

Jill Francis, *Gardens and Gardening in Early Modern England and Wales*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

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GARDENS AND GARDENING

IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND AND WALES

Jill Francis



Of all the different sorts of historians, I believe a garden historian may have the most difficult research field. By and large, gardens older than, let's say, 200 years are no longer present in their original form. As philosopher and art historian Mara Miller writes in her book *The Garden as an Art* (1993) "[...] a garden extends not only in space but in time. The garden demonstrates not only power to control a part of the world but a peculiar sort of confidence because it indicates an expected continuation of that power in the future." (MILLER 1993: 56) This continuation in the future,

however, has its limits as plant materials die and garden fashions change. Our subject matter can die, perish, wither, be replaced, neglected, cut down, uprooted, eaten, swept away by storms, and completely redesigned and replanted by other generations. Gardens, in short, are time-based constructions.

To research the design, use, and practices of sixteenth and seventeenth century gardens, as garden historian Jill Francis did for her dissertation (2011, with the title: "A ffit place for any Gentleman") and her subsequent book *Gardens and Gardening in Early Modern England and Wales*, one has to study gardens on paper. Gardens and garden practices can be traced in published botanical books, herbals, and florilegia, equally in manuscripts, notebooks, account books, letters, drawings, paintings, plant lists, advertisements, and proclamations. Occasionally there are traces of the perished garden visible in the landscape. Good finds are, for example, correspondence between owner and gardener, annotated manuscripts and books, drawings, maps, official documents, reports, and patents. By examining these sorts of sources, a historian can distil what a certain garden in a certain period could have looked like, for instance identifying what was grown, shape, ornamentation, utility, garden networks, etc. Moreover, a historian can use these sources to say something about, for instance, garden design (a wealth of publications can be listed, but here are a few: GLACKEN 1967; DE JONG 1995; PREST 1988; DIXON HUNT 1988; 1992; WIJNANDS 1988; HANSMANN 2009), philosophy and mathematics (SZAFRANSKA 1989; WERRETT 2001; REMMERT 2004; LAUTERBACH 2004), natural history (JARDINE et al 2000; FISCHER, REMMERT, WOLSCHKE-BULMAHN 2016), technology (FLEISCHER 2016), land surveying (LORIFERNE 1987; BOUDON 1991), local and exotic botany (HOBHOUSE 1994; SCHIEBINGER & SWAN 2005; COOPER 2007), trade (FINDLEN & SMITH 2002; COOK 2007), dominion (MUKERJI 1997; 2002), or the circulation of knowledge and practices (DRAYTON 2005; FLEISCHER 2007; BALDASSARRI & MATEI 2017).

For her book, filled with loads of beautiful and supporting images, Jill Francis has uprooted a bundle of precious manuscripts and annotated publications on gardens and gardening in England and Wales. The theme of her book and thesis involves the practice of gardening and the change in garden style in the period 1560-1660 in England and Wales. By focussing on gardens of the gentry rather than royal gardens, she wants to uncover what happened in the country garden, with real gardeners doing actual gardening work. Courtly gardens, she argues, are hardly representative of what went on elsewhere in the realm. By digging into various sources, she tries to reveal what gardeners were doing between 1560-1660. The end-year of 1660 coincides with the foundation of the Royal Society and restoration of the kingdom. The author wants to know what happened before that, and therefore she starts in the late Elizabethan times and via the turmoil of the Civil War, ending at the beginning of the Restoration.

For her research, Francis deliberately concentrates on “original sources from the time in question” in order “to attempt to view gardens as contemporaries did, unimpeded by fanciful notions of what we imagine they might have looked like.” Furthermore, she says, a garden historian should not rely “on subsequent interpretations which often simply perpetuate errors, myths and traditions in a way that they eventually become transmuted into fact”. By closely reading letters, diaries, notebooks, account books, manuscript-herbals, and annotated books, she reaches new insights on what early modern gentlemen’s gardens could have looked like, how gardeners managed their gardens and garden network, and how gardens in 100 years shifted in meaning and design, namely from a garden of profit and necessity to a garden for pleasure and splendour (<https://yale-booksblog.co.uk/2018/05/22/gardens-and-gardening-by-jill-francis/> accessed 19 August 2019).

A real find is the unexplored archives of Sir Thomas Temple at the Huntington Library in Pasadena. It includes a correspondence with his estate steward, Harry Rose, on the dealings and designs of Temple’s garden at Burton Dassett in Warwickshire. The letters talk

about vegetation, how to sow and grow these, about fertilization and propagation, general maintenance, and about reshaping and fencing the garden. Other sources for Francis’s book are the written materials of Sir John Oglander, Sir Thomas Hanmer, and clergyman William Lawson. The author frequently turns to the work of apothecary John Parkinson, as well. In 1629, Parkinson published *Paradisi in Sole, Paradisus Terrestris: or, A Garden of all Sorts of Pleasant Flowers* (1629) of which there are two annotated copies with additional information. The apothecary is a gardener himself, which he clearly shows by talking from experience. Besides these men, Francis uses writing from ‘the usual suspects’, i.e. father and son Tradescant and John Evelyn.

Francis’s main argument is to trail the change in country garden designs and the gardening work done by various garden hands. She concludes between 1560-1660 common gardens underwent a shift in use and appearance. Gardens turned from beneficial and healthy locations where edible, medicinal, and agricultural plants were grown, to sites for delight and display, with beautiful ornaments and costly “outlandish” vegetation. This shift in gardening affected the layout of a garden, from a square shape with practical rectangular sections filled with useful plants and indigenous fragrant flowers into a design with walks, alleys, mountains, and a parlour garden with exotic flora and fruits. Over the decades, the gentleman gardener overcame the initial hesitance and restraint regarding spending too much money on gardening. After the Cromwellian regime, certain gardeners returned from the Continent and brought with them a taste for the exotic. A new era dawned, whereby a gardener would easily splash his cash in order to procure foreign bulbs, seeds, and cuttings in order to create a new garden style.

What attracted me to read and review this book is the focus on the rural country gardener and gardens. We know so little about the actual garden work; what was planted where in the garden, who did what, and how was a garden appreciated? What did the country gentleman aspire to in his garden? Who were these skilled and mindful nameless garden workers? What

was the precise relationship between garden owner and gardener regarding knowledge and practices?

The author attempts to get as close as possible to this illusive group and garden designs via her archival material, but also for her, it is hard to get a good grip on the matter. This makes the book very rich in substance and detailed in descriptions. Sadly, this gets in the way of the focus of overall argument on what took place in early modern gardens. There is so much Francis wants to convey from all her found archival material, and she presents us with loads of original and detailed information. A book with so much original material and insights deserves better editing.

For instance, there are two chapters dealing with flowers and plants. It could have worked were it better connected; the chapter on the knot garden is very interesting, but what it does for the overall argument is not clear. In her dissertation the knot garden chapter was presented as an appendix, and it still feels this way. Moreover, she spends the first two chapters on mapping out the “intellectual background” before going into the next two chapters on practice, to find out what actually goes on in a garden. The separation of theory from practice I consider problematic. Today’s historiography has shown practice and theory are intertwined (see ROBERTS, SCHAFFER, DEAR 2007). Francis could have woven her two chapters on “theory” with the subsequent two chapters on “practice” and made a tighter case on how new insights and materials came about in the Late Elizabethan and Cromwellian eras.

The author goes back and forth to the various actors to address the different topics using the same quotations. For instance, Oglander’s quotation on what fruits he had planted in his garden with his own hands appears on page 95 (about the layout of Oglander’s garden at Nunwell House) and again on page 144 (regarding the act of planting). There is so much unique material at hand that it is a nightmare for any historian to root out wonderful details, such as the lovely detail of a vine clipping from Shakespeare’s garden, if it does not help the story. Having said that, I know it is very difficult to

“kill your darlings”, but it would have benefitted her overall argument and the readability of the book.

Francis brings forth that gardeners tinkered with foreign plants, transported to England via the Continent or directly from distant lands. The English gardener tried to find methods to keep costly and delicate plants alive in their gardens by creating stoves, lighting fires, and building hothouses. Gardeners, by experimenting with various ways to shield a plant from the cold, advised others that a plant not only needed warmth but that air and light were just as crucial. She presents the development of stoves and hothouses in England by following the advice provided by gardeners such as Parkinson and Hanmer. Other historians have delved into the history of stoves and hothouses in France and Holland, showing that in the 16th century both Bernard Palissy and Olivier de Serre were tinkering with the creation of glasshouses, together with Dutch garden owners (BEZEMER-SELLERS 1990; MUKERJI 1999; SIK-KENS-DE ZWAAN 2002). Presented in this manner, it seems hothouses were solely an English invention, whereas this development simultaneously took place throughout Europe.

Francis, by staying close to her archival material, comes to some interesting conclusions. She uncovers how the appropriation and adaptation of knowledge and practices in English gardens took place; she maps out a vast gardener network and how gardeners were tinkering with materials and inventions, like the invention of the hothouse. However, she presents her findings without connecting to today’s historiography regarding networks, or the circulation of knowledge, materials, and practices, or intertwined relationship between mind/theory and hand/practice. Had she rooted her views in the soil of recent publications in the fields of the history of science and sociology, her arguments would have been stronger. The way she has presented her material makes the book stand-alone like an island. It is filled with archival findings and insights, but it lacks engagement with other historians and their viewpoints. Therefore, she does not fully bring home her conclusions, which would have made her thesis stronger *and*

connected to today's historiography.¹

The focus on country gardens and their gardeners is what attracts me to Francis's book. The author's research into the people who were doing the actual digging and planting, men and women who saw their plants do well, or not, and the quiet but consistent pace in which gardens, desires and styles changed in the course of 100 years is very thorough. It is a joy to know there is so much original material out there, and I can imagine Francis's main characters, over time, have become her friends. This book invites us to take a good look at what happens in rural communities and in ordinary gardens, as well as examine the elusive work done by gardeners. *Gardens and Gardening in Early Modern England and Wales* opens the gate to further archival research into common gardens and its gardeners.

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¹ Publications such as the book by the French sociologist LATOUR, Bruno (1987) *Science in Action; How to follow scientists and engineers through society*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, or the edited book by ROBERTS, Lissa (2011), *Centres and cycles of accumulation in and around the Netherlands during the early modern period*, Munster: LIT Verlag. These books discuss the appropriation and circulation of knowledge, materials, and practices, and how these were adapted to meet local requirements.

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