

**RESEARCH ON THE PARADISE GARDENS AND ROMAN GARDEN,
TRADITIONS IN MODERN ART**

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***Abstract:** The two “schools” of gardening, into one of which almost every garden since the memory of man runlets not to the contrary, until the nineteenth century, could be placed, can be traced back to the two distinct originals of our western Christian civilization. Until fairly recently most people in the western world were brought up if not on, at least more or less in touch with, the Bible; consequently, for most western men, Eden was the garden. Granted that no such place ever existed outside Jewish mythology, yet since a myth stands for something in the mind and soul of man, the nature of Eden is significant. And Eden was, clearly, an “English” garden. This paradise was a natural garden of all manner of beautiful plants, a garden whose charm can only have depended on those plants, on the lie of the land, and the disposition of pleasant waters.*

Key words: *natural gardens, Roman gardens, Paradise gardens*

INTRODUCTION

Whoever conceived the myth conceived an ideal, something which nature unaided does not accomplish but which man perceives to be possible. God had scattered his best work about the world; he made a good effect here, contrived a lovely view there, so disposed land, water and trees in some corners that the mysterious demands of the aesthetic sense were satisfied; but what God had not done was to combine deliberately in a single masterwork all the triumphs of form and color of which his art was capable. Eden was a vision of such a masterwork conceived by a people who did not imagine that anything surpassing it was to be done by the introduction of man's own arts.

The Hellenic concept of a garden seems to be very different. The description of Laertes' garden in the Odyssey at once suggests the neat order of a French fruit-and-vegetable garden. Here, if anywhere, is the origin of the regularity and rectangularity of the 'Latin' garden. Now it has been very widely remarked by authors in many fields of literature that the English, in the development of their native Church, have shown a remarkable and perhaps unique sensibility to the feeling and ideas of the Old Testament people. The ideas and feelings of the ancient Israelites were never much to the taste of the Italians and French; the Christianity which appealed to them was neo-platonic, and was the New Testament as rendered into a kind of Hellenism. In England, possibly because of the unique quality of the English Bible, a far less impressive book in other European languages, the Jewish, as opposed to the Greek, kind of Christianity had a far greater influence. It is not enough to explain this by reference to the quality of the English Bible.

There is something in the English soul which rejoices in the works of nature, or as it would have been called until very recently, of God, more than in the works of man. Like W. S. Landor, Nature the English love, and after Nature, Art. The Greeks, and their spiritual heirs, never had any doubt that the setting for the good life is what man makes it; a house, a city, a garden which is itself a work of architecture. The English, like the Jews, have never been sure of this. For the English, the ideal remains to get back to the Garden of Eden, to Paradise.

Since I shall refer from time to time to the paradise' garden, if only because the words 'English garden' still convey to so many people outside Britain a certain type of eighteenth-century landscape garden, but also because it is the name I should like to attach to the exotically romantic garden which succeeded pure landscape, it may be as well to say a little more about what we have in mind here. Plate 112 is one of Edwin Smith's Bodnant photographs; and colour plate I he made in the Tresco Abbey gardens. The Bodnant picture was made in the part of that great garden which is called the Dell (see pp. 214-16); it is a small river valley with trees, shrubs and ground-plants such as are common enough in mountain and moorland country and such as nature-lovers rejoice in. But it is not 'natural', only 'after' nature, for it has been made over with exotic plant material, with trees and shrubs and groundlings from the Himalaya, the Andes, the Alps, and I know not where else.

The horticultural classicist will object that not even Rousseau should be mentioned; these gardens derive from a dream, no doubt, but a boyhood dream; they are out of Coral Islands or at best Robinson Crusoe. The fact is that the paradise-garden maker and the critic with his aesthetic rules can each say to the other what the unhelpful local said to the stranger asking his way: "By rights you oughtn't to be starting from here."

MATERIAL AND METHOD

As will appear, the romantic desire for a paradise garden is not the only influence at work: the English have always looked with half an eye towards the Mediterranean; and in some periods of their history, with both eyes. And it is out of the tension between the two principal influences already referred to, and from the traditions arising from them, that the design and detail of the best modern English gardens have come. The extreme case of the paradise garden should be Tresco Abbey, but excepting in certain of its points-of-view such as the one mentioned above, this is not the case. The vast range of exotic plants which flourish in the halcyon climate of that fortunate island have been used with imagination, but also with restraint, and what the Dorrien Smiths have planted is not an exotic wilderness. It is true that the romantic, the dream-like quality of that garden (see pp. 226-34) is remarkable: but it is owed to the detail of the picture, the exotic forms of the plants, and much less to design of the gardens, as should be apparent from plate 111: for that design is in the formal tradition, or very nearly so.

We have a remarkable case of the two traditions at odds in Stourhead (see pp. 47-55). As its maker finished it, this masterpiece was all in greens, browns and the blues and grey of sky and water. The planting, by a later owner, of rhododendrons where Hoare had grass or laurels, has changed the picture entirely during the flowering season. (This is discussed at greater length in its place; here we are using it only as a demonstration of principle.) Now it is a fact that Stourhead as Hoare made it was one of the masterpieces of European art, and for many who realized this introduction of flowering shrubs into the picture was an outrage.

For horticultural aesthetes it was as if the owner of a Rembrandt who disliked the darkness of the picture, took a palette of bright colours and a brush and proceeded to brighten it up a bit. This kind of change is always liable to happen to English gardens simply because the inheritors or purchasers of old gardens are themselves gardeners and work in the fashion of their time. Fortunately, Stourhead can now be seen as two rather different gardens: out of the May to July flowering season it is very much what it was in 1760; in spring, on the other hand, it is half-way to being a paradise garden. The monochrome pictures of the garden (plates 5,21, 24-3 5) give an impression of form and

design; plate 21 tells the story of the nineteenth-century transformation, or, if you like, outrage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

When it comes to compromise between schools of gardening, scale and degree become all-important to the final result. By the strict rules of picture gardening, as implied by garden-criticism rather than as written down by pundits, the *boscage* in the left middle-ground of plate 98, a photograph made at Sheffield Park in a brave attempt by Edwin Smith to illustrate this point, should, I suppose, be composed of a flowerless evergreen or perhaps of a golden or silver-leaved bush. But the scale of this magnificent place is such that the use of a flowering shrub enhances the effect aimed at; it reinforces the seasonal change in the prospect by helping the spring sun to raise the whole scene in brightness and slightly sharpen the middle distances, throwing the foliage-haze into notice. Such a device completely divorces the art of the garden from the art of painting; and rightly so, for nothing can alter the fact that the changing light of the seasons alters what one is looking at in a garden from day to day, and the skilful use of flowering shrubs and trees recognizes what, it seems to me, the great picture-gardeners tried to ignore, that the material of which a garden is made is alive and growing. The regard, in the eighteenth century, for a seventeenth-century school of landscape painting, set gardeners trying to do something impossible, to make an unchanging picture with living material. Possibly that may explain the mania, among their extremists, for planting dead trees.

At the other extreme is the Laburnum Arch at Bodnant in flowering time; and, in the same category, there was the famous Punch Bowl in the Saville gardens at Windsor which many readers will recall with pleasure or revulsion. In these cases the temptation to push to the extreme the effects which our great wealth of plant material makes possible has been yielded to entirely. The result is overwhelming, very spectacular; it is, even, vulgar if you like. The merits of vulgarity in the garden are discussed in a later chapter. The tremendous impact of colours obtained at Bodnant has the merit of experiment from which may emerge rules, as ephemeral as those of the past but none the less useful for the present. One rule emerges at once: the Punch Bowl, and to some extent the crowding of intense colour in and about the Laburnum Arch at Bodnant, prove quickly fatiguing; which is never the case of a garden like Stourhead.

Scale and degree: and Bodnant in another aspect again serves as a demonstration, where the planting of flowering shrubs into open woodland of fine trees with broad grass spaces - parkland, in short, is a case not of altering an old picture-garden but of setting about the creation of a paradise-garden in the first place. But the garden which was and in some respects still is the supreme example in that class is Nymans: it was in the nature of the man who created it, Colonel Messel, to love the English scene but to express a romantic (which does not exclude scientific) yearning for the exotic. In that he followed William Robinson (see pp. 129-31). At Nymans the most generous, but never extravagant, use is made of exotics, but flamboyance is avoided. The garden early had one of the most remarkable collections of plants from all over the world ever to be planted in one place, for it had the services of a very able, brave and successful plant-collector, Comber. As will appear in its place, the use of exotics there achieves an effect as powerful as romantic music. But it is not a garden in which one is overwhelmed, detail and scale are balanced, there are enough great trees, enough green, to absorb the colour.

CONCLUSIONS

The two divergent tendencies in English gardening were as it happened strengthened by economic influences. Civilization, and therefore gardening, was born in parts of the world where physical difficulties offered such a challenge to man that he was forced to be inventive in order to survive. The earliest civilizations of which we have any knowledge are irrigation and terracing cultures; they arose not where conditions for food production were easy but where they were very difficult. In the course of struggling to survive, the men of the Near East, who taught arts and laws to the rest of the Old World, learnt of necessity to impose order on the natural scene, to change it, to make it into something different. If civilization did not arise in these lands where soil was fertile, water plentiful, game abundant, it was because man is not willingly civilized; he is probably as happy as he is capable of being as a hunter-artist. The nature of the civilization which spread westward by way of Greece into western Europe was, so to speak, not really suitable to the terrain it invaded. Still, such was its radiant energy that it imposed itself. Thus when the English had reached a stage of advancement such that they could begin gardening, the art of gardening which they received from the East had been contrived by men with no notion at all of a nature as gentle, as friendly to man, as generous in yielding sustenance, as that of north-west Europe. Nothing is more striking, in such early gardening books as those of Barnaby Googe for example, than the way in which instructions for doing things quite impossible in our climate, and other things quite unnecessary, were uncritically translated into the English language.

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