

The English Garden

A Social History

CHARLES QUEST-RITSON

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On the Making of Gardens

SIR GEORGE SITWELL

Introduction by SIR OSBERT SITWELL

Foreword by JOHN DIXON HUNT

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The *English Garden* is a rich book, both in form and content. Charles Quest-Ritson, author of several books on English gardens and editor of the Royal Horticultural Society's *Gardener's Yearbook* and *Garden Finder*, is a feisty, informative writer. He has a bone to pick with those he feels have commandeered gardening history, namely the art historians, and seeks to shift their emphasis on "stylistic minutiae" to an examination of gardening as an expression of the owner's aspirations and its association with wealth and status.

Given this focus, the spotlight falls brightest on the aristocracy and the ambitious classes, especially the newly landed gentry, courtiers and politicians anxious to make an impression. What could impress more than to present Queen Elizabeth I with cherries in winter, as Sir Francis Carew did on the occasion of the Queen's visit to his house in 1599? Or grow one's own pineapples when they otherwise had to be imported at great expense?

Before the Tudor period, gardens built for display were primarily a royal pastime. The impact of the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII not only provided building material for the houses of ambitious courtiers but also fueled the boom in making impressive formal gardens to go with them. The period was also known for the popularity of deer parks, or "open-air meat larders" in Quest-Ritson's phrase. The sweep and expanse of the park and its royal associations, not only appealed to those moving up in the world but also gave them a sense of control over the landscape.

By the end of the 17th century the English had become not only a nation of shopkeepers but also a nation of gardeners. The English were full of "meteorological patriotism," and England's perfect climate was seen as the appropriate accompaniment to the perfect English government and a budding empire. Samuel Pepys boasted "we have the best gravel walks in the world, France having none nor Italy; and the green of our bowling alleys is better than any they have."

The Age of Enlightenment and its focus on utility and scientific principles sought to make the sweep and expanse of the garden economically productive as well as pleasing to the eye. Agricultural functions were removed from view, by the planting of copses and hedges, which also eliminated from view "any land not under the control of the landowner." Quest-Ritson sees in this a political dimension that substituted the hierarchy and separation embodied in the formal garden with a unifying statement of efficiency and improvement symbolized by the landscape garden. This garden was not the throne of kings but an expression of English liberty. Yet such liberalism came at a

cost: the dispossession of local tenant farmers by enclosure and the disappearance of whole villages.

The establishment of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1801 inaugurated the age of plants and flowers, rather than of parks, landscaped lakes, and vistas. As the empire expanded, so did interest in exotic plants for English gardens. The Industrial Revolution brought England (and suburban lawns everywhere) the mowing machine, and Quest-Ritson makes a good case for its revolutionizing effects, particularly in rehabilitating grass as a material for use in gardens and making gardening more accessible to those unable to employ legions of gardeners on their modest estates.

One of the disturbing delights of reading Quest-Ritson is viewing great events, such as wars, from the garden. The two world wars not only killed many people but also destroyed the age of the great estate and grand garden. If everyone could grow cherries in winter or buy pineapples at the corner grocer, what was the point of maintaining an expensive greenhouse and attendant gardening staff in order to enjoy them in the delicious knowledge that such treats were denied the great unwashed? Though the age of the great gardens is past, the author shows that gardening as a form of social statement is alive and well: historical gardens have a new cachet because they are expensive to own and maintain, and the appeal of the homegrown (especially from heritage plants) over the store-bought has once again asserted itself. Within this chronological framework, Quest-Ritson also explores many topical developments, such as the emergence of plantsmen, nurseries, seed catalogs, garden literature, and gender and gardening. He includes lively sketches of the great names in gardening, including the Tradescants, Lancelot "Capability" Brown, William Robinson, and many others. The work is definitely intended for the British reader, but the American Anglophile can gain much from it. Having some knowledge of English history will help, as the author assumes a certain level of familiarity in that department and does not always explain events or persons (though the index is helpful here). The illustrations, many of them in color with informative captions, are worth the price of the book.

While not definitive, Quest-Ritson's book has certainly provided a synthesis that future historians in the field will have to reckon with. His breezy, no-nonsense style is generally engaging, and the reader will have no trouble figuring out where his prejudices lie, though one wishes at times for less condemnation and more interpretation. For example, rather than write dismissively about gardening manuals based on astrological and magical knowledge in the early modern period, it would have been more interesting for the author to discuss what these tell us about English society and gardens in the age before the new science gained currency. The shift from living in a world where magic ruled nature to one in which science prevailed over it is a seismic one and merits a more clear-eyed discussion.

If you find yourself longing for some aesthetic complement to the above, Sir George Sitwell's *On the Making of Gardens* is for you. The name Sitwell is a familiar one, and Sir George is the father of the well-known siblings Edith, Sacheverell, and Osbert. In this 1909 work, Sitwell mourns the passing of the

great formal gardens of the Italian Renaissance and attempts to describe the ways in which these Italian gardens cultivate the senses, how their designs work, and why we need them still. In particular, he rejects the “mock-natural” garden and the aesthetic disconnect it presents with the obviously artificial house it surrounds. Though he favors the formal garden, Sitwell also objects to formalism without soul. A formal garden should explore the delights of “the liberation of constraint,” entice the senses, seduce and refresh them. A truly great garden shows no mercy to those walking through it. This book teaches one how to look at formal gardens and incorporate what is best about them into one’s own little plot of ground.

Sitwell makes his case by careful description of gardens that work, and it is worth quoting one at some length. Here is a description of the enchantments of the Villa d’Este:

On the left, the garden looks down upon gray-green olives shot with silver in the sunlight, and upon a vine-clad pergola which clings like a spider’s web to undulating slope and dell. Deep drifts of withered leaves have gathered on the stairways, the fountain basins are overgrown with maidenhair or choked with water-weeds, the empty niches draped with velvety moss or tapestried creepers. Descending by weed-grown stair and crumbling balustrade, one reaches a gloomy alley where a hundred fountains gush into a trough beneath a line of mouldering reliefs. At the further end of the terrace, falling in great cascades like the folds of a Naiad’s robe or the flash of a silver sword, the river leaps into the garden, to four great pools of untroubled water, a jewelled belt which quivers in the sunlight with a mysterious, an amazing blue.

Why do gardens affect us so? Sitwell attempts to explain their appeal and find a scientific basis that draws on the work of William James and other eminent psychologists of the time. This leads him to muse on the national quality of gardens. Is landscape destiny? Are some simply blessed by living in a more beautiful setting? Here a strain of elitism raises questions for the reader. Can we all have that million-dollar view? One could argue, as Sitwell does, that beautiful gardens are a world treasure and should be available to all, but if everyone visits them, will they survive such adoration? On this point Sitwell is philosophical, seeing great gardens as evolving and decaying like great civilizations and finding beauty and delight in every stage, and he is at his most lyrical in contemplating the “weathering” of gardens and the rightness of such a process. As John Dixon Hunt notes in his foreword, Sitwell has something to say to us today about sustainability and allowing nature to both harmonize with and reclaim a garden. Taken together, *The English Garden* and *On the Making of Gardens* provide a many-layered view of why we garden and what a garden means. ■

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