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Improving the View of Georgian Estates?

There is, it seems, a war in heaven, or at the very least, a militant tendency. Into the celestial calm and self-satisfaction of the garden history world a group, which describes itself as the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, has infiltrated, and now makes its presence felt with a manifesto. This monograph is a confident report on the papers given at the society's York Conference of April 2003. Its originality lies in a disdain for famous garden designer's names and over-visited sites like Stourhead or Studley Royal. Instead, the emphasis in these papers is on economics, politics, land usage, field boundaries, and agribusiness generally, rather than the aesthetics of the designed landscape.

Tom Williamson of the University of East Anglia leads with a challenging introduction followed by eleven essays from thirteen other members. Six of these essays relate to England and Wales, two to Ireland, one to Virginia, and two to the Leeward Islands. Williamson was, until recently, my external examiner for the MA in garden history at Bristol so I must tread carefully, but I have long been a convert to his particular analysis of Capability Brown's parkscapes as a response to new sporting guns and well-sprung carriages rather than to Georgian aesthetics.

Williamson claims here that the true archaeological approach to estate landscapes uses a wide range of sources; but these he lists as 'documentary, archaeological and cartographic' (p. 1). Documents and maps are

entirely acceptable, we all use them; but what precisely are 'archaeological' sources? The dictionary definition of 'archaeology' is 'the scientific study of human antiquities.' My personal approach to a garden and its extension into the designed landscape of an estate is to walk it and then correlate what has been observed with archival records and maps; so where exactly has the 'archaeology' been missed out? The subsequent eleven essays should have the answers. Are spades and trowels involved?

They are in Charles Orser's 'Estate landscapes and the Cult of the Ruin,' the first of the Irish essays where the excavation of a lost cellar is used to prove that the ruin of Tanzyfort House was deliberately sighted to make it look like the remains of a feudal Tower House at the entrance to the Coopershill estate in County Sligo. At Dunster Castle in Somerset, Henry Fownes Luttrell was even more ingenious. David Dawson and Oliver Kent's investigation and repair of a structure in his park have revealed that he built and operated a pottery kiln to enliven his view with a plume of industrial smoke and a night-time glare, very much in the Romantic spirit of Joseph Wright of Derby's paintings of scientific and industrial processes. The kiln produced coarse red pottery, which can be inspected in the Somerset County Museum.

Thomas Jefferson, who served as minister to France before becoming president of America, was even more practical in his park buildings. Barbara Heath reports

that he built two finely finished octagonal brick privies and screened them partly from view with weeping willows and paper mulberries to serve as garden temples at Poplar Forest, his place of retirement in every sense.

Accounts of plantation estates on St. Kitts and Nevis in the Leeward Islands supply predictable evidence of capitalism as the villain in agribusiness. Because sugar plantations had to combine production with processing they made rapid technological advances: triple rollers in the presses in 1754, hydrometers to measure the syrup specific gravity in 1775, vacuum pans and centrifuges in 1813. Slave quarters were built to the west of the elegant Palladian planter's houses: "so we breathe the pure Eastern air, without being offended with the least nauseous smell" (p. 103). Nevis had been settled 1620-30 by the earl of Carlisle, hence the wealth that built Castle Howard. Maps prove that plantation divisions were drawn in ruler-straight lines at right angles from the coast up to the highest point in the island.

Not satisfied by Palladian planter's houses, the poet James Grainger wrote an island version of Virgil's "Georgics" entitled "The Sugar Cane," in which black slaves perform as Arcadian swains. His verse is like a preview of New Orleans blues culture:

"Where frolick goats

Butt the young Negroes, while their swarthy sires,

With ardent gladness wield the bill; and hark,

The crop is finish'd, how they rend the sky;" [1]

So all was officially sweetness and classical light on St. Kitts, not "nauseous smell." That was how the Age of Reason and the Howards glossed the slave trade—happy singing swains!

Sam Turner's essay is particularly revealing on field boundaries in southern England. A "Barton" field name indicates a manorial land-grab from one of the old common fields; so do straight, surveyed hedge lines, as opposed to the wavy hedge lines of older boundaries. Water meadows are restricted to the south and west as the flat lands and peaty soils of East Anglia did not favor their construction. Selfish landowners favored pastoral rather than arable farming as fewer laborers were required and that meant lower charges on the parish poor rates. It also meant unemployment and migration to industrial towns. This is all very moral and interesting.

So were eighteenth-century landscape improvements "making something better" or simply "making something more profitable"? That would, of course, depend upon aesthetics, the forbidden resort of garden historians like myself.

Note

[1]. James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane: A Poem in Four Books* (London: R and J Dodsley, 1764), 3, 534-537.

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