Albury
cultivating a city in the country
Bruce Pennay

An inland settlement, Albury grew into a municipality, a regional city, and a growth centre within a rural context. As host city for Australian Garden History Society's 28th annual national conference, we look at the history of Albury's regional landscape.

Aboriginal occupation
Dense and sedentary Aboriginal populations lived along the Murray River. They had in the riverine environment a rich source of fish, game, and plants. As a result, there was little need to move from its banks. The river itself probably united rather than divided groups and it seems to have been one long river-system, rather than a collection of separate tribal valleys. There was a great deal of exchange along it. People speaking languages such as Bangerang, Dhuudhuroa, Kwat Kwat, and Wiradjuri lived as several groupings in the upper sections of the river. Each clustered within the main river valley itself and/or in the valley of a tributary, such as the Ovens or Broken Rivers. Two kinds of river place seem to have attracted Aboriginal peoples: river junctions and river shallows. Artefacts suggest that junctions were major industrial areas while fishing was comparatively easy in the shallows.

Crossing place
White explorers Hamilton Hume and Captain William Hovell discovered the Murray River and signs of the people who lived there in November 1824. They named the river the Hume and inscribed trees on the northern riverbank, where they first approached what seemed to be a natural ford. Because the river was running swiftly, they had difficulty in making a crossing and eventually found a way across the river near the site of the present-day Hume Dam.

Pushed by a drought to find pasture and water in the mid-1830s, several overlanders made their way south to the crossing Hume and Hovell had first tried to use. In 1835 or shortly thereafter, runs were established at Mungabareena on the north bank of the Murray, at Wodonga (or Woodonga) on the south bank of the Murray opposite Mungabareena, and at Bonegilla, to the east of Wodonga, between the Murray, Kiewa, and Mitta Mitta Rivers.

There was, however, an abrupt halt to the growing movement of livestock south in 1838, when for a period of two or three months, there were raids, reprisals, and open warfare between blacks and whites. Governor Gipps moved to meet the resistance and to quell the violence by establishing a Border Police unit and a Native Police unit. He also established ‘regular halting places or posts of protection’ at the principal crossings between Sydney and the Port Phillip district—at the Murrumbidgee, Murray, Ovens, and Goulburn Rivers, and at Violet Creek. Towns were founded at these posts, as part of an overall military strategy to make safe the route to Port Phillip and to settle the inland districts. The Government dispatched surveyors to select town sites, including one that might be built at the Murray River crossing place, where the enterprising Robert Brown had established a store.¹

Governor Gipps ... established
'regular halting places or posts of protection' at the principal crossings between Sydney and the Port Phillip district

Lady Jane Franklin, on her daring journey overland from Port Phillip to Sydney in 1839, left signs of her visit behind her. In a letter to Sir John in April from the crossing place that was to become Albury, she told how she had brought a packet of clover seed on her journey 'for the express purpose of disseminating pastures along the travellers’ track'. She sowed seed of white clover (Trifolium repens) in the trench dug around their tent to carry off the rain. Throughout the rest of her journey Lady Franklin was to sow her seeds wherever she stopped. By 1860 the white clover—now regarded as an environmental weed—had spread luxuriantly.²
Rural township

Albury—and Belvoir on the southern side of the Murray—grew and prospered in the 1850s, servicing not only passing travellers but a growing number of settlers. The discovery of gold at the nearby Beechworth and the Indigo gold fields boosted development, and the demand for meat, hay, foodstuffs such as potatoes, flour, and grapes.

In 1856 the New South Wales Government agreed to build a bridge across the Murray, as part of a number of improvements along the length of the Great Southern Road that linked it with its gold-rich neighbour, the newly separated colony of Victoria. The young Henry Parkes saw the significance of the bridge at Albury making the link between the old and new colonies. He predicted that the capital of a federal union of the colonies might be sited at the Murray River crossing place to prevent jealousy between the two. The aptly named Union Bridge was opened in 1861 in what Albury folk proudly called the Federal City.

James Fallon, an enterprising general store proprietor, prospered supplying the goldfields. About 1864, he became a principal in establishing steamboat connection with the Echuca railhead and Melbourne market. He began to focus on the wine trade and acquired the Murray Valley Vineyard, building large cellars in central Albury.

Fallon was important in creating a proud self-image—for him Albury was ‘the garden of the colonies for the cultivation of wine’. Yet the Albury wineries suffered with onerous colonial border customs duties and soon after, phylloxera. When the Victorian government sponsored vine planting and cultivation in the early 1890s and production across the river in the North East, Victoria boomed.

Railways, wool, wheat, and federation

The railway from Melbourne to Belvoir (renamed Wodonga in 1873) tapped the Riverina trade and succeeded in pulling wool to the southern capital. New South Wales was concerned about the loss of trade and pushed its own railway system to Albury in 1881. In 1883, the two railways were connected but not joined as they were built to different gauges. Despite this, the railway connection was perceived as marking a turning point in the movement towards Federation. Through the 1880s and 1890s railway tariffs and branch lines also helped establish the Riverina as a wheat growing area and Sydney as its principal port.

In 1889, the police magistrate and mining warden, Thomas Browne, with his wife Margaret and their children, took up residence in 642 Olive Street, Albury. Writing under the pseudonym of ‘Rolf Boldrewood’, Browne had published several novels in serial form during the 1870s.
and his latest, *Robbery Under Arms*, published as he arrived, was a marked success. In 1893 Margaret Browne published *The Flower Garden in Australia: a book for ladies and amateurs* in Melbourne under the pseudonym ‘Mrs Rolf Boldrewood’. Claimed as the first gardening book written by an Australian woman, it extolled the virtues of gardening as a meaningful and delightful recreation for country women. The Olive Street house the Brownes rented was in a ‘rising part of the town’, hailed as Albury’s Hyde Park. A near neighbour, Samuel Mudge, had planted Albury’s first street tree outside his house at 616 Olive Street in 1875.

Albury Botanic Gardens were established in 1877 and a horticultural society began in 1886, the same year reticulated water supply was ‘turned on’. Margaret Browne entered the local show competitions, winning prizes for her pot plants and hyacinths. As well as gentling her domestic space, Margaret Browne’s cultivated garden lent to the gentrification of the area and the town. Her husband meanwhile lent his support to the town’s federal capital ambitions, hailing Albury as the ‘Washington’ of Australia.

**Albury the Coming City**

Drought at the beginning of the twentieth century forced governments to give attention to the river. In 1914, the Commonwealth offered firm funding proposals to establish storage on the river, principally between Cumberooona and Ebden, just north of Albury and Wodonga. The River Murray Agreement of 1915 established the River Murray Commission, and work began on constructing the Hume Weir in 1919. The building of the weir was a massive project and involved a large workforce. This large-scale project was frequently compared with other big national and world projects. Locally the beauty of the lake formed behind the new storage was also celebrated in poetry and in song.

The taming of the Murray helped with the creation of riverside parks in Albury itself. The parks had been suggested by Charles Reade, a visiting town planner in 1915. Reade had also suggested that council acquire Western Hill for the creation of a war memorial on alignment with the main street. In 1925 the new war memorial was bathed in floodlight by night, within sight not only of townspeople but also of those in the adjacent rural areas who did not have access.
to electricity. Boosters claimed Albury was growing city-like in appearance. Albury was 'on the threshold of citydom'—it was 'the city of tomorrow', 'a coming city'.

Garrison towns
Situated at the break of railway gauge, Albury and Wodonga became a place of strategic importance during the Second World War. Defence personnel expanded the Wirlinga explosives and ammunition depot, installed a massive ordnance depot and vehicle park at Bandiana, and a large military camp and army hospital at Bonegilla. Altogether there were about 11,000 defence personnel stationed in the district. They required a steady supply of locally produced fruit, vegetables, eggs, milk, ice cream, meat, firewood. Many businesses in Albury and Wodonga had a good war. Yet a series of dry summers made the war years hard for local farmers and pastoralists. Townspeople did their best to promote war effort. They joined the dig for peace campaign with vegetable patches and the well-to-do raised funds for patriotic purposes with fashionable garden parties at Olive Street residences. At the end of the war Bandiana continued, indeed expanded as an ordnance depot and vehicle park, while Bonegilla became a migrant reception centre (1947-71).

Postwar city
Just before the Bonegilla Migrant Centre opened, Albury, along with seven other large country municipalities in New South Wales, was declared a city. This rush of city declarations was part of a revitalisation of local government. The postwar years were to be the heyday of large country towns.

Lanes became streets, paddocks became reserves, streets developed well-kept verges
Houses and their gardens expressed something of the urban character of the new city. The firmest indication of the city's achievement, citizens were told, was to be found in the built and cultivated environment, especially its 'sturdy garden-girt homes'.17 Lanes became streets, paddocks became reserves, streets developed well-kept verges. Competitions brought public notice to the most diligent gardeners, and had special awards for those who had built only in the last two years and for those who lived in a Housing Commission cottage. The fifties saw the emergence of the culture of home and garden. Albury took on the appearance and character of a remote suburb of a metropolitan centre.

Greening the National Growth Centre
The new Whitlam Government (1972) launched a number of urban and regional development projects, including a growth centre strategy. The Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre project was to become its iconic decentralisation project, set to 'attract population and economic activity away from the major metropolitan areas, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, in order to alleviate the undesirable pressures on these cities'. Subsequent governments cut funding and population targets were never reached. Yet critics seem to ignore the achievements of the Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation, in particular how it addressed environmental issues related, for example, to the river, parklands, and residential estates. In cultivating a city in the country, the Development Corporation had a green thumb.

In cultivating a city in the country, the Development Corporation had a green thumb
At the beginnings of the project, the planners drew up protective strategies to preserve the natural environment and moved quickly to establish an environmental laboratory to keep a check on the water quality of the Murray River. During the 1980s new conservation policies related to the Murray River appeared at the national level and governments agreed to take a broader approach to the river system itself and established a Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

The Development Corporation established Carramar Nursery to propagate trees and shrubs for the Development Corporation's use and established an energetic forward tree-planting program. Under its superintendent, Harry Jakobs, Carramar Nursery produced trees and shrubs for planting in urban and non-urban areas. It propagated 150,000 plants each year, almost all indigenous. These trees and shrubs were planted in each residential and industrial estate well ahead of the release date, so that there would be established growth from the outset. A further free issue of 40 shrubs and 10 trees was made to each landowner. In 1978 alone, Development Corporation staff planted 38,000 trees and shrubs in urban areas, and 100,000 in greenfield settings at Thurgoona and Baranduda. They landscaped 125 detached houses, using 5,000 advanced trees and shrubs and sowed 90,000 square metres of grass. Consultants Margules and Deverson set guidelines for a forward tree-planting program in 1977. The Development Corporation had been planting trees at the rate of just over 68,500 each
year for 13 years. By 1988, it had produced 1.25 million trees at an average cost of $2 each.\footnote{9}

Less land was needed for development when the population target was lowered in 1976 and again in 1989. In 1985 the Victorian Land Conservation Council recommended that nearly half the land surplus to the needs of the Growth Centre should be retained for farming, about one quarter should be converted into regional parks, and another quarter into regeneration areas.

The Development Corporation clustered its housing into newly developed estates ... rural values pervaded the promotional imagery

The Development Corporation launched a bold Regional Parklands strategy that provided a twenty-year strategy for the development of an open space system in which hills and streams would be integrated. It gave particular emphasis to the reafforestation of the major surrounding hills to set the landscape character of the city. It looked to the development of town parks, riverine parks, and wilderness parks. It sought to retain the character of the Kiewa River floodplain and conserve the Murray River floodplain downstream from Lake Hume to central Albury. It made provision for recreational uses in a variety of interconnected parklands.\footnote{10}

The Development Corporation clustered its housing into newly developed estates. This was to be a 'City in the Country' and rural values pervaded the promotional imagery. The Development Corporation estates were designated as park, wood, green, hill, rise, and heights. The new roads took the form and names of crescents, drives, ways, circuits, views, closes, places, and even mews. The names of estates and subdivisions made picturesque allusions to farm, village, and rural values.

One of the most important roles of the Development Corporation was the manufacturing and selling of the image of Albury-Wodonga. In alerting the nation to the potential of the 'National Growth Centre', it portrayed Albury-Wodonga as a place with unusual vitality, one that had an unusual respect for environmental values. Albury-Wodonga was a brand name that won national recognition and carried, in the main, positive overtones.

Beyond Growth Centre

Albury-Wodonga was well sited, planned, and managed. The basis was laid, in the growth centre years, for an enlarged and economically viable inland city in which there were pleasant neighbourhoods set within a surrounding area that demonstrated an unusually high respect for environmental values. From a local vantage point, at least, it seems that in spite of the prevailing orthodoxy, Australia's only major attempt at selective decentralisation was worth the effort.

Bruce Pennay is a historian and heritage consultant specialising in Australian regional history. He is an honorary adjunct associate professor in the School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University.

7. Ibid., 10 June and 4 September 1937, 29 August 1938.