A Little History of British Gardening

JENNY UGLOW

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Don't be misled by her blushing title: Jenny Uglow's new book is not little, nor does it confine itself to British gardening. It is, however, surely history. Uglow's discussion unfolds in time, pays heed to the great and the humble, examines cause and effect, and attempts (with both modesty and assurance) to construe meaning from growing things. I think I will give *A Little History of British Gardening* to all my nongardening friends, who cannot understand how a clutch of blooms bought at the market fails to satisfy. From Uglow, they will learn how gardening produces more than food and flowers; how it coheres with the history of art and architecture, culture and manners, politics and war; and how it can make their children better behaved.

Little History opens with the question "Did the Romans have rakes?" and Uglow's response establishes the engaging tone she applies throughout: "Well, yes—and they grew turnips." Like the most-read historians of her generation, Uglow brings the reader into her process, so we delight in her discoveries. We are patient as she gets us through her research on the lean years of the Celts, the Romans, the Saxons (who left meager relics for gardening historians), and moves us into periods more fruitful.

In her early chapters, grouped under the rubric "Seed" (later chapters sort out under "Leaf," "Flower," and "Fruit"), Uglow confirms her authority, providing a chronicle of the evolving ways in which land was cultivated for food and pleasure. Her details compel the reader's attention, as we sense her joy in small new clarities. She reveals, for example, the origins of the word *lawn*:

> *The first use ... from the French* laund, *an open space among woods—comes from the thirteenth century, applied to the smooth green of the cloisters, a place of peace and contemplation.*

But this is history, and Uglow's engaging fragments serve a larger narrative. Her use of the term *gardening* expands to admit all manner of agricultural endeavor, and she convinces us of its place at the center of British history and myth. For people of rank and means, gardens supplied their kitchens, decorated their lives, and inspired their literature. Indeed, by the early modern period, gardening provided such an essential trope that Shakespeare's plays are plump with images of planting and blooming and decay. The Tudors, Uglow tells us, conceived of their "gardens as if they were a form of self-expression, displaying not merely their owners' wealth, but also their reason and imagination" and she describes the mounds and arbors, topiary and mazes that punctuate the gardens of the gentry.

But gardening was never just an aesthetic dalliance; peasants and townsfolk worked their plots for food and medicinal herbs. "Up and down the country," Uglow reminds us, "ordinary people got on with their gardening, simply as part of their daily routine." Gardening and cookery books appeared, along with new plants and vegetables.

> *Summer salads—with violets and cowslips as well as green herbs and leaves—grew in popularity: in 1699 John Evelyn, like a foodie of today, wrote a whole "Discourse on Sallets," even laying down the right way to toss them.*

The issue of landownership raises primal responses, and Uglow shows how they play out politically. During the Civil War, for example, a group known as the Diggers "took over common land on St. George's Hill in Surrey, sowing it with parsnips, carrots and beans," asserting that "God made the earth for all and that private property came after the Fall." Throughout British history, the enclosure of public land has incited opposition, outrage, riot, and legislation, and Uglow follows that struggle keenly.

When she moves into the 18th century, with its obsession with the "natural," her narrative shows us why Peter Ackroyd has called her "the most perfect historian imaginable." She wends her way through the complex thicket of cultural, aesthetic, and political mores with the ease of the well traveled. She can speak of Kent and Hogarth and Garrick with gossipy familiarity (she suggests, for example, that "gardens were a refuge and often a kind of code for men who had secrets, sexual or political or both") because she knows them and their world up and down.

If the period was confused about nature, Uglow is altogether clearheaded: "The supposedly natural gardens of the early eighteenth century were as full of conceits and elliptical codes as the elaborate gardens of the Stuarts." Conversations about taste abounded, especially among "the young, well-heeled metropolitan wags" who mocked the pretentious gardening clichés of the day. "Capability" Brown's landscape improvements, the "large-scale overhauling of nature" in the service of the "natural," held the popular imagination long enough to effect the destruction of many old gardens, but by the end of the century his "bare landscapes failed to satisfy the new mood of 'sensibility.' " The highly theatrical Picturesque garden, beholden to Romantic yearnings for the long ago and faraway, held sway for a bit, but the Victorians found it too contrived, not quite "natural."

Self-improvers, the Victorians collected new species to fill their vivid carpet beds, which appeared not only in private gardens but in public parks and gardens as well. Scientists undertook serious botanical research; plant collecting and propagation became a popular avocation; horticultural clubs and societies proliferated; and gardening was seen as "a cure for depression, political agitation, drunkenness and ambition."

If Uglow spends much time with Victorian and Edwardian gardeners, perhaps it is because, on both sides of the Atlantic, they are our true forbears. Even today, serious gardeners look to William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll for considerations of form and color, and many of us can remember mid-20th-century gardens of our grandparents, wholly uninfluenced by the modernist trends that Uglow describes with polite disdain.

In her "Epilogue," Uglow admits that "there has never been a book so hard to finish as this, because gardening does not end." But she does end shortly thereafter, and I must take my cue from her, though I've marked many sections of this splendid history that are yet unsung. (By the way, the chapter entitled "The cherry tree" will convince all readers to make gardeners of their children.) ■

REVIEWER: **Nancy J. D. Hazelton** teaches an honors Shakespeare seminar at SUNY Rockland.