English Pleasure Gardens
ROSE STANDISH NICHOLS
Introduction by JUDITH B. TANKARD

For gardeners, early spring means that the cruel months are over. We had our struggle with weed catalogs while the vegetative gods slumbered, and now we’re ready to dig. On mild days and raw, we steal hours to undress the flower beds, to dethatch the turf, to snip off branches and canes weakened by pitiless winter. In the evenings, many of us satisfy our garden lust with heavy volumes filled with titillating photos of landscapes at the peak of perfection.

Some readers, however, sated with the glossies, look to their gardening forebears for inspiration. Earlier writers, prominent among them Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson, seasoned their gardening instruction with moral philosophy and aesthetics; they rendered judgments on all manner of plant life with the placid certitude of a bygone age. A writer less familiar, the American Rose Standish Nichols, has recently joined the conversation, having been brought back into print with her English Pleasure Gardens, first published in 1902.

Nichols sets a formidable task for herself: to offer the reader English garden history (and commentary thereon) from the Roman period to the present, with digressions into Greece, Italy, France, the Far East, and the Americas. She certainly has the wherewithal to guide us through this thicket of information. Born in Boston in 1872, she was encouraged (according to the introduction by Judith B. Tankard) by her wealthy and artistic family to pursue her interest in landscape architecture; she studied horticulture at Harvard and MIT and with prominent English garden designers during her many trips abroad. Few of her designs are extant, though she was apparently much in demand, creating landscapes “loosely based on Elizabethan gardens” for the western elite. This volume testifies to her formidable scholarship and bold confidence in her powers of discrimination, and it belongs on the shelf with her English contemporaries.

Nichols assumes a more limited audience than most garden writers do now. She punctuates her historical descriptions with references in French and Middle English and feels no need to translate. She illustrates past civilizations’ agricultural practices with literary passages, taking for granted her readers’ familiarity with canonical works such as Le Roman de la rose. And in discussing “modern” (early 20th-century) gardens, she might surprise us when she says without irony:

“Tennis-courts, croquet-grounds, and bowling-greens are provided in connection with almost every modern garden, laid out within easy reach of the house. In planning these, seats are usually placed in positions convenient for watching the progress of the game.

Nonetheless, serious readers of garden literature should not be intimidated, as much delight can be had from an evening with this book. Some sections, particularly the early ones on ancient growing, can be pedantic; she seems determined to leave nothing out, and her prose can become as plodding as a list:

PEARMAIN and costard apples were probably also of French origin. Cherries had been reintroduced at the time of the Norman Conquest. Peaches, medlars, quinces, and chestnuts were commonly cultivated and imported from abroad.

But once research gives way to direct observation, Nichols’ descriptions become engaging and evocative, as in this of Newstead Abbey, once inhabited by Dominican friars, and much later by Lord Byron. To the beauty of the gardens, she says,

a weird charm is added by the recollections of the sacrilegious Byrons and their pious predecessors. Shades of the friars seem to flit in and out among the more substantial figures of the lame poet and his friends, whose favourite diversion was to masquerade in monkish raiment.

Nichols traces influence in the gardens she records, so her material unfolds chronologically. She doesn’t attempt to force a clipped neatness on her progression, as sprouts of former fashion tend to turn up in unlikely places. Her bias, clearly stated, favors the 16th- and early 17th-century flower gardens, and she has polite, though withering, scorn for the designs of Capability Brown and William Kent: “in the strict meaning of the word no garden at all, but a stretch of cultivated scenery.” Her own garden at Mastlands, in New Hampshire, derives its spirit and formal arrangement from Hampton Court.

The grand gardens open to all—Hampton Court, Versailles, Kew—supply her with examples, but she also brings us into notable private gardens where we, lacking her pedigree, might not be welcome. (Her introduction acknowledges, “Garden-owners everywhere have thrown open their gates with a hospitality which has not been unappreciated.”) In all, Nichols shows us how gardening history coheres and provides us with charming line illustrations of details not to be overlooked: “The Fore-Court Wall: Ham House” and “Wrought Iron Grille: Drayton.”

English Pleasure Gardens will teach no one the difference between a columbine and a cowslip, will not instruct on the proper depth for planting roses, will not suggest cunning layouts for suburban gardens. It will, however, bring the reader into compelling conversation with the past, with Rose Nichols serving as mediator. Acknowledging that she carries her world and her prejudices with her, we join her garden tour, hoping that she can teach us to be a bit less timid with our own small plots of land.

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