programme.

The Directorship..... upwards and onwards

An old friend from Lothian's Melbourne days posted him a newspaper clipping of the advertisement for the position of Director at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and he decided to apply. After sailing back to Australia for shortlisting, a tour of the gardens and interviewing Lothian was offered the position commencing as soon as he could relocate to Adelaide from New Zealand. The relocation was not without its difficulties for on arrival it was found the Director's house, Yarrabee, was leased to a former employee who could not be

dislodged. The prospect of living there was, in any case, dismissed by the Lothian's who considered the old house unsuited for occupation by a young family. Pressed for a speedy solution by the Board the government eventually agreed that the SA Housing Trust would build new accommodation on site just behind Yarrabee. After some years, and a few modernisations the family did move into Yarrabee and stayed there until Noel and Ngaio separated in 1970ⁱⁱ by which time some of the children had grown up, married and left home.

On assuming the Directorship of the Botanic Gardens, Adelaide, towards the end of 1948, Noel Lothian automatically became a Councillor of the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia and took up various official roles in government agencies and departments with areas of responsibilities connected with his position as Director and a senior public servant. He was mainly concerned with conservation, tree planting, land management and horticulture but he was also called on to deliver expert opinion to the E&WS department, the Electricity Trust of SA, the Housing Trust of SA, the Woods and Forests department, the Local Government Association, the South Australian National Parks Commission and many others.

Hitting the ground running Lothian quickly made clear to the Board of the Botanic Gardens and the government that he had an extensive and ambitious plan to raise the public and professional profile of the gardens and its staff. After a long period in the doldrums resulting from the World Wars and the Depression Lothian's vision and determination were something of a shock. His immediate agenda was to sweep away all the out-dated practices which he noted on his first walk around his new domain: the use of horses and drays, the use of carpet bedding, staff positions that were assumed lifelong sinecures, low standards of presentation and maintenance among staff, lack of decisive leadership, lax levels of accountability and reporting, even old-fashioned

expectations from the Board – the Chairman expected to be presented with a fresh button-hole when he came to meetings, and irregular meeting and reporting structures.

All this was to change.

Aitken reportsⁱⁱⁱ with some incredulity that Lothian had to write personally to the Public Service Commissioner to request the provision of ball point pens for his officers in 1951! What Lothian thought is unrecorded but as a well organised Army officer and thoroughly acquainted with modern administrative systems he must have found it galling to be subject to such an antiquated, pettifogging government structure. Well that was being changed as he wrote the beseeching missive to his superior but not before Lothian discovered some other problems that existed between himself, his Board and the Government of South Australia.

The relationship between them all was tangled, contentious, divisive and inefficient. After the long period of doldrums in the gardens brought about by the Great Depression and indifferent directors, not being questioned by the Government, not queried by past Directors, Treasury or the Board, things were at a stalemate. The gardens were going nowhere and in fact were stagnant and going backwards. At the heart of the problem was a longstanding dispute between the Board and the Government over who controlled the gardens and its funding and staff. The Government, Cabinet and Treasury believed it was the sole authority but together with the other North Terrace cultural institutions there had been dissension pretty much since the beginnings of self-Government in the colony. Their Boards and Directors, though dependent of government monies to operate, acted as though they were entitled to a degree of independence owing to the specialist and elevated expertise they provided to the public. For many years this attitude was tolerated, though not necessarily graciously by incumbent Governments.

By the time of Lothian's appointment matters had come to a head and the Government was determined to rein in the independent minded Boards and reclaim their full authority to control these apparently aberrant entities.

From the evidence Lothian quickly appraised himself of the internal politics at play and set a course of action. First he smartened up the performance of his domain: irregular reports became regular, Directors Reports and Board Reports (also written by Lothian) appeared annually. Detailed minutes of meetings were kept. Documentation was consistent and comprehensive; funding claims were backed up with facts and figures – and letters from citizens concerning matters such as drainage, road works and fencing in Botanic Park, which were significant items of expenditure for the gardens. He also modernised the format and style of the documents produced by the gardens staff. Logos and letterheads introduced a modern feel to communications and Lothian made good use of photographs to illustrate reports and proposed new projects. In doing all this Lothian must have been informed of the high-powered socialites who formed his Board, and the risks he might run should he get off-side with them on the least error of etiquette or acknowledgement. He seems to have managed to suitably impress the likes of Walter Bagot and John Bonython with his practical and botanical knowledge, organisational skills and his vision for 'their' botanic gardens.

Lothian also appeared frequently at public events and took high profile roles in institutions such as the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, the Field Naturalists and even the Festival of Flowers, positions which enabled him to spread his issues among an ever enlarging group of influential supporters. He also took to broadcasting on radio as a modern means of communication and he wrote for many publications both professional journals and the popular press.

Second, he appeased members of Government by approaching them in a well organised and effective way. His ideas were appealing and well prepared; his requests were posed as advantageous suggestions that would benefit the state. By this means he soon found strong friends in the Premier, Thomas Playford, and his Ministers. Playford had his own agenda for modernising manufacturing, power and water supplies, regional development and population growth in South Australia, so Lothian's modernising ideas would have struck a most agreeable chord with Premier Playford. He must also have impressed government leaders with his apparent understanding of the relationship that they expected to be their due as his employers. Perhaps not subservient to them, but Lothian behaved as a government man. And he managed to tread the line of loyalty between the government and his Board with consummate tact and skill.

All this was necessary to achieve his bigger vision for the gardens.

At this point in the narrative it is important to have some insight into Lothian's organisational habits so it is possible to appreciate his capacity to manage his leadership role as successfully as he did. Surviving common day books from his years at Burnley, Christchurch, Kew and Munich show that he consistently used two methods of structuring his work and ideas; one book was used as a note book to record lecture notes, plants he had been introduced to, skills he had learned and written tasks he was required to produce as a student. The other day book was used as a rough diary of things he had done, wanted to do or needed to do with particular reference to his field trips, hikes, climbs and travels. He was very mindful and methodical. Writing these up after a hard day in the field, or at work, demonstrations and lectures must have been somewhat onerous but he managed it most of the time, even if with an increasingly indecipherable scrawl. Though not continuous these day books provide strong evidence of a well organised and

even strategic intellect at work. Even the text of his home-made book-plate carried an example of his purposeful motivation and drive:

*THE SECRET OF SUCCESS IS CONSTANCY OF
PURPOSE.*

With characteristic purpose Lothian came to the Adelaide Botanic Gardens with a well thought out and comprehensive plan for his Directorship and he lost little time in getting it on the agenda of Board meetings; he officially wrote the minutes (with the help of a note-taker) and constructed meeting agendas, which also gave him plenty of opportunity to ensure matters were followed up and decisions made according to his long term goals. It seems that by and large successive Boards and Chairmen acquiesced to his plans without demur, except when it came down to the on-going battle between government and the Board over control and ownership of the direction and business of the gardens. Strategically Lothian sought advice from Crown Law and presented it to the Board which clarified their subservient position, though that did not stop dissenting views being expressed from time to time.

The goals Lothian had determined were all about modernising the botanic gardens. He set his long term objectives as:

- ✓ Raising the professional and public profile of the ABG as a scientific organisation locally, nationally and internationally.
- ✓ Raising the status of the ABG as an educational institution.
- ✓ Raising the level of support the ABG provided to the development of South Australia in terms of horticulture, forestry and farming.
- ✓ Raising the standard of presentation at the ABG.
- ✓ Raising awareness of the 'new' modern roles adopted by the ABG.

All this had a strong international flavour, something that Lothian obviously felt the ABG did not have at the time he commenced as Director. But his fully fledged agenda for change, improvement and growth quickly dispelled any misapprehensions that this was all pie-in-the-sky day-dreaming.

Beginning with immediate and local challenges he set out to conduct an appraisal of staffing levels, staffing structures and skills sets matching of existing staff. He wasted no time in identifying personnel who would be retained, gaps where new staff would be needed, and staff who could be let go. Away from the gardens Lothian set about recovering objects and roles that had been siphoned off to other North Terrace institutions. The Herbarium had previously been handed to the University of Adelaide. Lothian called for its reinstatement as a rightful component for a serious scientific botanical garden. The library of botanical and horticultural books and journals had been dispersed to the State and Public Library, and to the Parliamentary Library. Lothian claimed them back again arguing they were a vital component for the research and education appropriate for a modern botanical garden. Personal knowledge leads me to believing that not all the books were returned *eg.* *THE BOTANIC GARDEN*, Benjamin Maund (26 vols 1825-51) and *MONOGRAPH ON THE GENUS LILIUM* by George Henry Elwes (4 huge issues in vols. 88 hand-coloured plates, 1867-1870). As the acquisitions registers of the respective libraries are incomplete it was impossible for Lothian or anyone else to have known exactly what went where when the original library was dispersed, or to know what should be returned. Himself a keen biblio-phile Lothian pursued wanted volumes in the rare book markets of Europe, especially those in London such as Bernard Quarich with whom he would have been familiar from his time at Kew.

He also set about establishing a new training scheme for apprentices based on the educational

model he had established at Lincoln College. With support from his Board Lothian got approval, and funds, to establish a trainee programme for apprentices which was rigorous and based on a balanced mix of lectures, practicums, assessments and work placements. Over the years of its existence the programme produced many skilled horticulturalists for the gardens and a wider field of employment in the state and beyond.

Reaching out to re-establish other functions appropriate to proper botanical gardens Lothian resumed seed exchanges with other botanical gardens on an international scale. The ABG also resumed publishing botanical research and distributing it internationally. In particular this resulted from establishing via the Herbarium new field expeditions to the Far North of South Australia and beyond the border into the Central Deserts. The result was a renewal of professional botanical publications of new discoveries in the flora of South Australia featuring new plant descriptions, new collection sites, new specimen sheets and species new to science. With these and other publications being sent to Kew, Arnold Arboretum and other major botanical centres the profile of the ABG, and its Director, began an international ascendancy that it had not enjoyed since the days of Francis and Schomburgk. All this exposure on the international stage brought Lothian, and other staff, into contact with numerous similar organisations. Memberships followed both nationally and overseas as did new positions of leadership and opportunities to speak at conferences of learned bodies.

Lothian's goals were slowly, but surely, being achieved though not always without a tussle for new funding for infrastructure and staff. The increased range of functions Lothian introduced meant new buildings were needed for the Herbarium, Library and administration. New staff rooms, teaching classrooms, storage and work facilities were needed and in time all were in place. The gardens themselves were also brought up-to-

date, though with subtle rather than bold changes. Old-fashioned bedding schemes were turfed over, rockeries were simplified and made more attractive, the formalism of the class ground was redesigned in a more contemporary arrangement. Old willows were taken out by the lakes, old Gardenesque plantings of Auracarias were turned into an informal avenue/ grove with judicious new plantings and a native garden was made, palms were relocated and greenhouse collections displayed more creatively; the formal rose garden was revitalised as ancient rose bushes were replaced with new varieties and a second wisteria tunnel was erected and planted. A Moorish garden was made behind the Museum of Economic Botany.

Modernisation also included a shift to mechanisation of equipment and applications to Treasury and Government for novel items such as four-wheel drive Land Rover vehicles, trailers, camping gear, high performance tyres for crossing the deserts, small aluminium boats and outboard motors, radio kits and budget lines for accommodation in country pubs were made. Bureaucrats in the Public Service must surely have been greatly surprised by these requests that went far beyond the days when asking for permission to buy biro's was first received, and even that simple request was well outside the requisitions for horse shoes, hay and harness repairs that they were accustomed to from previous Directors. With the support of the Premier Playford and his Cabinet, and with detailed reasonings from the Director the requests were authorised and processed. The total budget of the ABG grew steadily for infrastructure and equipment, and for increased staffing.

Among the increased staffing approved were a range of senior officers many of whom had been scouted and recruited by Lothian himself^{iv}. Aside from the eventual provision of an Assistant Director Lothian oversaw the appointment of a number of significant technical staff – botanists expert in fungi and seaweeds, botanical

illustrators, a tree expert, a librarian, a taxonomist and a person to manage apprentices and training. Many of those appointed to these positions became, in effect, Lothian's protégés, acting as living advertisements for the benefits to the state of having a thoroughly modern botanic garden. These people were very often active in the broader gardening community giving lectures and talks, taking leadership roles in numerous community groups and garden clubs and all the time drawing more of the general public into the ambit and influence of the ABG.

Early into his Directorship Lothian also achieved national acclaim for his book *The Practical Home Gardener*, first edition 1955, which was published by his family's company. His book, based on experiences and information gleaned through his early years in the position, gave detailed information on plant selection and cultivation that was especially useful for farmers and inhabitants of the drier regions of settled Australia and those places not served by reticulated water supplies. The book went through three editions thus showing that there was a definite need, a hunger in fact, for practical and appropriate information. Several other publications followed. *Growing Australian Plants* (with I. Holliday) 1967, *Commonsense Gardening* 1974 and *Complete Australian Gardener* 1976, second edition 1980.

In the broader context of state development Lothian took a significant role. His two most important achievements were the assistance provided by staff of the ABG in the landscaping, plantations and street trees deployed in the new city of Elizabeth. Prior to this ABG staff, and Lothian himself, were key players in the establishment of trial plantings of native and exotic trees at Giles Corner and other sites in the agricultural areas of the state. (Loxton-Berri Highway, Lameroo, Kulpara, Stansbury and Meningie, and at Wanbi and Parndana on Kangaroo Island.) The trees in these plantations were evaluated and written up in a series of

reports that were valued by farmers and townspeople as resources for choosing varieties for firewood plantations, erosion control, wind breaks and street trees, even fodder in times of drought. The trial sites included problem soils and the trees were not watered after their initial establishment^v. Included in the rural trees project was the development of community engagement at a level that encouraged farmers and communities to donate land to the project and to provide labour to establish and monitor progress. Again Lothian demonstrated his initiative and skill in progressing his ideas. Lothian's vision for a modern botanic garden included public advisory service officers and a Trees Officer which between them provided expert advice and information to the SA community. Later developments by the SA Housing Trust at Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Whyalla, and Leigh Creek were guided by the information set in place by Lothian's rural trees project.

Parallel with this initiative Lothian also used his position as senior counsel to SA Highways Department to argue strongly against the practice of roadside clearances then followed. At his urging this stopped and where-ever practical the native vegetation was retained and even re-planted with seedlings raised from plants with local provenance, much the same as advocated by the Field Naturalists of Victoria, and noted author Edna Walling.

Yet there were even more ambitious ideas already well formed in Lothian's far reaching mind. He early outlined his wish to develop another botanic garden on a site significantly different in climate, soil and altitude to that experienced by the ABG on the Adelaide Plains. This involved a great deal of persuasive lobbying by Lothian at all levels of government administration and private philanthropy. Finally he settled on a site high in the Adelaide Hills in a set of conjoined valleys and steep gullies just below the summit of Mount Lofty overlooking Piccadilly Valley. Researching with his usual thoroughness he identified the land owners

TRN Lothian and the ABG by Trevor Nottle

and set about courting them to donate the land, or to sell it at very favourable prices. At the same time he began raising the suggestion and desirability of such an acquisition with members of Parliament and Cabinet. With interest piqued he moved on to securing commitments and getting a handle on establishment costs for infrastructure, irrigation and works, staffing issues and public access. At the same time he was busy discovering sources for the rare trees and shrubs he wanted to plant in the cool-climate environment. He grew many, many of these in his own greenhouse and garden at Violet Avenue, Crafers particularly the large numbers of rare alpine and bulbs he wanted for the rock garden he planned to have there. When the time was right thousands of bulbs, perennials and alpine were donated to enrich the new botanic garden.

After he has begun work on achieving this new botanic garden he was approached by the Ashby family to receive their garden of Australian and South African plants at Blackwood as a donation to the state under the charge of the botanic gardens. The transfer of Wittunga was achieved in due course but not without some reservations about the financial resources of the ABG being stretched to the limit. It was a great addition; now there were three botanic gardens each one distinct in its collections and a unique combination of attractive sites within the greater conurbation of Adelaide.

All seemed to be going according to Lothian's ambitious plans^{vi} to modernise the Adelaide Botanic Gardens.

The winds of change blow in

After the demise of the Playford government in 1965 fresh imperatives came into play that led the Labour governments to focus expenditure on The Arts, heritage and tourism.

Lothian, outwardly energised as ever, must have felt the winds of change blowing across the landscape of his domain. The Festival of Arts and the new Festival Centre shifted government

attention from modernisation to competition between the states. Getting an edge over the eastern states was the new priority for the state government. Prestige, newness, tourism and international exposure were taken in a new direction under the personal aegis of Don Dunstan and his ministers. While his correspondence does not reflect the changed circumstances Lothian and his board must have sensed the gradual shift in focus. He travelled widely lecturing and leading international organisations. His leadership and prestige were not diminished but achieving new goals became more difficult. Compromises were called for. Even maintaining the status quo became a serious cause for much angst, particularly where staffing levels were concerned. The Mount Lofty annex landscape called for some intensive maintenance in areas like the woodlands, the alpine gardens, and the rock gardens, even the topography of the site imposed its own difficulties in that the steep-sided gullies could only be dealt with by hand-cultivation and weeding as the terrain precluded the use of mechanised equipment. As staffing levels were cut to meet Treasury demands for 'economic efficiency' and then 'required efficiencies' some of the specialised areas and collections gradually deteriorated and plants died without being replaced.

A time of Friends

One of the new goals Lothian did achieve at this time was the formation of a Friends group to support and advocate for the botanic gardens. He had seen similar groups at work during several trips abroad, particularly to the United States where public philanthropy are almost a requisite for the survival of many public institutions. Perceptive as ever, Lothian must have observed that such a group would help bolster the gardens against the demands for budget cuts made almost yearly by Treasury and Cabinet. Founded in November 1977 by the late Dr Collin Robjohns, the Friends of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide was the first botanic gardens Friends group in Australia. Dr

Ed McAllister, Deputy Director at the time, was asked by Noel to take the leadership of the project in terms of acting as the intermediary between the gardens hierarchy and the enthusiastic support base. The organisation has prospered and proven a formidable strength in advocating for the gardens to government. It has also acted a generous benefactor adding much to the gardens infrastructure, supporting its scientific role and providing a marvellous guide service to tourists and other visitors to the gardens. And from time to time adding significant financial support for a variety of special projects such as exhibitions, scientific expeditions, conservation projects, events and celebrations.

Even though Lothian did get several honorific appointments to visit China at the time it was opening up to influential professionals and foreigners which he fulfilled with grace and distinction from the perspective of 40 years distance it could fairly be asked if these were the botanical equivalent of the last final Grand Tours of a respected world leader?

Retirement and change

"Lothian told me that when he came to Adelaide there were two kinds of people here, those who knew we had a Botanic Garden and those who did not and by the time he retired there were still two kinds of people, those who visited the Gardens and those who did not, but everyone knew there was a Botanic Garden!"^{vii}

Noel retired from the Directorship of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide on reaching his 65th birthday in 1980. After his retirement Noel lived at his home in Violet Avenue, Crafrers until the cold winter weather drove him and his (second) wife Vivian to Townsville in northern Queensland. As their plans for the move progressed Noel disposed of his voluminous library via a series of donations, gifts, auctions and sales. The Botanic Garden of Adelaide library was a significant beneficiary of numerous (and valuable) rare books from his library.

Whatever remained of the rare plants he grew were disposed of among specialist growers and gardening friends. During these few years Viv served as a vigilant guard on Noel's privacy. No-one intruded on his seclusion and peace under her caring watch. Friends, callers and strangers were managed firmly but politely by Viv as she kept an eye on his well-being and health.

Deep within all his early professional activity Lothian's family barely rates a mention which strikes researchers, among others, as unusual but perhaps typical for a man of his era. His children, from his first marriage, remark that he was 'distant' and always busy out of their family home^{viii}. The apparent gap between relationships and career may lead to speculation that Lothian was in some way disconnected from those around him. Such a view is countered by the recollection of one older member of the Friends of the Botanic Garden who stated that she and her father met Lothian in the dahlia patch of the gardens at some time in the Fifties when she was in her early twenties. As they strolled around admiring the flowers she admired one in particular; to which Lothian replied that it was a variety he had raised and he asked if she would like him to name it in her honour. This offer being accepted tubers arrived in due course at the young woman's home. The plants flowered in time for blooms to be included in her bridal bouquet. A story which must surely dispel any ideas that Lothian was totally absorbed by his work and position.

Noel died at Townsville, Queensland, on 24 September 2004, and his ashes were scattered at the Mount Lofty Botanic Garden on 8 October 2004. In his Will, and Viv's, they established the Noel and Vivian Lothian Scholarship at the University of Adelaide which is awarded every three years in an area related to his particular area of interest, that of development of Australian native plants for ornamental horticulture. The Scholarship is open to full time postgraduate

research students in the fields of native plant biology, ecology and horticulture.



Post-script

At the point of his retirement political expediency came to the fore, and in a telling way the control and direction demanded by the government from its departmental heads and boards was asserted in a manner that set the scene for future Directors. The government was pressured by public opinion to purchase in part the Beechwood estate in Stirling. The gardens were heritage listed but the Marbury School, which purchased the mansion, was not prepared to maintain the extensive botanical collections in the garden, so after a public campaign the state somewhat reluctantly purchased the garden in 1980. Responsibility for maintaining the acreage was handed to the ABG. Despite the gloss put on the purchase as saving an important heritage garden neither the government nor the ABG were very happy about the situation they found themselves in. Priorities had changed.

In retrospect it is probably just as well that other heritage properties were not off-loaded on the scientific ABG. Problematic heritage listed places for government such as Carrick Hill, Martindale Hall, Marble Hill and Collingrove could have really threatened the focus of the ABG had they been placed in the responsibility of that organisation. We cannot know if these 'gifts' were proposed for transfer to the ABG but we can be certain that any such ideas, even the suggestion of them, would have been the cause of major alarm and dismay among the members of the Board and the Director.

Caught up in the imperative for Heritage and Conservation led by the Federal Government, and followed by the state government which wanted its share of the cash available the ABG found itself unwittingly drawn into making changes to accommodate the new imperatives. Suddenly a formerly decrepit tram barn on Dequetteville

Terrace, outside the boundaries of the ABG was declared a heritage listed building on account of the rare polychrome brickwork on its façade. Surplus to the requirements of the Tramways Trust of SA (Transport SA), yet protected by legislation a new use had to be found for it that would preserve its frontage and bring the government some kudos. The botanic garden was the obvious institution to take responsibility for it and it could be presented as a return of land previously excised from the gardens. With barely adequate funding for renovation the tram barn was transferred to the ABG and converted under protest to a new Herbarium, lecture rooms and storage facility. Land swaps arranged by the government, private business entities of the wine industry and the University of Adelaide saw further erosion of the botanic gardens site to suit the needs of the government and its ministers. Despite protests at public and government levels the botanic gardens lost ground and face to political expediency.

Lothian's purpose built herbarium, laboratories, administration centre and library were torn down virtually in front of his eyes and relocated to new accommodations adapted amid the internal spaces of the tram barn and the out-dated former 19th C administration buildings of the Tramways Trust of SA. It seems doubtful Lothian could have accepted such an affront to his sense of vision and dedication. We are left to ask if enough was enough; Lothian maintained a distinguished and discreet silence about his feelings on the changes imposed on the gardens and his vision.

Sadly, Lothian's expansive vision was further hollowed out by the Government and Treasury seeking flat-line profiles for all departments and organisations under its control. Across the board Ministerial responsibilities for staffing levels, expenditure, infrastructure and services were insofar as possible equalised though the big departments with big cost centres such as Education and Health were made to look more like the smaller departments by means of splitting and

lumping roles and functions. Some cost centres were virtually declared surplus to requirements eg. Beechwood heritage garden and yet others were re-assigned to other ministries as being more appropriately placed. Lothian's traineeship programme was handed to TAFE SA as the appropriate tertiary education/ training organisation but not without a period in the wilderness when it was relocated to the council yard of the Norwood and Kensington Council while temporary buildings were erected for the programme at Lochiel Park, Campbelltown. At length a new campus with good facilities was purpose built at its present site at Urrbrae, a co-located setting with Urrbrae High School.

In 2016 the Botanic Gardens of SA became a Registered Training Organisation in its own right and is once more training horticulturalists and apprentices. Thus the wheel turns perhaps vindicating in part Lothian's original concept of the ABG having an educational role.

SUMMARY:

As we are celebrating the birth of the Friends and the opening of Mount Lofty Botanic gardens it seems most appropriate to ask: What were Lothian's lasting achievements?

- ✓ Three wonderful botanic gardens with solid scientific purposes.
- ✓ The international standing of the Botanic Gardens of SA has been restored as a centre of botanical research and continues despite some political/ financial stresses.
- ✓ The BGSA has international and local standing as a centre of excellence for dry-land landscaping and plant selection based on strong field research.
- ✓ Lothian's vision has been validated by the existence Mt Lofty and Wittunga
- ✓ Lothian's reputation as a plantsman and gardener has been cemented by the collections at Mt Lofty.

- ✓ The scientific and conservation values espoused by Lothian have continued with strong purposeful contemporary developments, particularly by the Millenium Seed Bank Project and the Centre for Ancient DNA.
- ✓ The institution is seen as a scientific organisation internationally.
- ✓ The educational and training goals aspired to by Lothian have continued.
- ✓
- ✓ The Library is a magnificent and important collection available for research, and continues to grow in traditional print resources, image resources and IT based resources.
- ✓ Public engagement remains a key aspect of the gardens development in respect of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens group and associated groups such as the Friends of the Herbarium.

ⁱ McKinnon, Ross A.M., Phil Parsons, Alistair Watt and others, *NOEL LOTHIAN OBE, Reflecting on 33 Years at Adelaide Botanic Gardens and a Lifetime of Service to Horticulture.*, International Dendrology Society, no date.

ⁱⁱ Tony Lothian (pers. com. to Ed McAllister)

ⁱⁱⁱ Aitken, Richard, *SEEDS OF CHANGE*, Blooming Books, Melbourne, 2006. p167.

^{iv} Senior specialist appointments included: Rex Kuchel, Tony Whitehill, Ludwik Dutkeiwicz, Thekla Rechstein, Rob Swinbourne, Ed McAlister, Ross McKinnon, John Zwar, Allan Correy, Ron Hill, Barry Dangerfield, Ian Powell.

^v Lothian was awarded the Veitch Medal by the Royal Horticultural Society, London, for his contribution to knowledge about trees that could survive drought and saline soils. 1965

^{vi} Lothian was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1961 for services to botanic gardens and horticulture.

Acknowledgements:

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Essential reading:

McKinnon, Ross A.M., Phil Parsons, Alistair Watt and others, *NOEL LOTHIAN OBE, Reflecting on 33 Years at Adelaide Botanic Gardens and a Lifetime of Service to Horticulture.*, International Dendrology Society, no date. Transcribed from tape recorded interviews between Noel Lothian and Pauline Payne for the Somerville Oral History Project, Mortlock Collection, State Library of South Australia, 1999

^{vii} McAllister, Ed, *RECOLLECTIONS*

^{viii} Anthony Lothian (prs. Com)