

Editorial

The year 1996 represented both the sesquicentenary of the founding of Melbourne's beautiful and historic Royal Botanic Gardens and the centenary of the death of the first person to be appointed their Director, Australia's leading scientist of the nineteenth century, the botanist and explorer Ferdinand von Mueller. To mark these two notable anniversaries, a wide range of commemorative activities was held during the course of the year. These included a major botanical expedition to remote Gregory National Park in Australia's Northern Territory, where Mueller had collected 140 years earlier as a member of Augustus Gregory's North Australia Exploring Expedition, and the simultaneous issuing of identical postage stamps honouring Mueller by the German and Australian postal authorities. Also to mark the occasion, during the week commencing 29 September 1996, a set of overlapping and highly successful international conferences was held at the University of Melbourne, jointly sponsored by the Royal Botanic Gardens, the Royal Society of Victoria and the University. One of these was historical in orientation, on the theme of 'The Scientific Savant in 19th-century Australia: A Celebration of the Life, Times and Legacy of Ferdinand von Mueller'. A number of the papers prepared for that conference are now brought together in this special issue of *Historical Records of Australian Science*. The annual bibliography of the history of Australian science that normally would have appeared in this issue and a number of book reviews have been held over until the next issue. Papers presented at the overlapping botanical conferences will be published in *Australian Systematic Botany* and *Muelleria*.

Given the nature of the occasion, it was inevitable that many of the papers presented at the historical conference would focus on

Ferdinand von Mueller himself. Others, however, linked Mueller to wider themes in the history of nineteenth-century science, or discussed other work and other savants who were active in Australia during the same period. So it is with the papers now published here, which cover a diverse range of subjects but at the same time have enough in common to constitute a remarkably coherent collection.

Mueller himself and his life and times have been the target of a great deal of new historical research in recent years. Most of this has drawn to a greater or lesser extent on the massive collection of his surviving correspondence that has been newly assembled at the Royal Botanic Gardens and that is currently being edited for publication. The papers on him that appear in the present volume represent merely the tip of an iceberg. Others are listed in the annual bibliographies of the history of Australian science published in this journal during the past few years; a number were published in the special anniversary issues that appeared during 1996 of two local Victorian journals, the *Victorian Historical Journal* (vol. 67, no. 1, April 1996, entitled 'Melbourne's Pride and Glory: 150 Years at the Royal Botanic Gardens') and *The Victorian Naturalist* (vol. 113, no. 4, August 1996). Taken together, this research is beginning to yield a much deeper understanding not only of Mueller himself and his work, but of the circumstances of scientific and intellectual life more generally in nineteenth-century Australia.

The frontispiece is a photograph of Mueller taken in 1866, when he was 41 years old. The original is at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.