

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (October 2007)

By Rob Upson

Ferdinand von Mueller

The German born botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller, was instrumental in designing the Botanical Gardens at White Hills in the 1870s.

Von Mueller was born in Rostock in 1825, studied pharmacy and botany and received a doctorate from Kiel University when he was 21. For health reasons he came to the warmer climate of South Australia in 1847. He was employed as a chemist and travelled throughout the Colony studying its flora and discovering a number of plants previously unknown.

In 1853 he was appointed Government Botanist for Victoria and in the same year completed a 1500-mile journey through the alpine and eastern regions of the Colony collecting plant specimens. This was soon followed by another expedition, this time to the northwest. Towards the end of 1854 he again explored the northeast regions of Victoria, ascending and naming Mt. Hotham. In total, von Mueller had travelled over 2500 miles and had increased the number of known Victorian plants by about 25%.

In 1855 he accompanied Augustus Gregory on an expedition to the Northern Territory in search of the ill-fated Ludwig Leichhardt. They found no trace of Leichhardt, but von Mueller found nearly 800 plant species that were hitherto unknown.

In 1857 he was appointed director of the Melbourne botanical gardens and arranged for the building of what is now known as the National Herbarium. Over the next several years he wrote and published many volumes describing the flora of Victoria and Australia.

For his botanical work he received many accolades and decorations from overseas and in 1861 was appointed Fellow of the Royal Society. In 1879 he was knighted as KCMG. He was made a baron by the king of the German kingdom of Wurttemberg with the official title of Baron "in the order of Olga" (Olga was the queen of Wurttemberg). He was then known as Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller.

Von Mueller was a benefactor of the explorer Ernest Giles who journeyed several times through central Australia. Giles discovered an unusual mountain range near Uluru and named them the Olgas in von Mueller's honour. The Olgas are now known as Kata Tjuta.

Von Mueller was primarily a man of science and for him botanical gardens had to be mainly scientific and instructive. In 1873, when the demand arose to make the Melbourne botanical gardens more aesthetic, he resigned and William Guilfoyle became its director. He retained the position of Government botanist.

Von Mueller died in Melbourne in 1896 after a short illness. A bust and commemorative plaque in the Melbourne botanical gardens reads in part "*...As Director of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens from 1857-73, he was directly involved in the laying out and planting. During this period he also supplied the highest quality plants to the regional botanic gardens throughout Victoria.....*"

In recognition of his achievements as an explorer and botanist a number of geographical features, such as ranges, rivers, peaks, creeks and parks have been named after him in all States and the Northern Territory.

One of the least successful activities he is noted for was the introduction of the European blackberry into Australia. Story has it that he scattered the seeds along creeks and riverbanks on his journeys throughout the land. The consequences of introducing certain foreign flora and fauna did not enter the thinking of those early settlers and pioneers. They tried to create surroundings that they were familiar with and some of these have been and still are the scourge of the landowner today.