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# Saving Araluen

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Araluen is situated 40km south east of Perth at Roleystone, one of the loveliest, hilliest suburbs in the Darling Ranges. The actual garden area is 59.9 hectares in a long, narrow, steep-sided valley running north/south. This orientation is unusual in the Ranges as most valleys run east/west and suffer bad east winds from inland Australia in summer, but the strong winds do not get into Araluen. Such is the drop from north to south that the dam, at the northern top of the valley, feeds by gravity the whole garden. The creek runs down through the centre of the garden and out the southern end into the Canning River. There is an eastern tributary coming in half way down the valley and joining the main creek in the garden area in the bottom half of the valley. The top or northern end is still bushland.

## **A dream that faded, 1930 - 1985**

In 1896 at the age of 13 John Joseph Simons left Clare in South Australia with his mother and two sisters to join his father who had found work in Western Australia. Nine years later he was a young Perth businessman with an enthusiasm for football. He formed the Young Australia Football League to encourage schoolboy participation in Australian Rules football at a time when that code was being seriously challenged by soccer, especially in schools. Simons believed that if boys travelled to play football against other districts and other states, they would benefit both mentally and physically. The YAFL became popular and in 1907 a team went to the Eastern States to play other schoolboy teams. The YAFL acquired a city headquarters, formed a band, and admitted girls changing its name to the Young Australia League or YAL. By 1929 the 'Boss', as Simons was now known to his co-workers and young members, decided they needed a bush block for camps, holidays and, most importantly, band practice.

He searched the hills east of Perth for months looking for his bush dream. It had to be *...quiet, secluded and off the beaten track. It must have a permanent brook with a good supply of fresh, pure water. It must have an abundance of natural growth, preferably with maidenhair fern, wildflowers, tall gums, she-oaks, black butts, banksias, blackboys and with rich soil in which, with cultivation and water, flora from other states and perhaps overseas, would survive.*<sup>1</sup>

Today I marvel at his vision. Araluen is all he searched for, and much more.

The block was purchased and officially opened to the public in November 1930. Known as Araluen meaning variously 'running waters', 'singing waters' or 'place of lilies' it was to be a picnic spot and a holiday camp for YAL members, their parents and friends, a parade ground for the band - and a garden.

In the next 10 years five log cabin cottages were built, rock terraces were formed on the sides of the steep valley, trees were planted and gardens made. A major project, a memorial to 89 former YAL members who had died in the 1914-18 war, was created on a west-facing hillside. It consisted of a series of five terraces flanked by 89 Cupressus sempervirens, planted in the shape of a lyre, the symbol for music as so many of those killed had been bandsmen. There was ...a waterfall ...made to cascade down the slope and over several smaller falls between the differing terrace levels, its tinkling music infusing life into the memorial and singing an eternal requiem.<sup>2</sup>

Called 'The Grove of the Unforgotten', it has now reached maturity and the pencil pines have grown to create a sky-ceilinged place of great tranquility. At the base of the Grove there is a large 'Pool of Reflection' mirroring a magnificent jacaranda that eventually drops its deep-coloured flowers, turning the Pool into a magic blue lake.

In 1940 Jack Italiano, an Italian stone mason and gardener completed the most impressive feature at Araluen, the Margaret Simons Memorial Pergola, a tribute to J.J.'s mother who had died in 1937. She had encouraged and physically helped her son with his Araluen dream. One of the most impressive man-made structures in Perth, the Pergola was mainly the physical work of one man and a horse. It consists of 38 massive pillars of small stones topped by great logs, 35-40cms in diameter. The Pergola was opened on Mother's Day 1940 and apart from a rock swimming pool and poolside colonnade it was the last major work at Araluen for many years as the 1939-45 war put a halt to all gardening or building activities.

Over the years the League's popularity waned as young people wanted to travel independently. J.J. Simons had died in 1948 but the YAL continued because of its band, its holiday retreat at Camp Simons and some small groups that still travelled - my youngest son was one of nine schoolboys who went on an escorted tour to Singapore in 1975.

By 1985 the League was in desperate financial straits. Araluen, now an overgrown, run-down secret garden in the heart of which the Chalet Healy Restaurant, originally built in 1937 as a guest house, still functioned. Araluen and Chalet Healy were sold. The purchaser's elaborate plans for redevelopment were unsuitable and were rejected by the local authority, the City of Armadale. Araluen dreamed quietly on, the honeysuckle climbing ever higher and wider. However, as it was not for sale nothing could be done.

### **Action - February to September 1990**

After the Council's rejection of the Disney-like plans, Mary Hargreaves, a gardening friend of mine and a member of the Australian Garden History Society, rang me and talked of her suggestion that Araluen should become a botanic garden. Then on Valentine's Day, Saturday, 14 February 1990, there was a notice in the *West Australian*. Araluen Park was for sale at 1.4 million dollars. I rang Mary in great excitement but she was not feeling her usual self and did not feel she could face the fight. (That changed later and Mary has been one of the greatest champions of Araluen and is still vitally involved). It now seemed up to me.

With great confidence I sat down to write to Carmen Lawrence, the new Lady Premier, never dreaming she would not think it was obvious that her government had to buy Araluen. She thanked me for my interest and said she

had passed my letter on to the Minister for Racing and Gaming! Now I know some people do look on gardening as a relaxation and a bit of a gamble - but Sport? Gaming?

I then wrote to most of the Cabinet. I received polite letters all saying the same thing. They thanked me for my interest but at that stage they were not considering buying Araluen. I started talking about Araluen to friends and anyone else who would listen. They all thought it should be saved. In late April the young agent handling the sale, who knew of my interest, told me I was likely to miss out.

On 2 May Mrs Ann Cullity, then president of the Board of the Western Australian Botanic Garden, Dr Paul Wycherley, the Director of King's Park Botanic Garden, the agent and I met. The King's Park people were sympathetic but said they could not help. I asked if there was a way of 'buying' time. The agent told me I could put a holding option on the sale for 30 days. A sum of \$8,000 to \$10,000 was mentioned so I wrote a cheque for \$8,000 and 'bought' breathing space.

The following week several things happened. Peter Thorn, president of the Tree Society and I decided to call a public meeting for Monday 14 May. I thought I had better see a lawyer to establish my position as one thing was certain, I did not have \$1.4 million. I did not even have \$1.3 million, my option! The Tree Society arranged for me to meet with a lawyer, a delightful man who looked slightly amused, or amazed, and said 'I think you need some publicity'. He picked up the phone and rang the *West Australian*.

On Friday 11 May at Araluen I met with Michael Zekelich, an investigative journalist, and Nic Ellis, an imaginative photographer. The next morning their article and photo generated unbelievable interest. The phone rang all through the weekend. One hundred and seventy people attended the public meeting sponsored by the Tree Society on the following Monday in the Chalet at Araluen. A Steering Committee was formed. The campaign to save Araluen was off and away. Somewhere in those early weeks, Ian Blackburn, the Mayor of Armadale told Dave Everall, of the Department of Planning and Urban Development, about the Chalet meeting. Everall agreed that Araluen should be bought for the people. For the next three and a half months there were Sunday traffic jams because of the number of people 'going back' to Araluen.

On 11 June, Kay Hallahan, Minister for Planning and Urban Development and a YAL member in her youth, announced that the government would buy Araluen. More photo opportunities for Nic Ellis! Later Kay Hallahan told me that she had more letters concerning Araluen than on any other subject during her ministry. Our Steering Committee metamorphosed into the Araluen Botanic Park Foundation Incorporated. From September 1, 1990 when the Lawrence Government officially took over the Park, the Foundation assisted the Department of Planning to make it 'fit for its purpose'. Five years later the Foundation leased Araluen from the Government for a tulip bulb rental and, with a descending grant, it has been running the park ever since.

### **Paradise Regained**

The Park is now cleared of its honeysuckle, well almost. It has a six-week Tulip Festival every year, concerts and other musical activities including a magical 'Carols by Torchlight', a 'Midsummer Night's Dinner' (again magical) under the colonnade beside the pool and many other 'happenings'. Last year 92,000 visitors came to the Park and the numbers increase each year.

There is a dedicated staff, not nearly enough by Botanic Garden standards, but all are young, enthusiastic professionals who can change hats at a second's notice. One moment a seedling planter, the next a train driver. Another heartening thing is the volunteer support that has been generated – the philanthropist spirit of J.J. Simons continues after all these years. There are the weeders (The Wednesday Wonders), shop keepers, train drivers (we acquired a little 3-carriage train last year) and there are gate keepers, tulip bulb planters, traffic facilitators, gardening groups and many more individuals who help in different ways. There are Community Service, Work for the Dole and Job Training schemes in operation. A nearby prison also helps with manual labour.

Some of the early planting has survived notably a Moreton Bay Chestnut (*Castanospermum australe*), a Burdekin Plum (*Pleiogynium timorense*), huge clumps of *Doryanthes palmeri*, a magnificent stand of *Eucalyptus viminalis*, quite a lot of *Ceratopetalum gummiferum* and a dozen or more rhododendrons.

Literally tens of thousands of bulbs have been added to those surviving in 1990. This year 100,000 tulips were planted by volunteers over two weekends to give spectacular displays. Six years ago we planted a large area of roses towards the eastern boundary – a big bed of Alister Clark's strong growing creations, and another area of Tea roses. The kangaroos loved them. For four years the Teas did not get above 30cm, and the Clarks looked like moulting fowls most of the time, but when the park was fenced the roses grew so well that maybe the kangaroos did us a favour.

The Simons Pergola was said to have had 80 climbing roses growing on it in the early years. Now there is quite a lot of shade but we are trying roses again – there were four or five still there from 1938. We actually have copies of the working notes used to plant the roses on August 29 and 30, 1938 in 'Boss' Simons' handwriting, and one of the three original suppliers of those roses is still one of our leading nurseries. This year they have re-supplied two of each of the same roses on the 1938 list apart from three varieties that are now unobtainable. Their donation is typical of the way the garden is being restored and supported. Another rose nursery gives us end of season treasures, mainly older, obscure roses.

There is no space to list all the planting of the last 10 years, but magnolias are 3-4m high already, Japanese maples are thriving, birches are growing happily beside the stream and the camellias become more spectacular every year. We have planted some WA wildflowers, but not a lot as King's Park specialises in those. Our aim is to grow exotics for people who cannot always go elsewhere to see the beauty of a magnolia in full bloom or a sweep of tulips on a rock terrace.

Our garden project at the moment is a contour walk which will become 'The Bark Walk', featuring varieties of trees with interesting trunks or bark. The path is so constructed that you will be really close, within hugging distance of most of them, except the *Chorisia* maybe.

Also exciting is the fact that there are lots of early gardening records that have not been published or even read by most people. In August this year Cyril Ayris wrote a small book on Araluen which is available from the Foundation.<sup>3</sup> It contains quite a lot of early history of the League and good 'then and now' photos of the garden.

### Postscript on campaigning

I am often asked whether I would do a 'save the garden campaign' again. I honestly do not know. I was completely ignorant of the way politics actually work then (not now!) and I sometimes think that is why the project succeeded. My action was absolutely apolitical. At the time, early May 1990, *all* government response had been NO. There was not even mild interest expressed in any of those ministerial letters. I consider my response a desperate Irish action to give us time to find a miracle. Maybe it was the unusual nature of the issue that caught people's imagination and caused the Government such surprise. My own friends were variously aghast, shocked, intrigued, enthusiastic - but all were supportive and that definitely helped me through those months. People still ask if I got my money back. Yes, I did, eventually, although at one time I received a letter pointing out that I must come up with the \$1.3 million. More lawyers!

**I hope you have realised that I love gardens, and all that goes with gardening, far more than politics! To see Araluen re-blossom and be loved, enjoyed and valued is the greatest reward an innocent, unintentional lobbyist could ever hope for. Now I see Araluen as our contribution towards trying to keep a balance of beauty in this poor old post-September 11 world that we all share.**

1 Courtney, Victor, *The Life of J.J. Simons*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 1961

2 As above

3 Araluen Botanic Park Foundation (Inc.), 362 Croyden Road, Roleystone, WA 6111 Website: araluenbotanicpark.com.au

Pic 1 Caption: From Left: Mrs Noelene Drage (Perth), Mrs Billie Hamilton (AGHS, Victoria), Mrs Mary Hargreaves (AGHS, WA) and Mrs Heather Thompson (AGHS, WA)

Pic 2 Caption: Swimming pool and colonnade in spring 1991 (Photo: Noelene Drage)



