NO POET COULD DESIRE A MORE CONGENIAL NOOK in which to conceive or perfect his ideal creations; and few persons with any soul will leave this poem of rock and plants after a retreat of an hour without a feeling of regeneration and quiet enjoyment [sic].

One of the interesting characters that has been discovered as a result of the forthcoming Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens (c.2001), is Charles Robinette (1841-1921). Robinette has surfaced as being the only professional horticultural structure and grotto designer and maker in Australia in the 1870s-1920s.

While we have a considerable literature in Europe, North America, and Australia that reviews the qualities of grottoes we know little of their designers and creators, and less of whether they moved from one project to another and increased the scale and quality of their craftsmanship.

Aitken has touched on this topic when reviewing garden structures, and Watts has mentioned several in Historic Gardens of Victoria (1983). We know of grottoes at Werribee Park and Rippon Lea in Victoria; Wairoa, Anlaby, Montefiore (in North Adelaide - designed for Chief Justice Sir Samuel Way) and The Acacias (in Kensington Park – garden of Adelaide Mayor Sir Edwin Smith) in SA. Most of these grottoes, except the latter two, attempt to adhere to picturesque ideals but with varying degrees of success.

Establishing a Reputation in South Australia

Born in Moulton, Lincolnshire, Robinette served as gardener to Isaac Holden of Oakworth House near Keighley in West Yorkshire, from 1867-1873.

In December 1875, Charles and Mary Robinette, with their first child Julia, sailed to Australia arriving at Port Adelaide in January 1876. Upon arrival the Robinette’s established a grocery business first in
Rundle Street and then at Glenelg in 1882 where he established his workshop.

Robinette had no formal training in gardening or horticulture. Instead, he was an adept learner who studied surveying and hydraulic engineering from monographs that he acquired. While there are numerous detailed reviews about his artistic workmanship in creating grotto and rockery structures, there is little recorded that gives us an insight into his design ideas and intentions. Descriptions about what he intended, or any of his ink drawings prepared for each design, are also limited. All point to an unusual expertise in crafting stone, understanding theory and design and hydraulic principles with grotto creation.

In Adelaide, Robinette was engaged to work on several private commissions including Montefiore and The Acacias. The grottoes and rockeries at Montefiore were praised as a triumph of nature, art, and practical convenience. The whole is as natural-looking as if it had been carved in toto from the side of a mountain stream. The only break to the fanciful picture is the little incongruity of pure white stalactites suspended from the decidely discolored limestone formation of the cave. This is an artistic fault. But no blame to the artist builder, who perforce had to use the only material available. Despite this the grotto is a splendid copy of nature, and delightfully picturesque.

At The Acacias he crafted his largest work, involving 'innumerable cascades and rills, at the foot of each of which is a pool apparently hollowed out by the constantly falling water.'

A Shift to Melbourne

In late 1885 Robinette gained employment with William Guilfoyle of the Royal Botanic Garden, Melbourne. Increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of workmanship of his staff, Guilfoyle commissioned Robinette to create a rockery in the Garden near the Anderson Street (B Gate) entrance. The small triangular grotto, described as 'a fantastic piece of rockwork,' was planted in typical nineteenth century period accents.

A reporter recorded critically that it is a ... very extraordinary piece of workmanship ... as though it had dropped from the sky. It consists of irregular masses of stone cemented together, with irregular outlines and surfaces formed into caves, arches, stalactites, &c., with pools intervening, and pockets for plants. We understand it is called a fountain, but by whatever name it may be known, it is totally out of place in such a position, being in no way connected with its surroundings, and is certainly as great a piece of incongruity as ever was perpetrated.

During his project Robinette was also engaged to work on several other public commissions. Grotesque rockeries on two small triangular carriage-drive islands in The Domain—credited as his constructions—are very typical of his artistic style and design. At the Melbourne Zoological Garden, in 1886-87, he erected 'a very handsome rockery and pond' and '... a platypus pool with rocks and burrows and holes for them to live in.' Another project was the 'Rockery' in the Melbourne General Cemetery in c.1889. In Malvern Gardens he crafted the 'handsome fountain and a fish pond, fashioned in artistic grotto work' in 1888.

In 1892 he was at work in the Darling Gardens, Clifton Hill, creating a rockery and a series of ponds.

In about 1896 Robinette decided to shift his family to the alluvial goldfields in the Ovens Valley in north-eastern Victoria. What prompted this decision is unknown; possibly he had insufficient horticultural commissions to sustain him due to the stock market crash. He died after a short illness at his residence in Porepunkah in 1921, aged 80 years, and was buried in the Bright Cemetery. The Alpine Observer recorded him simply as 'a well-known and highly respected resident of Porepunkah.'
The Legacy

Charles Robinette therefore stands out as an unusual and significant landscape designer in the history of Australian horticulture and landscape design. Between 1875 and 1920 he crafted some of the most significant public and private grotto and rockery structures known in Adelaide and Melbourne. His authorship of these artistic works disappeared because of his artisan status, minimal recognition in period publications and journals, and due to the promotional activities of the public clients he worked for that often appropriated any accolades of the artistic quality of the structures and success as their own.

Fernery and grotto at 'Montefiore', 1902. Source: The Australian Gardener, 1 December 1902, p. 4.

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