

Reviews

The Arcadian Friends, Inventing the

English Landscape Garden, by Tim Richardson

Bantam Press, London (2007), pp.562, illus. in colour and black-and-white, £25 (hardback), ISBN 9780593052730

The subject of this book is the development of English landscape gardening from the 1680s to the 1750s but Richardson's real interest lies in the people who made them - the Arcadian Friends. Amongst their motives may have been aesthetics, philosophy, art appreciation, classical education, personal experience (particularly through the Grand Tour), fashion and personality but, as his main theme, Richardson takes political ideology and argues for its centrality to the creation of landscape gardens at least up to the 1740s. Later he suggests that gardens became an escape from politics and much more an expression of personality. Whether one agrees with his observations or not, his enthusiastic and persuasive style is very engaging of the reader's attention and leaves the impression that the book was just bursting to come out.

Richardson dives straight in to the politics of the times. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 saw the exile of James II and the accession of the Dutch protestant, William of Orange, with Queen Mary. Twenty-five years later, in 1714, a long period of political manoeuvring by the Whigs resulted in the accession of the Hanoverian line, thus creating the conditions for Whig political supremacy for the first half of the eighteenth century. This was the time of the formation of political parties and the casting out of the Tories created the scene for 'the battle for the English landscape... a series of politically inconclusive but aesthetically thrilling skirmishes...over the next thirty years or so' (p.5). 'The image of both parties was based in part on their perceived relationship to the land, and that made the landscape garden an important emblem of the division between them' (p.120).

The development of the Anglo-Dutch style of gardens in the run-up to and following William III's accession is well covered in two chapters (their headings 'Agents Orange' and 'Roast Beef meets Sour Crud' illustrate Richardson's penchant for engaging language). Gardens reflected the politics and the diplomatic ties of the day but did not comment on them. Less easy to accept is the statement that William and the Whigs 'engineered' a cultural conquest partly through an enthusiasm for horticulture (p.38). At page 92 Richardson uses the term 'a cultural and aesthetic programme' (including garden-making) in the context of the political manoeuvring to introduce the Hanoverians - this perhaps underscores the contemporary importance of the art form.

Cobham's disaffection with Walpole, the Whig prime minister, and his removal from office begins the story of Stowe. Here politics became the heavy message in the landscape. Richardson feels that, the 'cumulative polemic never quite gels'(p.324); too much insistent political haranguing leaves the informed visitor exhausted whilst the uninformed are left baffled, sensing a 'haught[y] detachment'(ibid.). That might be a fair criticism of the book itself. For the reviewer, the insistence on politicisation is not always convincing although always interesting. For example explaining the political message behind the Gothic buildings at Stowe after 1740, he states that an

alternative ideology to Walpolean Whiggery was to be found in ancient British history as symbolised by the Gothick style (p.326). This would have been more powerful if there were some references to supportive contemporary sources. At page 330, after commenting on the lack of politically symbolic incident at Mount Edgcumbe, across the estuary from Plymouth, he airs an admittedly unsupported suspicion that 'a large number, if not the majority, of landscape-garden-makers were in fact politically motivated at this time'.

The penultimate chapter contains a very sympathetic account of The Leasowes, William Shenstone's creation at Halesowen, very much a personal creation on a limited budget - 'elegiac' is the word used.

Richardson has an eye for the anecdote, whether it be the altercation between the owners of Wentworth Woodhouse and Wentworth Castle (p.334) or the aside that the writer of 'a terrible garden poem like Claremont', apparently the fattest man in London, beat the second fattest man in London in a running race down the Mall. He also has garnered a substantial body of quotation from poets, some quite obscure.

An aspect touched on occasionally but not fully explored is the point at which some design feature, initially political, descended into the fashionable arena or as just another component in the design catalogue.

One leaves this book stimulated by its breadth. Reading the bibliography, itself twenty-seven pages long, it is evident that this book is extremely extensively researched across a wide range of subjects. The footnotes and referencing are somewhat sparser and lead to speculation about the subjective nature of some of the opinions. The academic reader may have the facts to assess their validity but not so the lay reader. The indexing has its shortcomings – no mention of Neptune, Hercules or even the wiggles, the political symbolism of all of which was discussed in the text.

No matter. What the book has left the reviewer with is a desire to know more about the period so as to meet Tim Richardson's observations from a more informed basis.

(Marcus Batty)

Vista: the Culture and Politics of Gardens, edited by Tim Richardson and Noel Kingsbury
Frances Lincoln, London, (2005), pp.191, £16.99 (hardback), ISBN 07112 2575 3

Although *Vista* has been out now for some time, its purpose makes a revisit appropriate on the occasion of this, the first *Journal* of the Devon Gardens Trust. *Vista* sets out to question where gardens lie in our culture. Whilst there are many practical and technical handbooks on gardens and gardening and much has been written in the academic press on garden history, the editors have perceived that there has been little writing on the contemporary cultural or intellectual basis of gardens over the last hundred years. This gap they have addressed by assembling a collection of essays which examine the culture of the garden from a variety of modern angles.

None of the essays (with the exception of Tim Richardson's 'Psychotopia') is particularly long so there is little risk of becoming bogged down in too much subjective theory. Some

of the essays are essentially descriptive in nature. Thus we have accounts of women in gardening and a description of how literature has focused on landowners and designers and largely ignored the input of labour. The essay on 'Gardens of Ethnicity' combines enquiry with description, enquires into the contribution of immigrants to gardening in Britain, comparing the different cultural influences brought to this country, for example in relation to space, activity and plants themselves. Others are philosophical: David Cooper explores what is meant by the appreciation of gardens in the opening essay, 'Garden, Art, Nature'.

The reader can make his own connections. It is interesting to read Tony Heywood's essay on 'Horticultural Intervention Art' ('HIA') together with Louisa Jones' exploration of the increasing French interest in garden visiting. In the latter the writer suggests that French garden visiting is as much about participation and discovery as spectatorship. 'HIA' is about ideas, drawing inspiration from popular culture and embracing installations.

It is these connections which are a central fascination of the book. HIA suggests a denial of the genius loci being 'in but not of a place'. In contrast Tim Richardson's essay on 'Psychotopia' is a re-exploration of what it is that makes a garden 'special and unique'. 'HIA' affirms the artificial construct at the expense of nature yet other essays explore the garden viewed as nature-inspired, whether as a naturalist would or as a product of a media-induced lifestyle. The essayists, sixteen of them, come from a range of backgrounds: garden design, horticulture and landscape architecture predominantly, but also philosophy, art history and writing. Some light heartedness is provided by Tom Hodgkinson who believes that growing cabbages and overthrowing the state is 'one and the same thing'. There is something in this book for everyone.

(Marcus Batty)

Book Notes

Douglas Ellory Pett, the Cornish author was unanimously awarded the 2004 Royal Institution of Cornwall 'Charles Thomas Prize' for his contribution *Horticulture on the Isles of Scilly*. This three-part work was intended 'to provide the researcher with a convenient collection of the most informative articles under one cover'.

The first part of this unpublished treatise documents the history of horticulture in Scilly from the medieval period up to 1985, drawing on C17 and C18 official surveys and the observations of earlier authors, including Heath, Borlase and Troutbeck; and examines the impact on the islands of the Duchy of Cornwall and the Smith family. The second part consists in the main of photocopies of reports and articles drawn from many obscure periodicals (1870-1971), which document the development of horticulture in the islands. The final, third, part is dedicated to the story of flower growing in Scilly. It is based on the Tresco Abbey archives and includes a unique checklist of daffodils with coloured illustrations of the narcissus, daffodil and their hybrids.

In their report the Institution praised Dr Pett's work as a work of reference for use by other researchers, citing, for example the index of synonyms, the details of marketing figures for the

years 1931-1950, and the comprehensive subject index and bibliography. The panel congratulated him on his extensive research and the high quality of his presentation.

Douglas died in 2005, but his widow, Mary, has been working on the papers he left on his death and it is hoped that *Horticulture on the Isles of Scilly* will be published during 2008. Many people are familiar with his early books, *The Parks and Gardens of Cornwall* (now out of print) and *From a Cornish Bishop's Garden*.

His most recent book, *Creative Gardeners* (Alison Hodge, ISBN 0906720419, £12.95) was published in 2005, shortly after Douglas died. It reveals the aspirations and philosophies of 20 Cornish gardeners and examines gardens which are diverse both in concept and in execution ('traditional', minimalist, African-influenced, inspired by plants or by sculpture, for example). The conclusions it reaches are far from simply regional, however, and it contains inspirational ideas which will be copied across the country. As John Norrington-Davies observed in *Borderlines*, 'All the conditions described will be found elsewhere in the British Isles, and most of the problems faced are universal'. This is a book to inspire on dull, non-gardening days and to carry with you on car journeys through Cornwall.

(Taken from information provided by Mary Pett)

Cuttings

Short Reviews of Recently Published Books of Interest

How to Read an English Garden, by Andrew Eburne & Richard Taylor
Ebury Press, London, (2006), pp.272, illus.,
£25 (hardback), ISBN 0 091 90900 7

This is a handbook for every garden visitor which explains the elements that make up the historic garden and their meanings. There is a chronological overview followed by what you might expect to see from first arriving at a garden, on a tour round and then leaving. It considers the influence of important designers, hard and soft landscaping, buildings and plants. The book is well indexed and contains a short gazetteer of gardens to visit.

More Papers from The Potting Shed, by Charles Elliott
Francis Lincoln, London, (2006), pp.192, £14.99,
ISBN 0-7112-2633-4.

A series of amusing essays, comment and mini histories in four sections entitled Challenges, Exotica, Planters and Plantsmen and From the Past. A light-hearted book to keep on the bedside table.

The Victorian Gardener: The Growth of Gardening & the Floral World, by Anne Wilkinson (foreword by Bob Flowerdew).
Sutton Publishing, Stroud, (2006), pp 236, illus., £20,
ISBN 0-7509-4043-3.

Well researched, well illustrated volume about Victorian amateur gardeners. Written in three sections, the first is about the men and women who gardened as a hobby in Victorian times. The second part is entitled Learning to Garden which details where

the amateur found practical information, plants and tools. The third section includes ten chapters each dealing with a separate part of the garden, including chapter 16, The Indoor Garden. The appendices gives details of gardening journals that were available to the amateurs and a list of plant suppliers and places to visit for those who are interested in creating an authentic Victorian garden of their own.

Virgins, Weeders and Queens: a History of Women in the Garden, by Twigs Way
Sutton Publishing, Stroud, (2006), pp.278, illus.,
£20 (hardback).
ISBN 0-7509-4106-5

Women's connections with gardens and gardening has a long history although they are often ignored not only in the literature of today, but also in contemporary documents. This book goes some way to redress this oversight. Twigs Way looks at women who have been involved in gardening from garden owners to the lowly garden weeders, including gentlewomen and housewives in between. Women have been responsible for creating garden designs, cultivating and selling produce, growing and collecting plants, caring for herb gardens and contributing to family food production. It was not until the nineteenth century that the place of women was recognised in the garden, and women began to have the freedom to write about their gardening experiences. Now in the twenty-first century women are free to do as little or as much as they like in the garden, their skills are recognised and many are designers or head gardeners of prestigious gardens. Twigs Way proves this was not always the case.

Seven Deadly Sins of Gardening and the Vices and Virtues of Gardeners, by Toby Musgrave with Mike Calman
The National Trust, London, (2006), pp.176, illus., £9.99
(hardback), ISBN 10 1905400462

The seven deadly sins are illustrated with snippets from history. A 'dip-in' book for odd moments.

William Kent: Architect, Designer, Opportunist,
by Timothy Mowl
Pimlico, London, (2007), first published by Jonathan Cape
in 2006), pp 298, illus., £12.99 (paperback).
ISBN 9781844135394

A stimulating biography of the garden designer, William Kent (1684-1748), in Tim Mowl's inimitable and provocative style.

Diary of a Victorian Gardener: William Cresswell and Audley End, (Preface by William Cresswell's great granddaughter, Patricia Rabôt)
English Heritage, Swindon, (2006), pp 175, £14.99 (hardback),
ISBN 10 1 85074 988 4

William Cresswell was a gardener at Audley End in Essex from 1873 to 1874 and recorded his life there in a diary which was found in a market in London and transcribed for this book. Illustrated with line drawings, photographs and pages from Cresswell's notebook, this gives an insight into the working life of a gardener in one of the most prestigious gardens in the country.

(Clare Greener)