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Book review: The Australian Botanical Liaison Officer scheme at Kew, 1937–2009

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In a sense this book is a requiem for a well-established scheme – the Australian Botanical Liaison Officer (ABLO) at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Founded in 1935 and discontinued in 2009, it had a double role: firstly, to service enquiries from Australia for information from the huge collection of plant specimens, literature and archives kept at Kew (and in other botanical institutions, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe) and, secondly, to enable the successful applicant to conduct research on special areas of interest. Being a secondment position, usually held for up to twelve months and paid jointly by the Australian Federal, State and Territory Governments, a total of 53 taxonomists served as ABLOs from Charles Gardner in 1937 to Tony Orchard in 2009. For many of them it was a once in a lifetime learning experience that often shaped their further career. While both the Director and the Keeper of Kew supported the continuation of the ABLO scheme, it came to an end on the advice of the Committee of Heads of Australasian Herbaria and the Australian Biological Resource Study for a variety of reasons. These include shortage of staff in Australian institutions and the fact that many resources had become accessible electronically, which before could be studied only by visiting the relevant institutions. Thus ended a scheme to the detriment of Australian systematic botany and of European herbaria that benefited from the redetermination of numerous Australian herbarium specimens done by ABLOs.

Alex George's book consists of three parts. In the first part (pp. 1–39) the editor presents the history of the ABLO scheme with its complex selection mechanism, the practice of rotating among the Australian States (not strictly adhered to) and the necessary approval of the respective State Government for the successful candidate. It also deals with the funding arrangements for the appointee and the more formal aspects, such as the selection criteria, a duty statement and a Memorandum of Understanding.

The connoisseur will find specimens of the more sublime aspects of UK bureaucracy, e.g. the notion that all official records produced by an ABLO while at Kew are to be considered part of the UK public record and not part of the Australian public record (p. 26). This chapter is followed by 53 texts on the holders of the job (pp. 50–339), in part written by individual ABLOs themselves and therefore autobiographical, in part extracted from obituaries, published reports and archival materials often compiled by the editor and other authors, and therefore to be classified as biographical. For the latter group of texts, the final report of the ABLOs turned out to be a particularly relevant source. The third, much shorter portion of the book contains a selection of texts written by former members of staff of the receiving institution remembering the ABLO scheme (pp. 340–344). As clearly stated on p. 340, the benefit of the whole arrangement was on both sides, with the ABLO effectively being an additional part-time member of staff for Kew “in the saving of time and in bringing expertise on the Australian flora”.

Admittedly the biographical and autobiographical texts contain a considerable amount of anecdotal or rather personal information, e.g. on accommodation at Kew, the British way of life as seen by Australians and on the financial shortfalls, but they add spice to the story. For example, who remembers the strict rationing of food, clothing, fuel and petrol still in place in England in 1949, and who can imagine that for c. 100 members of staff at Kew four microscopes were available at that time? Who is aware of the various Australian offices based in London, such as Canberra House, Queensland House, Australia House, and the key figure for the ABLOs, the Australian Scientific Liaison Officer? Who can imagine the feelings of an Australian botanist looking at a hedge of *Eucalyptus globulus* L'Hér. along the front of a London garden, while in Tasmania this tree reaches a height of c. 70 m? These autobiographical/biographical texts

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also offer a peephole view into the work actually done by the ABLOs, e.g. unearthing in NAP (herbarium codes following Index herbariorum: <https://sweetgum.nybg.org/science/ih/>) the unmounted specimens of Friedrich Dehnhart's *Acacia* species and finding his unpublished watercolours documenting *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* Dehnh. Occurring in all Australian states and cultivated on four continents, this is a tree of major economic importance with its name based on a specimen cultivated in the garden of Francesco Riccardi conte di Camaldoli in Naples (for full background see Del Guaccio & al. 2019; remarkably, the type specimen is kept in W). Similar work included searching Allan Cunningham's diaries, field books, draft maps etc. in order to reconstruct his collecting expeditions, or routine tasks such as tracing an endless procession of protologues of Australian plant names not available in Australia. Locating specimens in BM collected by Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander on the *Endeavour* voyage was among the regular jobs for ABLOs, while one of them managed to trace in DBN the collections of the gardener William McNab, who had grown at Kew plants collected by Robert Brown and Peter Good in Australia. On the other hand, there was an unsuccessful search in botanical gardens for living material of *Streblorrhiza speciosa* Endl., an endemic of Phillip Island, now extinct. More unconventional was a contact by an early ABLO with the Admiralty in London in order to get permission to inspect the original charts from Matthew Flinders's voyage on the *Investigator* marked with letters and numbers used by Brown to denote collecting localities. Another aspect of the ABLOs' stays at Kew should not be underestimated: at a time when the specimens in several major collections in Australia (e.g. MEL) were still unmounted, the ABLOs became familiar with the practice of herbarium management as put in place at Kew and codified in a handbook only many years later (Forman 1989). Occasionally, social events are mentioned in the miscellaneous recollections, e.g. a lunch given by the Australian ambassador in The Hague for his retired colleague Milo Talbot 7th Baron Talbot de Malahide, the sponsor of *The endemic flora of Tasmania* (Stones & Curtis 1967–1978), with Hermann Sleumer (L), Frans Stafleu (U) and the ABLO in office attending. On a somewhat different line were meetings of the Royal Society and the Linnean Society of London or sessions of the House of Commons and the House of Lords to which a few ABLOs were invited. No doubt less formal were the legendary Christmas parties at Kew mentioned by several ABLOs with senior members of staff acting as masters of ceremonies.

The present volume is richly illustrated with photographs, mainly from the archives of the editor and from the Kew archives. Portraits of all ABLOs, all directors and all keepers from 1937 to 2009 are included plus those of a few key Kew figures such as Richard Brummitt, Grenville Lucas and Bernard Verdcourt, but more interesting are photographs of the various herbaria visited by the


ABLOs. Among these are the old herbarium of the British Museum (Natural History) (BM), now the Natural History Museum, in 1968 (p. 69), the Cambridge University Herbarium (CGE) with the enormous step ladders in 2009 (p. 339) and the herbarium of Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in 2003 (p. 301). The long-gone cut-up *Index kewensis* is documented in a photograph and so is the old entrance lobby in Hunter House and the library kept there before it was moved to wing D when ready in the early 1970s. Photographs of the buildings housing major collections in mainland Europe have also been included and document the changes that have occurred since then: the specimens kept at the Národní Muzeum in Prague (PR) were still housed in Průhonice castle in 1978 (p. 257), the wooden doors of the herbarium cupboards had not yet been removed in the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna (W) in 1968 (p. 167), and the specimens were still kept in metal cupboards in the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris (P) in the same year (p. 181).

This carefully edited and nicely produced book is more than a requiem, however. It is a plea for formalized, long-term scientific collaboration between botanical institutions, in particular between the major institutions with extremely rich collections in the global north with herbaria in the tropics and in the global south. Alex George refrains from mentioning examples, but the present reviewer is aware of a need for similar collaborative schemes for botanists from Latin America in, e.g., MA, NY and US or from the Caucasus region and Central Asia in, e.g., LE. As a matter of fact, a Singapore Botanical Liaison Officer has recently been established at Kew. Additionally, this book forms a complement to the second edition of the monumental history of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Desmond 2007) and is recommended reading for visitors to Kew interested in more than just their plant group. As rightly observed by Karen Wilson (NSW), this institution is “a botanical Piccadilly Circus, where one meets botanists from all parts of the world” (p. 210). Where else does a visitor find such a nice introduction (co-authored by Nicholas Hind) into the geography of the Kew herbarium with its five wings named C, B, A (in reverse chronological order of construction) followed by wings D and E (in chronological order of its construction) with the content of these wings bearing today no relation to taxonomic sequence? Where else do you find the Kew atmosphere so nicely described with the allocation of a working bay in the herbarium at the beginning of the visit? Where are you able to read about the Kew seminars, the impromptu talks, to which the present reviewer contributed in 2002 by giving a talk on the Kew Crisis 1839–1840, and about the regular morning and afternoon teas often attended by many members of staff? Where do you find such wonderful photographs of spring at Kew with the bluebells in the woodlands or of the crocuses in front of Kew Palace? In short, for all friends of Kew and all members of the Kew Guild this is a must-have.

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