

**ADDRESS TO THE BICENTENARY DINNER OF THE ROYAL CALEDONIAN  
HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY**

# **A Growing Pleasure**

**The Rt Hon George Reid**



**Two hundred years of Growing Pleasure! A very Happy Birthday to the Caley...!**

## **A Time of Change**

**Edinburgh, 1809.** The country's capital was undergoing rapid change. The New Town was edging its way outwards. St Andrew's Square and Charlotte Square were already planted.

**But the war with Napoleon was disrupting trade and encouraging landowners, farmers and smallholders to dig for victory – to grow more of their own fruit and veg – as later generations had to in their time.**

**Because of the war, the traditional tippie of the burghers of Edinburgh – claret from Bordeaux – had disappeared. The Lord Provost of the day was certainly aware of the rumblings and grumblings this caused among the citizenry. He was therefore very open to the foundation of a horticultural society which might supply, "timeously and tastily", a synthetic substitute squeezed from Scottish berries. Of which, more anon.**

## **The First Meeting**

**Two centuries ago, Scotland was a country eager to secure a future for its past.**

**Our gardeners already had an enviable reputation. The principles of horticulture north of the Border had already been laid down in 1683 in "The Scots Gardener" by John Reid. In language rather reminiscent of Jim McColl today – I translate loosely — Reid opined that *Ye maun aye begynne orderly, wi forethocht, wi a perpendikular, if ye are to hae ony satisfactioun frae arbours, knottis, legumis, and orchards grene.***

**The wonderful gardens laid out at Alloa House, Culross, Drumlanrig, Falkland and many other stately homes were testimony to that.**

**By 1809, however, there were exciting new plants imported from Africa, the Americas, Australasia and the Indies. And in Edinburgh, at the height of the Enlightenment, there were savants and scientists eager to improve gardening and put it to good, productive and pleasurable use.**

**And so, on 5 December 1809, seventeen men came together in the Physicians' Hall in George Street – today the Dome restaurant – to found the Caledonian Horticultural Society.**

**What is remarkable was their social mix, in the broad Scots democratic tradition. There were professional gardeners from the great country estates; nurserymen from the Water of Leith, like Thomas Dickson; the printer of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Patrick Neill, who himself wrote the article on Gardening; Walter Nicol, the "best practical writer on Scottish gardening of his day"; and the eminent medical professor and physician to the King, Dr Andrew Duncan, who had the Latin motto *Hinc Sanitas* ("here you will find health") engraved on his garden gate on St Leonard's Hill.**

**The gathering was clear that, while the Society would adopt a scientific approach to horticulture, the results must be of practical benefit.**

**It then debated how it was to extend its influence. There were a few jokes about the motto of the City of Edinburgh, *Nisi Dominus Frustra* ("if the Lord is not with us, our efforts are in vain"). So, as their Patron, the founders chose the Earl of Dalkeith.**

The founding principles of the Society were set down clearly. They were to “encourage and promote the best fruit, the most choice flowers and the most useful culinary vegetables.”

For two hundred years now the Caley has followed these principles through Best Practice, Innovation, International Outreach, Education, and the promotion of Wellbeing to the People of Scotland.

Your current motto, “A Growing Pleasure”, is therefore long-rooted and well focused.

## A Political View

These days, I suppose, I am best described as a “Recovering Politician”.

I’ve been around so long that I am not surprised to be asked to recall memories of the last two hundred years.

I was made acutely aware of this the other day at Shillinghill in Alloa when I was approached by a group of teenagers:

- *Are you George Reid?*
- Yes
- *We get you in school*
- That’ll be in Modern Studies?
- *No, we get you in history*

Nonetheless, I have enough memory left to recall the solace I have gained from gardening since I was first elected to Parliament in 1974. When taking a view on the economic crisis of 1979 or 2009, or deciding in 1999 to stand for Holyrood, or determining how to get a grip on the costs of the new campus or MSP’s expenses... in all these cases, the solutions to all came when I was weeding.

In this I am indebted to my dear wife, Daphne, who is a Trustee of Gardening Scotland.

She has taught me that if we forget how to tend the soil, we forget ourselves. That planting a garden is to believe in the future. That to dig your fingers into the soft earth is to feel its energy and your spirits soar.

As someone in public life, however, a warning to elected representatives: an MP or MSP should never plant a garden larger than his wife can take care of.

## Promoting Best Practice

I said that, in this bicentenary address to the Caley, I would look briefly at four aspects of your work: Innovation in Practice, International Outreach, Education and the Promotion of Wellbeing in Scotland.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, science in Edinburgh was scintillating. When Charles Darwin came here to study, he was astonished at the botanical specimens brought back by intrepid Scots from all corners of the earth. He was amazed that John Edmonstone, a freed black slave from Latin America, should be free to discourse with academics on the medicinal properties of plants from the South American rain forest.

The mood in Edinburgh was utilitarian. Innovation and discovery were not scientific abstracts. They were to be used for the improvement and benefit of society.

Small wonder, then, that the early papers of the Caley dealt with such issues as the spread of 'curl' in potatoes, the examination of a cauliflower with a three foot head, the properties of blanched sea-kale, the development of melon pits, onion maggot, the public viewing of tomatoes and the extraction of opium from lettuces and poppies.

One lady associate was so enthused by the process that she started a cottage industry which today would have meant the finest of Lothian and Borders police arriving at her door in the early hours. She had, she reported, so far extracted around nine ounces of opium from *Papaver somniferum*...

And there was, of course, the competition to see whether Scottish red and white currants could produce a wine to rival the best of Bordeaux.

So many berry-pickers entered the competition that extra medals had to be produced. The tasting committee faced such submissions as *The Thunderer*, *The Tasty Thrapple*, "*If You Don't Like it, Don't Tell*" (this one reportedly topped up with a mixture of whisky and brandy) and a staggering 866 gallons from George Montgomery of Princes Street, who clearly had enjoyed a bumper crop.

*Le vin écossais* did not please the Scots palate. I suspect it was a bit like these cheap bottles of plonk I drank as a student, which I always thought should have a health warning on the back telling you what to do if you got it in your eyes.

And I am sorry to tell you that poor Mr Montgomery had a visit from the Customs and Excise.

But, all that aside, there was an astonishing amount of innovation. The garden established by the Society at Inverleith was, above all, to be "experimental". It led to extraordinary improvements in the production of potatoes, carrots, turnips, peas and beans. To major advances in strawberries, raspberries and currants. To old apple strains being carefully coaxed into new Scottish life. To the establishment of Plum and Pear Competitions. And to an understanding that, with infinite love, citrus fruits and pineapples could actually be grown in Scotland.

And when the City fathers found that they were running out of money — you are not the first, Lord Provost, to face this dilemma — it was the Caley which gifted a large number of trees to plant in the newly drained Nor Loch. It is Princes Street Gardens which set off the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh, and this Society should take great pride in the foresight of its early members in helping to create a world class centre for our national capital.

True to its democratic origins, however, the Caley has never focused exclusively on big, prestigious projects. It has always been committed to aiding the professional gardener in the shires, the amateur who wanted to get the best from his plot, the man or woman who simply took pleasure from growing onions or orchids.

It has not always been easy to balance these interests. There was a period when the Scotch Pansy Society took an intense dislike to the Leek Growers. And at one dinner a member stomped out — “Damn the lot of you. You are not worth a candle” — because the Society was becoming effeminate, spending too much time on flowers instead of food.

The Caley has always managed, somehow, to find a way to meet such competing demands on its services. Its archives contain two centuries of practical papers to counsel gardeners the length and breadth of Scotland, always conscious that what grows in Stirling may struggle in Stornoway and go to seed in Stranraer.

Today, office bearers and experts from the Society are regularly on television or radio, or in the gardening pages of our newspapers and magazines, providing practical advice to Puzzled of Paisley on why his *Philadelphus* or *Pittosporum* has keeled over. But there is nothing new in that.

For two hundred years the Caley has churned out papers on such diverse issues as “How to diffuse steam in forcing houses”, “wiping out wasps”, “coping with carrot worms”, “the proper cultivation of carnations”, “the true use of mangell worzels” (this paper submitted by the military commandant of St Helena, who clearly had time on his hands), and *Compostaphile versus Compostophobe* — a detailed study of whether to rot, or not.

This innovative work is continued today by your provision of expert advice through your Gardeners Fora, your one-to-one discussions in the margins of your Spring Show and Gardening Scotland, your articles in *The Caledonian Gardener* (which always manage to combine readability and knowledge), your supply of judges to local shows, your provision of medals for excellence, and your wonderful explanation of how much pleasure and produce can be got from a small plot, like your organic allotment at Bridgend in Edinburgh.

You set out to be scientific in your outputs, practical in your outcomes. If I had to conduct a performance appraisal of the Society, judging what you have done against what you said you would do, I think I would probably give you an Alpha.

## 200 Years Ago Today

I have a challenge for you, though, in the tradition of your forebears.

It derives from work done at Kew — itself something of a Scottish invention, since it was largely the creation 250 years ago of the Earl of Bute, born here in Parliament Square, Edinburgh. A place where William Forsyth from Aberdeenshire served as head gardener to George III.

Kew has built up a remarkable reputation for its Millennium seed bank, saving species from across the planet. But it's also bringing history back to life.

Scientists have induced seeds, found in the pages of a notebook brought in 1803 from South Africa to Britain, to germinate. In America, scientists have grown seedlings from 500-year-old lotus seed found at the bottom of a Chinese lake. And, in Israel, scientists claim to have grown a date palm from a 2000-year-old seed.

Would it not be wonderful if, raking through the archives of Dixon, Neil or Duncan — or some of the other gardeners — you chanced on a seed which had lodged there?

Would it not be fantastic, 200 years on, for the Caley to bring its 1809 beginnings back into being today, in 2009?

### An International Reputation

The reputation of Scots gardeners has always extended far beyond their native soil. Commenting on the monopoly that our seedsmen and nurserymen seemed to have established south of the Border, George Elliot commented: “A gardener is Scottish as a French teacher is Parisian.”

But they had a link to France as well. Much of the cultivation at the great houses around Paris and in the Loire Valley is billed today as *un jardin anglais*. In reality, they are *un jardin écossais*, tilled by a loon from the Mearns or Angus who had accompanied his Jacobite master into exile.

Others travelled for adventure, and in search of exotica. David Douglas from Scone, hunting for plants in the Rocky Mountains and bringing back the Californian poppy. James Drummond of Inverarity journeying throughout Australia, finding the black flowered *Boronia megastigma*, and laying down the Botanic Garden in Perth. George Forrest from Falkirk, scouring the Himalayas, whose *Pieris forrestii* today adds a splash of colour to many a shady corner. John Fraser of Tomnacloch, Inverness, named Botanical Collector by Paul I of Russia, discovering new varieties of Rhododendron and Hydrangea. Archibald Menzies, who began his working life in the gardens of Castle Menzies, introducing the Monkey Puzzle tree from Chile. And George Sherrif of Larbert who travelled through Tibet and Bhutan and ultimately retired to Kirriemuir to create a garden of Himalayan plants there.

Some put down roots where fortune took them.

I have done a lot of conflict-resolution work in the Caucasus in recent years. At Inozemstsevo, in the region of Stavropol, I was astonished to find Маленькая Шотландия — Little Scotland — a Presbyterian mission from Edinburgh, founded by Alex Paterson and William Glen at the start of the nineteenth century. A report to the Tsar indicated that the Scots were engaged more in “agricultural than theological work”, had introduced potatoes from home, and planted “a profusion of orchards”. Descendents of Paterson were later to work in the Botanical Gardens in Moscow.

Travel east to the gardens of Poona in India, and you will see the flowerbeds laid down by Scots-born nurserymen (and also, for reasons perhaps best not elaborated here, the workshops where they extracted substantial quantities of senna and castor-oil). Go further east still, to the great tea estates of Assam, where the adventurer Robert Bruce discovered *Camellia sinensis* growing wild and found, by mixing its leaves with its Chinese cousin, he could produce a particularly potent Scottish Breakfast Tea. Look at the little gardens round the bungalows, where memsahibs from home tried to recreate a little bit of the Grampians in the Himalayas.

Go south now, to Nagasaki in Japan. To the Thomas Glover Garden, named after the “Scottish Samurai” from Fraserburgh who started what was to become Mitsubishi. Marvel at the hydrangeas tucked in behind immaculately trimmed hedges. And allow yourself to be astonished when one of the staff regales you with tales of the Bluebells of Scotland.

The memories of home mark the work of many a Scots gardener resettled overseas in different climes. You will see this influence in the Botanic Gardens in Sydney, Australia (where Alan Cunningham from Renfrewshire fought a long battle with the Governor against his employment of convicts as cheap labour). In the Botanic Garden in Wellington, New Zealand, laid out by James Hector from Edinburgh. In the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, the work of John Hays McLaren from Bannockburn. And in Canada’s oldest surviving botanic garden in Vancouver, established by John Davidson, a former demonstrator in botany at Marischal College, Aberdeen.

Davidson was consulted on the lay-out of the magnificent 36-acre garden of Government House, across the Straights in the provincial capital of Victoria. With its heathers, rhododendrons and bluebells, mountains and sea views, it is immediately comfortable to any Scot.

In 1991, however, the cost of upkeep became too much for the Government purse. The Lieutenant Governor of the time then did something both radical and sensible. He appealed to the local horticultural society and to amateur gardeners to put their ideas, skills and labour at the service of preserving and sustaining “their national heritage”.

Today the gardens are immaculate, maintained by over 250 volunteers whose only reward — apart from an enormous sense of satisfaction — is a Christmas party in Government House.

I mention this only because I am currently charged to conduct a strategic survey of the National Trust in Scotland. As you will know, some of its magnificent gardens are under threat. I very much hope that I can turn to the Caley for ideas on how we too can preserve and sustain this part of *our* national inheritance.

The Wellbeing of Scotland

Finally, I turn to the impact of the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society on the wellbeing of the people of Scotland.

Clearly, over the past two centuries, you have contributed to scientific research, the improvement of species and the beautification of our country. But you have also made a notable contribution to our health and happiness.

Two hundred years ago Dr Andrew Duncan would take himself up Arthur’s Seat, where he would compose a few stanzas to entertain his colleagues at the next meeting of the Caley. Here are a few lines extracted from his poem, *From the Potato to the Pineapple*, in which he reflects on the benefits of his own garden:

*Stop Friend and view this small but fertile spot  
Which well arranged serves a hermit for his lot.  
The active man, a Hermit here you’ll see,*

*Deriving precious health from every tree.*

I wonder whether the challenges of the global economic crisis are pushing us to produce more from the soil, just as the challenges of the Napoleonic wars did in 1809? There are a number of encouraging signs.

A major study by the Carnegie UK Trust, of which I am a Commissioner, indicates that people are increasingly returning to their roots in a new spirit of localism, and want to grow their own food. There are over 3000 Scots facing a wait of up to ten years to get one of the 6300 allotments in Scotland. Conscious that a good plot can feed a family of four for almost half a year, several councils are now looking for land to open new ones. And, at least in my part of Scotland, a growing number of gardens attached to council houses in the 1920s and 1930s are now being restored, the concrete slabbing removed and the vegetables planted.

Anyone who wandered round the pallet gardens at this year's Gardening Scotland exhibition was bound to be enthused by the effort and ingenuity of our primary and secondary schools in showing what they can produce from the soil. Like my own grandchildren, they are finding that mucky fingers and muddy welly boots are fun.

And, like many of the servicemen and women with whom I worked in my International Red Cross days, troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are finding that peace and tranquility can come from digging, weeding and pruning. I cannot praise highly enough the *Gardening Leave* programme, organised by Combat Stress, for those still experiencing the trauma of war when they come home.

*Hinc sanitas*: "Here is Health". The good Dr Duncan knew a thing or two about the therapeutic values of horticulture.

**The Next 200 Years**

200 years of gardening. Happy birthday, well done, and thank you.

Over the past two centuries, the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society has promoted excellence, innovation, research, pleasure and wellbeing. Keep on doing so. Keep rewarding it through your Queen Mother and Society medals.

**Stay strong in your commitment to the ideals of your founders to “encourage and promote the best fruit, the most choice flowers and the most useful culinary vegetables.”**

**Never lose that enthusiasm for the soil, your conviction that the tiny seed of today will be**

**the great tree of tomorrow ■**

**You know that planting a garden is always an act of faith, of trying to make your best efforts of today even better tomorrow.**

**Gardening, you know, is always about optimism. Gardening is about believing that the future will turn out fine.**

**Gardening is always a Growing Pleasure.**

**Envoi**

**That, I think, is enough preaching from me.**

**During my time as Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, I had to visit one small congregation. The local newspaper carried the story: “Mr Reid spoke briefly, to the great delight of those assembled.” Let that be a lesson to me!**

**Two hundred years down the road, however, I conclude with a tradition of the early years. Members of the Caley then had to endure the verses cobbled together by Dr Duncan on his walks up Arthur’s Seat.**

**I end, therefore, with this offering — liberally adapted from the Lumberjack Song in the Monty Python television series:**

***Oh, I am a gardener and I’m okay,  
I sleep all night and I plant all day.  
I dress in grubby clothing  
and hang around with slugs.  
Oh, I’m happy in my garden,  
With dirt and plants and bugs***

**ENDS**