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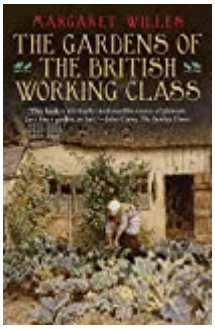
Micheline Nilsen. *The Working Man's Green Space: Allotment Gardens in England, France, and Germany, 1870-1919.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. xiv + 232 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3508-9; $39.50 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8139-3537-9.

Margaret Willes. *The Gardens of the British Working Class.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 416 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-18784-7; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-21235-8.



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Each of these books on European garden history contributes much to our understanding of how class and horticulture intersect and express each other. In welcome contrast to the preponderance of garden books that focus on the gardens of the great and the wealthy, the expert and the professional, Micheline Nilsen and Margaret Willes show us how gardening has formed a basis for community (both local and âimaginedâ), as well as provided a creative outlet for those whose gardens were never renowned, visited by garden tourists, or held up as models for other gardeners.

In *The Working Manâs Green Space: Allotment Gardens in England, France and Germany, 1870-1919*, Nilsen looks at European allotment gardening, bringing together perspectives from a number of different disciplines, notably landscape studies, social history, sociology, geography, and anthropology. Her goal, which she ably achieves, is to go beyond the usual, nation-bound examination of allotments to find commonalities in the ways âsmall-scale produce gardening became a significant cultural phenomenonâ (p. 5). This phenomenon thrived because it not only embraced the growing of fresh food but also provided outlets for family recreation, aesthetic expression, conviviality, and even political engagement.

The author takes us on a comparative and historical field trip. Since the early nineteenth century, allotments have been critically important to the well-being of European town and city dwellers, as well as a section of the rural population. They remain so today, although, arguably, their class component has changed somewhat (allotment gardeners today include a substantial middle-class contingent). Nilsen compares the experiences and contexts of allotment users in three European countries: England, France, and Germany. She deals with how allotments originated in part as supplements to poor relief, and vital green spaces, though these were always vulnerable to competing demands for land use and capitalist

development. But she never loses sight of what allotment spaces have meant for those who cultivated them.

The history of allotments is complex, but in all cases, they emerged as explicitly noncommercial uses of land. That is, allotment holders were and are expected to use their spaces to produce for household consumption, rather than for monetary profit. They were also generally obligated to grow food, rather than flowers, though that line has almost always been blurred, and flowers are often planted around the edges and even interspersed with vegetables.

Nilsenâs account is made all the more interesting because she embeds national allotment histories in social philosophyâsocialist, utopian, and aestheticâand in explicitly paternalistic, reformist agendas that included sobriety, hygiene, and the training of a docile citizenry. States had an interest in allotment access, which was reflected in political debates over provisioning for the poor, particularly in times of agricultural depression. But nothing spurred the stateâs interest in allotments like war, when self-sufficiency in food became a national priority. For the island nation of Britain, in particular, threats to food imports weighed heavily on politicians and citizenry alike. Nilsen moves skillfully back and forth between national-level discourses and more local practices, showing how activist groups, unions, local committees, and councils worked together to promote allotments as part of the national way of life.

Similar concerns for social stability and a hygienic way of life animated the German allotment movement. There, gardens were provided by employers, municipalities, and even such groups as the Red Cross. Nilsen stresses the emphasis on strict governance and adherence to rules about what to grow and how to grow it. Gardener education and assistance were widely available. In Germany as well as in Britain, allotments provided a sense of security during and after the First World War. They were also seen as therapeutic. As Nilsen notes, âGardens restored a sense of personal agency in a time of helplessness and contributed to making life tolerableâ (p. 93). Finally, following the war, gardens were linked to land reform. Allotment associations successfully demanded that more land be provided, that rents be managed and monitored, and that some degree of security in allotment tenure be guaranteed.

Workersâ gardens in France, the *jardins ouvriers*, Nilsen tells us, emerged later than their counterparts in Germany and Britain and owed a great debt to initiatives from the Catholic Church and particularly to a few individual clerics who made it their lifeâs work to see that working people had access to a bit of land. Here, also, the First World War proved a compelling stimulus. I was somewhat amused to read that gardening journals deplored the necessary ââtemporary regression of civilizationâ that would be caused by the cultivation of vegetables instead of flowers in public parksâ (p. 117).

Nilsenâs penultimate chapter is devoted to the question of allotment aesthetics. Since her work is historical, not ethnographic, she laments the fact that âwe do not have ample evidence about how allotment gardeners thought or felt about their gardens,â and by evidence she means words (p. 127). But she points to another way of perceiving these thoughts and feelings: the gardens themselves. It is here that gardenersâ agencyâas people who decide what to plant and how to arrange the plantings, as well as the sheds and small shelters that many erectedâcan be seen. She references John Dixon Huntâs argument for reception theory in thinking about âvernacular gardensâ but indicates that visitorsâ accounts of these gardens are often strongly biased by class snobbery (p. 128). So, how to make up for what she calls the âelusivenessâ of gardenersâ voices?

If I have a criticism here, it lies in the truncated discussions begun but insufficiently developed in this chapter. A section called âThe Allotment Landscape,â for example, is a mere paragraph. And Nilsen skates over the aesthetic question when she says that âallotments were imprinted by elite expectationsâ (p. 147). As the next book that I discuss here makes clear, there was a lot of mutual imprintingâfrom the elite to the workers and back againâthat confounds neat, class-based stories of what allotment gardens, as well as other types of working-class horticulture, could mean and say.

Over the years, I have lost count of how many books on English gardening I have read. But not until reading Willesâs *The Gardens of the British Working Class* have I encountered a book that puts so much together in such a nuanced and holistic way. Willesâs book is excellent social history, and any student of British (it must be said, primarily of English) society, whether horticulturally inclined or not, will benefit from reading it. That said, be prepared for a densely packed experience. To say that Willesâs approach is exhaustive is to understate the case.

One of Willesâs great contributions is to disabuse the reader of any notion that the utilitarian and the decorative can be disentangled. While we often see these two tasksâgrowing the edible and growing the ornamentalâas serving very different purposes, she tells us, in fact, that

in the garden, the useful and the beautiful (paraphrasing William Morris) have always been conjoined. And this becomes a very important point for two reasons: it corrects the view that the working poor have experienced only oppression and have had little chance to express themselves aesthetically or to take pleasure in the landâin other words, it grants them agency; and it also contradicts the commonly held view that working-class gardens were solely dedicated to food.

Willesâs historical scope is wide, though her national scope, in contrast to Nilsen, is narrower. She opens her book in the sixteenth century and closes in the twenty-first. She argues that proletarian green spaces deserve close study and that they must be understood as the products of complex historical and social forces. Whether cottage gardens or allotments, narrow backyard spaces or even a windowsill, the gardens of the poor grew amid changing claims about property and agricultural policy as well as notions of morality and governance. The upper classes saw allotments, for example, as a way to keep working men out of the alehouse and a means of pacifying social unrest. Gardeners of all classes were also influenced by planting fads, flower societies, and garden writing. Increasingly, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, working people visited the gardens of the landed gentry, strolled with their families through municipal parks, and attended flower shows.

But the poor had their own ideas about what they wanted to grow. Food, though essential to life, was not their only passion. Flowers often became objects of intense interest. Willes takes us through early examples of competitive flower growing that long antedate the horticulturally hegemonic, big shows like Chelsea and Hampton Court. Specialist groups devoted to individual flowers, such as chrysanthemums or roses (and many others), burgeoned in the nineteenth century and their memberships were often solidly working class. Willes recounts the extraordinary efforts that people undertook to grow perfect blooms under very difficult conditions. Beset by urban smog, crowded into ill-lit and worse-ventilated tenements, living on the edge of penury, men and women devotedly tended plants grown on windowsills in bits of broken crockery if no other space was available. Flower shows grew apace, as did the newspaper columns and periodicals devoted to recording them.

Willes organizes her account both chronologically and topically, embedding subjects like homes, gardens, and changing fashions in flower preferences within dense layers of social and regional context. Indeed, this book could stand as a social historianâs response to Clifford Geertzâs call for âthick description.â[1] Each chapter contains rich and varied detail. Chapters 1 and 2 take us from early techniques of plant husbandry, to healing (or physic) and early market gardens. Chapter 3 looks at the origins of Englandâs professional gardeners (though, as she notes, many of these were in fact Scottish), while chapter 4 describes how flowers became both objects of desire and devices to enhance social status through competition. In this context, flower growing and showing become âdeep play,â indeed.

In chapter 5, which Willes, borrowing from Benjamin Disraeliâs novel of 1845 about the schism between rich and poor, calls âTwo Nations,â she engages with Britainâs eighteenth- and nineteenth-century experiment in model or planned villages. These settlements, often laid out by benevolent or at least paternalistic landlords with high social ideals, embraced the garden as an instrument both for material welfare and for moral reform. Each cottageâeven those for industrial workersâhad to have its designated garden space. Not surprisingly, a rapid growth in horticultural societies also took off at this time, with working-class people joining together to purchase subscriptions to garden periodicals. Some occupational communities became particularly engaged in gardening. Miners, for example, became well known for their deeply competitive horticultural commitments. (Anyone who wants to understand the northern English passion for giant vegetables would do well to watch the film *Wallace and Grommit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* [2005].) Willes does not neglect the influence of land-based social movements, such as those of the Diggers and later the Chartists and others who founded colonies upon the principle of working-class self-sufficiency, for which gardens were critical.

She addresses the vexed issue of garden taste, though here her contribution is perhaps less striking. Much has already been written about the Victorian landed gentryâs mania for using annual flowers (usually tropically sourced exotics grown in hothouses) as elements in complex designs, often called âcarpet bedding.â Upper- and middle-class gardeners came to revile carpet bedding by the early twentieth century, but it has survived to this day in the gardens of the working class, as well as in many municipal parks and corporate landscapes.

Willes is strongest in her use of sources, her comprehensive approach, and her ability to make connections among a wide variety of horticultural processes and events. She is excellent as a context setter. Where she

is less strong, perhaps, is when she ventures onto more theoretical ground toward the end of her book. There, she briefly discusses how people self-identify by class and what that might mean for âthe future of gardening by ordinary peopleâ (p. 369). She follows that question with a short epilogue that muses on the current demand for allotment space and on the dearth of trained horticultural professionals. Somehow, this seems rather anticlimactic for a book whose breadth of vision, particularly with respect to the earlier centuries, is very impressive, indeed.

Together, these books add considerably to our understanding of the ways in which gardening permeates European society at all levels, not just the landscapes of the elite. Students of culture, as well as students of horticulture, can learn much here about gardens as sites of human activity, intention, and relationships of power.

Note

[1]. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), chap. 1.