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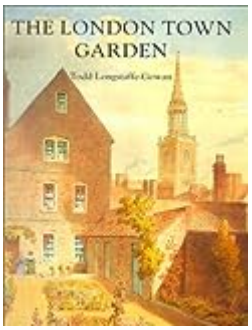

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. *The London Town Garden, 1700-1840.* The Paul Mellon Centre New Studies in British Art. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. xiii + 289 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08538-9.

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This justly-praised exploration of the difficult subject of London town gardens in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries represents a triumph of research and ingenuity working in an area so slenderly-documented as to be hitherto almost invisible. This well-illustrated and handsomely-produced book (the finding of the illustrations represents almost as much of a triumph of investigation as does the text) has very considerable claims to make as a serious piece of historical research (as well as a very able and judicious study in the history of taste) touching on many areas of social and cultural history.

This being said, it must be allowed at once that the surviving materials are very slender indeed and there are areas of London gardening activity in the area broadly covered by the book which are, I suspect, barely documented at all. While the research for this book stops short of the kind of life-sentence which would be represented by combing of obscure novels for an adventitious description of a town garden or the reading of unindexed law-reports for a possible record of an "encroaching" or squatter garden, it still manages to cover a remarkable range of printed and manuscript sources. In addition the careful attention to the details of larger maps and topographical engravings results in one of the most beguilingly-illustrated books to have appeared for a long time. I think there can be hardly any historian, architectural historian, or amateur of London who will not find a new and striking visual image, a new visual perspective on the City and its history. George Scharf's 1825 watercolour of small terrace houses at Woolwich on a summer morning, with the potted plants put out on the window-sills, is perhaps the most charming of many visual discoveries. Scharf's series of quotidian views of backs of houses and studies of the neighbors across the street and the pot plants on their balcony is discovery of real interest. I would have liked to know more about the artist and whether his meticulous depiction of the everyday is related to the continental *Biedermeyer* tradition of recording the middle-class environment.

The very fact that the author has had to perform such prodigies of research to assemble the record in this book is in itself an important historical datum about London and about the way in which its society perceived itself over the years. What is notable by contrast with contemporary depictions of the cities of continental Europe is that neither domestic pleasure nor civic pride have produced the kinds of visual documentation which would have rendered the author's task considerably easier. But there are neither the meticulous and prodigiously detailed Dutch town prospects, so detailed as to the appearance of merchant's gardens that virtually whole streets

of (for example) Middelburg could re-create authentic late-seventeenth century gardens from one visual source. Neither did London apparently produce the loving amateur depiction of family gardens either as objects of interest in their own right, or as the setting of bourgeois conversation pieces. London's gardens seem taken for granted in the same ways that the seventeenth-century Londoner took for granted the cheap painted hangings on the walls of their houses, so almost no conscious attempt has been made to document the appearance of these small gardens. Few London scenes in novels seem to take place in private gardens, again perhaps expressing the attitude of the more prosperous inhabitants of the city. This lack of interest is physically expressed by the comparatively small provision of garden ground made even for London houses of some pretension (and the provision of virtually no garden-ground in the Georgian spa-towns of England). In short, gardens appear to have been considered no particular asset in the period covered by this book, and the author's achievement in marshalling information deserves even more credit in the light of that attitude. To add my own footnote to the social history of the London garden, when I attempted to lay out a garden just south of the Euston Road in the early nineteen-eighties, just as the first "gentrification" of the inner-city was taking place, there was almost nowhere in Central London where any plant material could be bought, except for the neighbourhood ironmonger (hardware shop), which sold a very little window-box bedding. The last twenty years have seen something of a revolution: perhaps for the first time now London gardens are seen as an essential asset to a housing stock gentrified to the last degree. Today, looking out of the back window of a Regency villa in a prosperous residential area, there is no garden now visible which has *not* in some degree been re-designed professionally and at considerable expense in the last decade.

Given the scant evidence available, this book manages a remarkably detailed account of the subject: the omissions are few and hardly vital. The only one to bewilder me was the absence of any reference to the pleasure Gardens which were such a feature of eighteenth-century London life. Again there may simply be no adequate documentation, but, since the upper bourgeoisie of London were only intermittently using the garden-ground attached to their own houses, and since all early attempts to keep the central gardens of the residential squares as the exclusive province of residents seem to have been attended by considerable difficulties (splendidly documented here), the pleasure-gardens must have played some part in the experience of Georgian Londoners.

That is a very minor reservation in the light of the triumphant recovery of illustration and information in almost every other part of the subject. The range of this book is remarkable: there are chapters on the garden as it appears in the town plan; on the garden provision for the "first-rate" to "fourth-rate" houses of the speculative builders who were building on what had been until surprisingly late in the eighteenth century the farmland which began on, or within, the boundaries today defined by the circle of London's terminal railway stations. (This interpenetration of town and country is very well documented and illustrated: today only in Bristol of all English towns can one recover this juxtaposition of Georgian residential development with rural views.) The third chapter on Garden theory attempts to derive a theory of urban gardening from the few books published on the layout and stocking of a town garden: this is obviously of considerable interest but (as so often) the very word "theory" serves to confuse rather than clarify what were on the whole a set of pragmatic suggestions, pragmatically followed. [To clarify: the Giardini Buonaccorsi near Macerata in Italy preserve a somewhat counter-cultural garden layout which focuses on flowers rather than on the classic evergreens and statuary of the Italian garden. This layout, which can be seen to be derived from a complex work on the ideal layout of the garden and on the symbolic weight of such a layout (Ferrara's *De Florum Cultura*), is clearly a case of theory and theory being applied. I am not quite convinced that theory is the right word for the "how-to" books of Georgian London.]

The fourth chapter is a masterly study of the use of different elements of the garden's visual repertoire, with a focus on the garden–plans prepared by the informed amateur Joseph Spence. The detailed interpretation of these few sketch-plans is in itself a triumph of patient research. Chapter five is a detailed study of one man's garden: that of the antiquary Francis Douce, whose garden in Bloomsbury was formed with the encouragement and advice of his enthusiastic friend Richard Twiss. Chapters on the gardeners and on greenhouse gardening follow, together with a remarkable chapter on the commercial and social phenomenon of plant-displays hired by the affluent for a particular ball or entertainment. The book ends with the detailed chapter on the garden squares, mentioned above and with some consideration of the contrived "rus in urbe" of Nash's planned "villages" within the Regent's Park development.

In summary this is not only a highly enjoyable work documenting a forgotten aspect of the texture of quotidian London life, but is also a triumph of dedicated and imaginative research.

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