

2011 Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture Awards

Award in Garden History

Bee Dawson



Bee Dawson at the award ceremony.
Photo: Gil Hanly.

Bee Dawson has written extensively on many aspects of gardening and horticulture but it is her two books on New Zealand horticultural history that make her such a deserving recipient of the Institute's Award in Garden History.

The earlier of these books, *Lady Painters: the flower painters of early New Zealand* (Viking, 1999; reprinted 2007), is an account of nine woman artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of these women, such as Martha King, Emily Harris and Fanny Osborne,

compare well with professional botanical artists anywhere and they illustrated their plants with great flair and accuracy. Others such as Margaret Stoddart, whose paintings are still in great demand, excelled more at landscapes, in portraying massed plants in gardens or in flower arrangements. All women were united by a delight in plants. *Lady Painters* is a book to enjoy as well as being instructive and it is well illustrated by good examples of each artist's oeuvre. In Bee Dawson's own words, it is "fundamentally a social history, concerned rather more with the painters than the paintings". However, in telling us of these remarkable women, of their difficulties and too often straitened circumstances, she makes us better able to appreciate what they achieved.

This keen sense of social history is likewise seen in her more recent book, *A History of Gardening in New Zealand* (Godwit, 2010). Her history starts with the agriculture of the Māori and then follows the introduction of many plants by the first missionaries and settlers. She then describes the development of gardens during the colonial period. For the colonists, gardens reminded them of the homes they had left but gardens were also an economic necessity as they supplied fresh fruit and vegetables that were not

otherwise available. This dichotomy between aesthetics and necessity has continued with the balance point changing according to economic conditions. Many of us will remember how in our childhood, it was usually the man who was responsible for the vegetables, the woman for the flowers. Gardening remains a hobby for many but there has recently been an increasing emphasis on the health and economic benefits of home-grown fruit and vegetables.

A History of Gardening in New Zealand provides many hours of reading and the comprehensive list of literature will entice many of us to study further new aspects of our horticultural history. The drawings, paintings and photographs that are used as illustrations are particularly apt and finding such appropriate images must have taken months of searching.

As a social historian, Bee Dawson may well prefer people to plants. However, all of us who have an interest in gardening (and books) will be glad that she writes about people *and* their plants. Our appreciation of her efforts is shown by our presenting her with the Institute's 2011 Award in Garden History.

**Citation prepared by
Ross Ferguson**