



Writing the Garden

A Literary Conversation Across Two Centuries

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Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
www.allisonandbusby.com

First published in 2011.
This edition published by Allison & Busby in 2014.

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First published in 2011 by David R. Godine, Publisher in the USA in
association with the Foundation for Landscape Studies and the New York
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-1690-6

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



FOREWORD

From putting together the experiences of gardeners in different places, a conception of plants begins to form. Gardening, reading about gardening, and writing about gardening are all one; no one can garden alone.

– Elizabeth Lawrence, *The Little Bulbs*, 1957

THE GENESIS OF THIS book was an invitation from Mark Bartlett, Head Librarian of the New York Society Library, to co-curate with Harriet Shapiro, Head of Exhibitions, a display featuring the library's trove of rare books by garden writers along with similar works from my own collection. An afternoon of delightful browsing with Harriet brought us to the same conclusion – that we should focus on a particular genre of garden writing within the larger realm of books on landscape subjects: books *by* and *for* actual gardeners. Moreover, these should be books whose literary quality ensured even a non-gardener's reading pleasure.

It was difficult to leave on the shelf one of the library's great treasures, the 1728 English edition of Dézallier d'Argenville's *The Theory and Practice of Gardening*, but this treatise codifying the design style of Louis XIV's royal gardener André Le Nôtre falls outside our selective purview. Mentioning it here, however, provides a clue to the riches of the New York Society Library. It is remarkable that

books such as the Dézallier, which command high prices by rare book dealers when available today, are not recent acquisitions by the library, but rather were purchased not long after their original publication dates. Their status as rare books, therefore, is often a function of the long span of time they have been in the catalogue of more than three hundred thousand volumes that this venerable subscription library has amassed since its founding in 1754.

My own association with the New York Society Library began two centuries later, in 1964, the year I took up residence in the city. The Children's Library was an obvious boon to me as the mother of a young child, but an even greater asset was revealed around four years later when I began to research my first book, *The Forests and Wetlands of New York City* (1971). I remember going into the stacks and finding *Springs and Wells of Manhattan and the Bronx, New York City, at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1938) by James Reuel Smith, as well as other similarly obscure titles. Although, as a member of the library, I could have borrowed these books, it was pleasanter to sit at a writing table in the high-ceilinged, second-floor reading room making research notes on a yellow legal pad in the midst of engrossed book lovers on nearby sofas and chairs.

Probably because I am a native of San Antonio, the first rare book I purchased for myself was Frederick Law Olmsted's *A Journey through Texas; or A Saddle-trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (1857). I felt bold that day in the late sixties when I stood at the counter of the Strand Bookstore writing a cheque for fifty dollars. Of course, I could have found this volume along with all of Olmsted's other books in

the New York Society Library, but establishing a tangible link with America's first landscape architect was a catalytic event, prompting first the writing of *Frederick Law Olmsted's New York* (Whitney Museum/Praeger, 1972) and then twenty years' involvement in the restoration of Central Park.

Buying this bit of Olmstediana also planted a seed that remained dormant until the 1990s. By then I was embarked on tracing landscape history both backwards and forwards from Olmsted, gathering material and visiting parks and gardens in other countries in preparation for writing *Landscape Design: A Cultural and Architectural History* (Abrams, 2001). Doing research in the rare-book rooms of libraries with collections that elucidate the history of landscape design with period images – Avery, Morgan, New York Public, Dumbarton Oaks, Harry Ransom Centre, Hunt Institute, and Huntington, to name the most prominent – was an eye-opening experience. How fascinating those beautifully illustrated books by Humphry Repton were with their hand-coloured flaps hiding and revealing before and after views! And what a thrill to hold an album containing prints of Versailles by Israel Silvestre or Nicolas and Adam Perelle! And turning the pages of the marvellous folios of engravings by Giovanni Battista Falda and Giovanni Francesco Venturini depicting the villas in and around Rome was almost as exciting as a trip to Italy.

Obtaining my own copy of Dézallier, which discusses and illustrates the French classical design idiom of Le Nôtre, was exciting enough to awaken the acquisitive streak that leads to the self-gratifying malady called collector's passion. Like most collections, mine has a particular focus: it principally

consists of treatises on landscape theory and practice, books of engravings of historic landscapes and narratives, such as Olmsted's *Journey*, in which landscape description is a major theme. Some of these works are discussed in *Romantic Gardens: Nature, Art, and Landscape Design* (The Morgan Library & Museum in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, and the Foundation for Landscape Studies, 2010), and a number of them were on loan to the 2010 exhibition of the same title at the Morgan Library and Museum, for which I served as co-curator.

The books of mine discussed here in conjunction with ones belonging to the New York Society Library are a distinct subset within my overall collection. They were not acquired with any notion of collectability in mind but rather because I had succumbed to another passion: gardening. I can date the beginning of this phase of my life to a trip to England in 1974. It was to be the first of many subsequent trips to look at gardens and parks. My itinerary took me into Kent and Sussex counties south of London, to the Cotswolds and the West Country, and then back east through Oxford. En route I visited Gravetye Manor, Nymans, and Sheffield Park in Sussex; Sissinghurst in Kent; Stourhead near Salisbury; Hidcote Manor and Sezincote in the Cotswolds; Westbury Court and Kiftsgate Court in Gloucestershire; Knightshayes Court in Devon; Stowe in Buckinghamshire; and Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. I loved them all – the great eighteenth-century estate gardens of Stourhead and Blenheim, the Victorian splendour of Knightshayes, William Robinson's counter-Victorian landscape at Gravetye, and probably most of all Major Lawrence Johnston's Hidcote.

It was in this garden that I experienced the epiphany that gardening is an art form like painting or architecture and that it was possible, with enough looking and learning, for a novice like me to make a garden myself.

Before that revelatory trip I grew marigolds, zinnias, lettuce, and tomatoes in the backyard of my weekend home in Wainscott on the South Fork of Long Island. Now I was overcome with a desire to grow old heritage roses with names like ‘Maiden’s Blush’ (or more erotically in French, ‘Cuisses de nymphe’, or ‘nymph’s thighs’). Catalogues from nurseries such as White Flower Farm in Connecticut, Wayside Gardens in Ohio (now in South Carolina), and Roses of Yesterday and Today in California began to arrive in the mail. I ordered bulbs from Holland – anemones, grape hyacinths, fritillarias, and scillas along with narcissuses, daffodils, and tulips. And I bought books not only about how to garden but books that friendly experts appeared to have written just for me, the amateur gardener. As I began to write this book and to select with Harriet the contents of the New York Society Library’s corresponding exhibition, I discovered that these old books I had acquired willy-nilly over the years fit exactly the genre we had chosen as our thematic focus.

The sharing across time and distance of gardening news, tips, information, observations, and opinions found here is paralleled by the collaborative nature of this book. As Elizabeth Lawrence, one of my favourite garden writers, observes in the epigraph above, ‘No one can garden alone.’ Certainly no author can produce a book such as this one without the skills of a good editor and talented designer, the commitment of a sympathetic publisher, and the generosity of financial supporters.

In my case, I must first acknowledge Julia Moore, an editor of art history books with whom I have had a long professional and personal friendship. I am most appreciative of Julia's attention to this essay's overall structure and narrative flow as well as her sound suggestions wherever she encountered infelicities of phrasing, a task that was augmented by copy-editor Margaret Oppenheimer. Harriet Shapiro provided a good editorial sounding board. I am grateful for her discovery of certain volumes in the New York Society Library that I might not have found on my own, as well as her first-reader's suggestions regarding improvements to the text. Brandi Tambasco of the Library also contributed her valuable editorial skills. In addition, I am indebted to Judith B. Tankard, landscape historian and author of *Gardens of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (2004), *Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes* (2009), and *Gertrude Jekyll and the Country House Garden* (2011), for her helpful editorial comments and manuscript corrections.

A further debt of gratitude is owed David Godine, a paragon within a dying breed, the independent book publisher. A true bibliophile schooled in the craft of letterpress printing, David involves himself in all aspects of his books' production. In this case we were immensely advantaged by having Jerry Kelly as the book's designer. Jerry is a calligrapher as well as a teacher of graphic design, and his skill is apparent in the layout, typeface, paper quality, cover, and other creative decisions that account for the book's handsome appearance.

The sponsors of the publication of *Writing the Garden* are the New York Society Library and the Foundation for Landscape Studies. Their underwriting of editorial,

photographic, design, and other necessary expenses constitute a subvention without which it would have been prohibitive to publish the book in its present form. I am therefore grateful to Michael and Evelyn Jefcoat, longtime supporters of the Foundation for Landscape Studies, Frederic Rich, chairman, and the other board members for voting to underwrite a portion of these publication costs.

I offer thanks as well to Charles Berry, chairman, and the members of the board of the New York Society Library and to Mark Bartlett, head librarian, for encouraging me to bring together this array of garden writers from past generations along with those of our own time. Inevitably there are some fine garden writers missing from these pages. I hope that readers will discover them too, and that meeting the ones they will find here engaged in a timeless dialogue will make them want to read their books in their entirety.

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NEW YORK CITY

2011

INTRODUCTION



IN THE SAME WAY that you don't have to be a baseball fan to enjoy a good description of a Yankees-Red Sox game by a sportswriter like Roger Angell or to be a chef to savour the spice in the books of a food writer like M. F. K. Fisher, you don't have to be a gardener to appreciate the knowledge, enthusiasm, and wit with which certain garden writers achieve a creative and fruitful liaison between words and nature. The garden writers I have in mind are not the professional landscape designers whose theories, ideas, and examples provide inspiration to garden-makers or the horticulturists and botanists whose works form the practical gardener's basic reference tools. Rather, they are the ones whose own gardens are usually in full view as they write.

This does not mean that there is not a great deal of important information and sound instruction being conveyed in this genre of garden writing – only that it is being delivered in informal, engaging, and sometimes droll literary prose. Typically, authors in this category write in the first person. This conversational style presumes a certain comradeship with the reader. Some come across as friendly tutors. Others create personae that make their words sound like neighbourly nattering, gardener to gardener. Then there is the shriller voice of the polemicist with decided views on the proper approach to making gardens. In addition, there

are the ruminations of the philosopher who finds the garden filled with metaphorical meaning.

I would say that all of the books of this genre are premised on passion. They constitute a love affair between the gardener and the garden. Although horticultural love affairs are often tumultuous (nature can be frustratingly fickle, and in dealing with weather, pests, and other adversities, some garden writers assume a comically beleaguered persona), the authors of these books are lovers of place, the space in nature the writer-gardener claims as home ground, an arena for individual creative expression. Naturally, the volumes we are about to discuss display varieties of tone, style, and intent. What unites them is their status as classics – books about gardens and gardening that we can read and reread simply for pleasure.

One could question the fact that, with the exception of Rousseau and Karel Čapek, a Czech, we are dealing here with anglophone writers. I believe that is so because the origin of this particular genre of garden literature is essentially a British innovation. Beginning with Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Lord Burlington*, which exhorts the garden-maker to 'consult the Genius of the Place in all', the primacy of the English garden as a particular style of landscape design was established. Its alliance with the rural countryside laid the foundation for the Picturesque, and with the rise of Romanticism as an international movement, the *jardin anglais* became a kind of national export. Further, it is reasonable to suggest that a preponderance of garden writing was British because of the simple fact that landscape gardening and literature are this island nation's two principal art forms. Therefore one finds

the garden serving as a setting in many English novels and providing the theme of many English poems.

As American gardening came of age in the nineteenth century, it was obviously to England that gardeners and landscape designers looked for advice, drawing on the works of J. C. Loudon and his wife Jane, proponents of the Gardenesque style, with its emphasis on horticultural display. Both Loudon and Andrew Jackson Downing, his American counterpart, edited gardening magazines as a means of communicating new botanical knowledge, garden-design theory, and horticultural information. As Gertrude Jekyll and other English garden-makers brought the genre of literature we are examining here to full flower at the turn of the twentieth century, it was natural that their American cousins would follow suit.

Differences in climate, history, and national ethos, however, account for divergent expressions between the two countries both in gardens and words. In Victorian England, sustained by a profession of trained head gardeners and their staffs, the Gardenesque style of specimen display enjoyed a longer period of fashion than in America. The subsequent Arts and Crafts movement helped foster a garden style that I like to think of as 'Englishness Cherished'. It is one where the mellow stone walls of ancient manor houses are married with seemingly casual floral compositions in which many of the plants once found in humble cottage gardens blend with rarer horticultural specimens. This is a place-specific kind of garden making. Estate-defined, it often enjoys a Picturesque alliance with the surrounding rural landscape, yet its fundamental design principle is one of enclosure. In

America, however, as might be expected in a land of continental dimensions in which notions of wilderness and scenic grandeur have traditionally challenged the national imagination, the designers of the nineteenth-century villas in the Hudson River Valley and the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Country Place Era houses in the Berkshires were able to incorporate into their garden landscapes views of the more awesome scenery associated with the Romantic Sublime.

The present volume is, as the title suggests, a ‘literary conversation’ for which I have provided the descriptive context for the voices of writers whose words appear along with mine. Garden writing flourishes today as vigorously as ever, and with so many wonderful books of this kind still being published, I do not feel that there should be an arbitrary cut-off date. Rather, I wish to set up a virtual colloquium that brings together garden writers from the end of the eighteenth century to the present.

Since even within a particular genre authors write from different perspectives and for diverse audiences, I have placed the garden writers we are about to meet within categories. There are those who write articles for magazines or columns for newspapers, which are sometimes collected and published in book form. These authors, along with the inveterate letter writers who thrive on horticultural fellowship with one another – often one and the same since garden columnists invariably receive mail from their readers – I call correspondents.

Other authors adopt the role of tutor, giving advice based on their own gardening experience and visits to other gardens. I have labelled them teachers. We also have here those whose

random enthusiasms or strong opinions sound like the congenial musing or lively harangue you might hear over drinks. I have classified these writers as conversationalists.

Irony is a great literary virtue, and the gardener's foibles in the face of indifferent nature are the stuff of comedy. We therefore have a category of humourists. Then there are writers for whom the garden provides metaphors for subjects beyond botany, horticulture, and landscape design. I think of them as philosophers.

We meet women who broke the barrier of the spade; spouses who cooperated or quarrelled; nurserymen who blurred the boundary between disinterested advice and business promotion; foragers who tell of their adventures digging plants for their gardens in the wild; warriors who filled their pens with vitriol in order to acidly disagree with one another; rhapsodists who never met a flower they didn't love tenderly; and travellers who write about the gardens of foreign lands. But, of course, teachers travel, travellers teach, philosophers can be humourous, humourists can philosophise, and so on. Therefore the reader should feel free to transpose these authors from one category to another as they see fit.

Transecting all our garden-writer categories are certain universal themes. Several of our authors tell us how their love of gardening sprang from a seed planted in childhood. The gardening mother or grandfather and the advantages of growing up surrounded by nature and horticulture were for them formative. These autobiographical fragments help round out our sense of their backgrounds, characters, and personalities, as well as their predilection for certain kinds of gardens.

Another theme that you will find sounded throughout is the importance of good soil. True gardeners always start in the most literal sense from the ground up. In their case ‘digging in the dirt’ is much more than a metaphor. Soil is the fundamental medium of their art, and their close attention to its quality is a leitmotif that runs throughout our present survey. For them nothing is sweeter than the smell of freshly turned soil. More than any herbal fragrance, this is the most intoxicating garden aroma of all. Rightly, they give fundamental importance to knowing the degree to which their soil is composed of clay, sand, and silt and what its chemical composition is. To garden successfully, you, like they, must calculate your horticultural possibilities in terms of which plants will thrive in what kinds of soil. Read carefully what they have to say about soil when you are still a gardening neophyte; you will be grateful that they felt compelled to pass on this valuable information.

As a corollary requirement, competent gardeners need to understand the climate of the region in which they garden and have a keen grasp of those plants that will thrive and those that cannot be planted at all. Related to this is a knowledge of the seasonal nature of gardening and which plants can be expected to appear to best advantage at various stages of the growing season. For this reason, you will note that many of the books under discussion have chapters titled according to the months of the year.

The Garden of Eden may have been the only garden not to have had aphids, scale insects, moth larvae, mealybugs, spider mites, cabbage worms, and a host of other unwelcome guests – including the slug, a slimy, shell-less mollusc. This

nocturnal predator can ravage foliage and kill plants faster than they can grow. The slug is a universal scourge, the bane of gardeners everywhere, and a subject discussed with unqualified repugnance and unbridled ire by several authors we encounter in these pages.

Sensory delight, on the other hand, emerges as a happier recurring theme. There is a physicality to gardening, and we should take note of the tactile satisfaction dedicated gardeners find in good, friable soil running through their fingers; their joy in the pungent aroma of rich compost or decaying autumn leaves on a woodland path; the bliss they derive from the smell of various flowers in bloom; the aesthetic enjoyment they receive from tree form, plant texture, and flower structure, as well as the colours of bark, leaf, and blossom; the nostalgia they experience in remembering the taste of honeysuckle nectar when they were children.

Curiosity is a long suit among the garden writers we are considering. They are readers and researchers avid for botanical lore, horticultural history, and the etymology of plant names. They are steeped in the works of ancient and Elizabethan herbalists – Dioscorides, Pliny, Gerard – as well as Linnaeus and other pioneering botanists and plant hunters in the Age of Enlightenment. Because of the fact that self-taught amateur gardeners like to seek and share information and ideas and are quite naturally readers of one another, a large literary commonwealth of garden writers has developed during the past two and a half centuries. This is a situation that is hospitable to a personal and individualistic form of writing that presumes, as we shall soon see, a certain friendly intimacy between author and reader.