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Social Undertones in William Robinson's Crusade Against 'Architects' Gardens': a 'Costly Ugliness to Our Beautiful Home-landscapes' (Robinson 1892, XIII)

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Introduction

- 1 Garden history and the history of gardening go hand in hand, as a garden is the result of work, knowledge and practices, and a garden design can only be made possible through imagination and technique. This paper purports to delineate the influences that were exerted by rapidly changing practices in gardening over garden designs and representations in the latter part of the nineteenth century in England. Before the 1850s, the term 'gardener' was merely used to describe a profession whose tricks of the trade were kept secret from the masses of those who would soon be called, 'amateur gardeners'.¹ In the second half of the century, the latter would progressively be able to fulfil their 'quest for information' (Wilkinson 2011, 33) in the columns of the specialized monthly or weekly newspapers that were becoming more readily available and cheaper. Their editors, who vied for readership, wielded tremendous influence on how gardens and gardening were perceived and on how gardens were designed.
- 2 One of them was William Robinson (1838–1935), an influential Irish gardener, writer, and newspaper editor. He came to be known as the 'father of the English flower

garden' (Allan) and is especially famous for his rejection of regularity and geometry in gardens, which he deemed 'tyrannous and unmeaning' (Robinson 1872d, 651). To him, topiary art and the bedding system² in particular, were the doings of architects, not gardeners. As the editor of numerous popular weekly garden magazines and garden guides, he managed to popularize his views across the various tiers of Victorian and Edwardian society, among laymen and professionals alike. In teaching the masses how to become amateur gardeners and teaching professional gardeners how to improve their practices, he remained faithful to one of his most enduring principles: that a garden should stem from a gardener's observation of nature and experience, not an architect's plans and patterns.

- 3 One of the difficulties that arises from the study of his journalistic contributions is the fact that he incessantly championed a return to an idealized form of nature freed from human disturbance and intervention on the one hand, and promoted professionalization and the creation of an intensive production market on the other hand. In other words, there is some evidence that he promoted both technical progress in horticultural cultivation and market gardening, and a return to a state of unspoiled lush wildness in parks and gardens.
- 4 I would first argue that the new definition of garden beauty William Robinson advocated was a way of promoting the figure of the gardener at the expense of the architect. I will then show the extent to which the new garden economics that emerged from this new aesthetics met the social and economic demands of the growing middle-classes. I will finally attempt to examine how Robinson managed to make his 'modern' garden a place of peaceful cooperation catering to the nation's social and representational shifting ideals.

Gardeners vs. Architects: Towards a 'plantsman's garden' (Thacker 282)

- 5 For Robinson, artificiality should never prevail in what he considered the 'modern garden'. In that sense, his *Wild Garden*³ and naturalistic aesthetics (Fig. 1) comes as a break away from previous garden theories that emphasized the artificial nature of gardens as a criterion of beauty. Mr James Shirley Hibberd, a prominent figure of mid-century garden writing, who came to be considered as 'The Father of Amateur Gardening' (Wilkinson 2012), encapsulated the idea in 1856 in the famous phrase: 'the Garden is an artificial contrivance, it is not a piece scooped out of a wood, but in a sense a continuation of the house...it is a creation of art, not a patch of wild nature...' (Hibberd 279). John Fleming's series of plans and patterns might best exemplify this High Victorian gardening theory (Fleming 1864). It was also the case of Andrews Nesfield's work—which Robinson loathed—in the Royal Horticultural Society Gardens he created at Kensington in 1861 or Worsley Hall gardens, which Robinson compared to industrial weaving and called 'railway embankment' gardening; for Nesfield had replaced plants in parterres with coloured minerals and resorted to terracing which reminded Robinson of 'brutal cutting through banks, lines like railway embankments' (Robinson 1892, 65).

Figure 1—'A Glimpse at the Wild Garden', illustration to Robinson, William, 'What is a Wild Garden'. *The Garden*, Vol. I (Sep. 21 1872): 247.



- 6 In the violent controversy about geometry and artificiality that ensued in his own newspaper *The Garden* in 1873, Robinson took a stand against this notion that 'a garden is a work of art, and therefore you must not attempt the imitation of nature in it', which he called an 'ancient dogma' (Robinson 1872b, 333–34). As early as 1863, when he was travelling around the country to chronicle its various parks as a correspondent for Joseph Paxton and John Lindley's *The Gardener's Chronicle*, he had, for instance, praised the 'regular irregularity' and 'bouquet-like aspect' of the mixed flowerbeds (Robinson 1863, 1133), which he set against the mechanical "bedding", in its vulgarest aspect' (Robinson 1864a, 843):

the bugbears of our flower gardens—monotony and dumpiness . . . the cottage now in too many cases [is] surrounded by a spread of bad blue, gamboge, and scarlet, without a particle of grace . . . a blaze of 'colour' which could be almost equally well spread out by the cotton printer, and which render our gardens generally the most uninviting places in the world for a Turner to look into for repose, or a subject. (Robinson 1864a, 843)

- 7 The reference to painting opened the debate to larger aesthetic considerations. To be considered beautiful, a garden was to be laid out according to the rules of nature, not geometry and engineering, which challenged the prominent position enjoyed by architects so far. Three articles published in 1872 on the front page of *The Garden* summed up the aesthetic stakes of the debate by comparing garden art to painting and the architect to 'the savage, who has never seen a picture, [and] is delighted with a set of circles or ovals filled with decided colour' (Robinson 1872b, 334):

the true gardener is an artist and not a weaver of carpets, and the day will come in due time when the laws that guide the landscape artist will guide the garden artist, and when it will be thought as barbarous to make a geometrical carpet of a garden

as it would be to make one of 'Summer's Golden Crown' by Mr. Vicat Cole,⁴ or of one of Turner's 'Rivers of France'.⁵ (Robinson 1872a, 265)

- 8 Further, he explains that gardeners, or 'artists planters' as he liked to call them (Robinson 1916a, 51), should endeavour to imitate and interpret nature and that the more natural a garden appeared, the better artistically. Gardeners are even presented as the ultimate artists in so far as the materials they use to create are directly living organisms and natural elements:

Our gardens are beautiful in proportion to their truth to nature. Natural and artistic gardening (synonymous terms) mean the art of expression of the beauty of the vegetable kingdom in gardens. And the most artistic gardener is he who does this without allowing his mind to be sullied by a thought of the figures in elementary books of mensuration . . . He is in one sense the most privileged of artists, because he deals with nature herself, and not a representation of her. His work is not done with pigments, but with living trees and plants, and with nature's own air, soil, and water. (Robinson 1872b, 333-34)

- 9 The quarrel reached a new height when, in 1892, Robinson published a pamphlet against geometrical forms being forcibly superimposed on trees and plants. It was fittingly entitled: *Garden design and architects' gardens: two reviews, illustrated, to show, by actual examples from British gardens, that clipping and aligning trees to make them 'harmonise' with architecture is barbarous, needless, and inartistic* (Robinson 1892). It was Robinson's direct response to two books written by architects—John Dando Sedding's *Garden Craft, Old and New* and Reginald Blomfield's *The Formal Garden in England* published in 1891 and 1892, respectively—in which their authors deplored the loss of 'architectural sense . . . in modern design'—i.e. the freer style supported by Robinson—and upheld the long tradition and the 'place garden design took in the great art of architecture, with the result of that well-ordered harmony which was characteristic of the house and garden in England down to the middle of the eighteenth century'⁶ (Blomfield VI). Eventually, all architectural elements had to be hidden in Robinson's modern garden: 'The true gardener conceals his art, and, privileged as he is above all men in being the interpreter of nature herself, to modestly conceal his art must ever be his pride'⁷ (Robinson 1872b, 334).
- 10 This rejection of architectural elements to the background took various aesthetic forms: climbing plants and pergolas to soften the unnatural-looking straight lines of facades, walls or walks (Fig. 2); wall gardens to hide unsightly fences; no terracing when preventable to preserve the natural geology of the land; no follies, which were to be replaced rather by towering, architectural tree specimens; no clipped trees, as their natural forms were deemed beautiful in themselves; large-leaved plants to create 'beauty of form' (Robinson 1871a) beyond the flowering season; and finally the softening of water margins which created the new nature-inspired concept of 'bog-garden' (Robinson 1871b, 7), in which plants and water gently coalesced (Fig. 3).

Figure 2—'Our Readers' Illustrations: the Dutchman's Pipe (*Aristolochia Siphon*) and Other Climbers. From a photograph sent by Mr. W. E. Matthiessen, 40, Devonshire Road, Forest Hill, S.E.'. *Gardening illustrated*, Vol. VI (Aug. 22, 1885): 340.

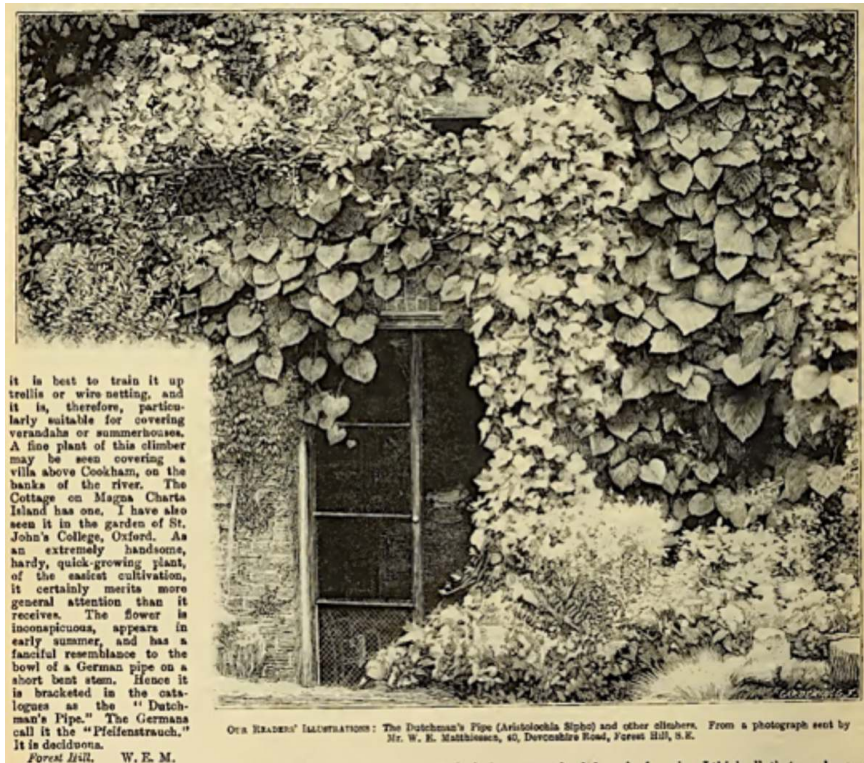


Figure 3—'The Bog-Garden', illustration to Robinson, William, 'The Bog-garden', *The Garden*, Vol. I (Nov. 1871): 7.



- 11 In 1901, Blomfield perfectly summed up the controversy in the preface of the third edition of his *Formal Garden*, when he stated that 'The gardeners said the architects knew nothing about gardening, and the architects said the gardeners knew nothing about design' (Blomfield VI). Robinson made it sound like the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns when both sides actually resorted to the past as arguments of authority to justify their positions—rural cottage gardens, on the one hand and pre-Brownian design, on the other—and one could argue that it all boiled down partly to a social and professional rivalry. In fact, behind the apparently aesthetic quarrel loomed a social struggle for position: in an age of unprecedented expansion of horticulture and demand for new exotic specimens, architects felt they could no longer hold their ground in the realm of garden-making. However, a distinction could still be made between horticulture, left to professional gardeners and nurserymen, and design, the architects' preserve: 'having handed over horticulture to the gardener, the question of design came fairly within the province of the architect' (Blomfield VII). To Robinson, however, the work of a *true* gardener encompassed a lot more than the technicalities of taking care of plants, growing fashionable exotics in plant factories, producing seeds and putting them up for sale. Rather, gardeners were qualified artisans, if not artists, who deserved professional and social recognition.
- 12 Robinson sensed there was room for the rise of a new profession in the continuum between architecture and horticulture, that of 'landscape gardener', or 'garden designer'—he strongly rejected the term 'garden architect' or 'landscape architect', which slowly came to prevail in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸ Indeed, Robinson, who had started early in life as a garden boy in Ireland, really tried to promote the social and professional status of the landscape gardener and his 'ideas are to be understood as attempts to strengthen the positions of the garden [designer] and to repulse other rival professions' (Wolschke-Bulmahn 1992, 189). In 1930, aged 92, Robinson published a pamphlet entitled *The Architect in the Garden*, in which he questioned once again the legitimacy of appointing an architect to the select committee in charge of Hampton Court Gardens:
- A Committee has been formed of late to study the question of Hampton Court Gardens, and over the committee an architect. Why an architect it is not clear. In our country we have many amateurs . . . of proved taste, who know the subject by heart. Architects away from their own work, have no knowledge of our garden flora, and for ages gardens were disfigured, owing to their endeavours to conform trees to the lines of buildings. (Robinson 1930, 2)
- 13 In an obituary in *The Garden* for Robert Marnock, who was a landscape gardener and the curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Regent's Park, Robinson had already underlined the illegitimacy of the hierarchy within the profession and expressed the need for the advent of a new social and professional figure: the gentleman gardener.
- Mr. Marnock's works differ so much from what is often called 'landscape architecture' . . . He was a fine type of the true gardener—not aiming to be more, and yet welcome as a gentleman anywhere. Such a life, too, helps to show that gardeners if true to their work may help to give their art its just place, and save it from being, as it has often been in public places, put under the rule of men without either training or sympathy for it. (Robinson 1889, 489–90)
- 14 As early as 1865, Robinson had published an article in which he defended the social and professional recognition of gardeners as 'a class'. Indeed the custom at horticultural exhibitions was to mention exclusively the name of the employers, who most often were

'above . . . the labours of a gardener' (Robinson 1865, 29). That of course infuriated Robinson who stood up for the recognition, through the press, where the results of such competitions were published, of their 'skill and knowledge':

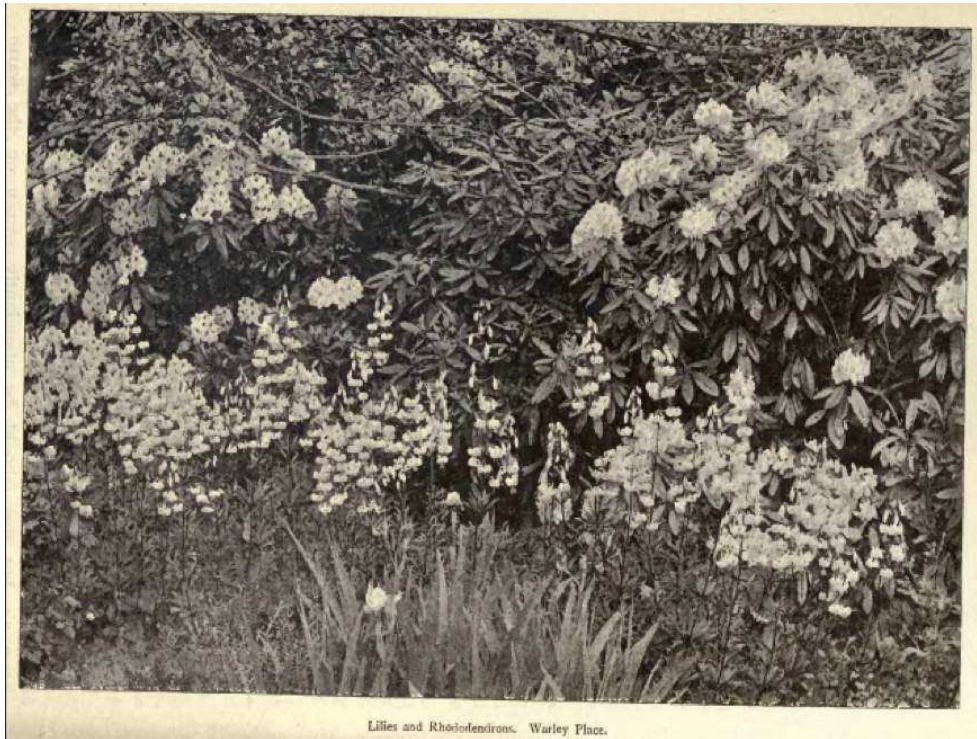
gardeners as a class [are] more worthy and intelligent than any other men of the same social rank No class of men work harder than prize-taking gardeners Therefore . . . where an individual, be he what he may, wins a prize with his own hands and with his own brains, it is both unfair and unmanly to deprive him even of the nominal merit of having done so (Robinson 1865, 29)

- 15 This reappraisal of the socio-professional role played by gardeners might be illustrated by the portrait Robinson acquired in 1894 to adorn the drawing room of his Elizabethan Manor. It was painted by French artist Carolus-Duran and entitled *Mon Jardinier*⁹ (Carolus-Duran 1894b), being a portrait of the artist's gardener. Portrait painting is a genre that essentially ennoble sitters by giving them pride of place. Later the same year, Robinson would commission his own portrait by the socialite Third Republic French bourgeoisie painter (Carolus-Duran 1894a).

Meeting the Demand of the Middle Classes

- 16 This empowerment of gardeners, aimed at making them 'welcome as gentlemen anywhere' (Robinson 1889, 489), resulted partly from Robinson's aesthetics, which simultaneously met the demand of the Victorian middle classes. Indeed, since the artistic garden magnified the laws of nature rather than going against them, it was less labour intensive, thus making garden upkeep easier for labourers and a more suitable form of leisure for aspiring unstaffed garden owners. It was also less costly in tender exotic specimens, which made the practice more accessible to the middle classes.
- 17 Mowing and pruning best reflect Robinson's garden economics and the shift towards a pleasure garden affordable and accessible to middle and upper middle-class Victorians. In his own words, dismissing topiary art and clipping, and using perennials and hardy plants rather than tender ones was 'A true economy in gardens' (Robinson 1916b, 341) in as much as it unburdened professional gardeners, whose tasks were made less tedious, and rendered gardening consequently more suitable and acceptable as a form of leisure for the middle and upper-middle classes. In his 1883 edition of *The Wild Garden*, for example, Robinson explained that 'mowing the grass once a fortnight in pleasure grounds, as now practised, is a great and costly mistake' (Robinson 1883c, 18). Indeed, according to him, the grouping of shrubs intermingled with hardy flowers as well as the naturalization of bulbs in the grass around them, did not require any care (Fig. 4). In fact those had to be left alone after flowering and a clever association would enable amateurs to enjoy a succession of bloomings throughout the year. This was a far cry from the bedding-out system and topiary work, which *de facto* had been reserved to a wealthy minority who could afford gardening staff. In this system, all tender exotics had to be changed at least twice in the season after each bloom and multiplied in expensive heated glasshouses in the winter. Not to mention the tedious pruning of yews and boxes, which Robinson contributed to alleviate by endlessly promoting the *sécateur*. He had discovered the 'useful pruning instrument' in France in 1867 and 'they were ideal for amateurs, as they were versatile and safe in inexperienced hands' (Wilkinson 2011, 70).

Figure 4—'Lilies and Rhododendrons, Warley Place', illustration to Robinson, William *The English Flower Garden and Home Grounds*: 170.



Lilies and Rhododendrons. Warley Place.

- 18 The use of the *sécateur* perfectly illustrates the rationalisation of amateur gardening and horticultural practices. It was also the result of the spread of technical and scientific knowledge to professionals and amateurs alike, which was fostered mainly by a flourishing horticultural press. William Robinson's numerous journalistic contributions have already been mentioned: he edited no less than eight periodicals between 1867 and 1920. Robinson was aware of the financial aspect and made sure the magazines were affordable to the greatest possible number. *The Garden* cost fourpence, *Woods and Forests* twopence, and *Cottage Gardening* a halfpenny (Wilkinson 2011, 211–14). He even published *Flora and Sylva* for three years 'at less than its actual cost, with a view to putting little pecuniary bar to its circulation' (Robinson 1905, 321). But he also wrote and published a number of notebooks and guides—which were often the re-editing of press articles. The printed book enabled him to reach an even wider readership in time and space. Indeed, two of his books, *The Wild Garden*¹⁰ and *The English Flower Garden*, are still in print to this day, for instance. And he claimed 'one and a half million copies issued in six months by 1881' for *Gardening Illustrated* (Wilkinson 2011, 213).
- 19 Those were aimed at both a professional and an amateur readership and had a twofold impact on the British readership (and perhaps beyond). On the one hand, they helped improve market gardening to feed the population, which was achieved mostly thanks to the transfer of knowledge and techniques from France. Robinson wrote books on asparagus (Barnes & Robinson 1881) and mushroom culture (Robinson 1870), and published the first English edition of Vilmorin's *Description des plantes potagères* in 1885 (Vilmorin-Andrieux & Cie 1885) and *French Market-Gardening* in 1909 (Weathers 1909), for example. But book-publishing was also aimed at fostering the dissemination of knowledge: Robinson edited a number of handbooks such as John

Loudon's *The Horticulturist* (Loudon 1871) and Jane Loudon's *The Amateur Gardener* (Loudon 1870).

- 20 The 'democratisation' of nature's bounty was mainly achieved through Robinson's journalistic activity, which popularized gardening through four main channels of mediation. The first was illustration, and Robinson worked with the best artists of his time (Henry George Moon and Alfred Parsons, among others) for his famous coloured plates, which he was the first to introduce into a weekly magazine (Fig. 5). He also advocated a simplification of language and favoured English names over Latin ones for educational purposes. Then he rather cleverly suscitated the involvement of readers through essay and photograph contests to target middle-class readers and promote cottage gardening (Fig. 2). Finally, he fostered experience sharing as he turned his publications into forums: the 'Correspondence sections' especially enabled readers, columnists and scientists to exchange on best practice and experience.

Figure 5—'Great St. Bruno's Lily, *Anthericum Liliacum*', illustration to Robinson, William, 'The Great St. Bruno's Lily, drawn by F. W. Burbidge'. *The Garden* (Jan. 1, 1876): 12-13.



- 21 Robinson eventually advocated professional horticultural education and apprenticeship in 'country air', among the 'trees of the world' (Robinson 1916a, 51)—rather than a theoretical one indoors, in college classrooms. He became a patron, for instance (along with Gertrude Jekyll and Ellen Willmott) of Viscountess Wolseley's College for Lady Gardeners, at Glynde, East Sussex in 1902 (Wolseley 119).
- 22 In a nutshell, Robinson's endeavour to modernize horticultural practices unburdened professionals and thus made gardening a more appropriate leisure for middle-class amateurs. In rejecting architecture from the garden, he helped democratise gardening in two ways: he made the profession more equal and less tedious, which in turn appealed to

the Victorian middle-class amateurs. They looked for precious information in his periodicals, which created a lucrative market.

The 'modern' Garden: Locus of Cooperation and Symbiotic Haven

- 23 The reconciliation of market gardening and natural beauty arguably took root in the cottage garden as a possible representation of national harmony. It appeared as an ideal alternative to urbanisation and industrialisation in so far as it was an imaginary place where aesthetics met agriculture, where the garden met the field in the mixed borders of vegetables and flowers. It was also a 'democratic' system since it afforded food and beauty to the humblest members of society.
- 24 Between 1892 and 1898, Robinson published *Cottage Gardening: poultry, bees, allotments, food, house, window and town gardens*. The variety of subjects addressed illustrates a continuity and complementarity between house and garden, between sustenance and aesthetics, between countryside and suburban living. The cottage was not merely a preindustrial architectural vestige, but the emblem of a gardening and social alternative system in which harmony was possible between economics and aesthetics, with no need for mechanisation.
- 25 Such aspirations were shared by a number of Victorians, among whom William Morris, who wrote an article for *The Garden* in 1873 entitled *Tree Clipping in Olden Times*. For Morris, the role of the gardener was to study nature and pass on this knowledge to others to bring about a reconciliation of the useful and the beautiful¹¹:
- In the present age, however, there is a disposition to make a more rational use of our wonderfully varied resources of horticultural material, by so mingling the *utile* with the *dulce* in our garden arrangements, that, in standing and obeying Nature more, we shall at length win from her the secrets of her own untaught loveliness; and it is as well the duty as the privilege of every faithful horticulturist to aid in hastening the advent of such a desirable consummation. (Morris 341)
- 26 To do so, nothing less than a change of paradigm was called for: gardens could no longer be seen as mere static pictures, but needed to be envisaged as dynamic spaces and systems, with their cycles, interactions and evolutions. In a sense, the trim gardening style defended by architects was a representation of man's power exerted over nature. The gardens of Versailles offered Robinson the best proof that 'the total absence of the life and grace of vegetation may be indeed the architect's notion of form in gardens, the only sign of life being the few trees of the orangery, and of course they disappear in the winter' (Robinson 1897, 9). Robinson would compare the work of landscape architects to torture and denounced the unhealthy conditions and treatment of plants: 'To enter the gardens of the Little Trianon, leaving the tortured trees and many inanities of the large gardens at Versailles, is like escaping from a desert into a flowery land. The trees are no longer paralysed, mutilated, or starved, but healthy giants' (Robinson 1883b, 207). Such ethical considerations¹² would of course find an echo in the most socially progressive British middle classes, all the more so as it exempted them of wasteful work and expenditure.
- 27 To a certain extent, this non-hierarchical representation was influenced by natural sciences. With the support of Charles Darwin, among others, Robinson became a Fellow of the Linnaean Society (F.L.S.) at the age of 29, in 1866. Darwin and Robinson also shared

the same editor, John Murray, who had published Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Robinson was thus immersed in a scientific milieu that provided him with fresh new ideas to fill the columns of his newspapers. For instance, Alfred Russel Wallace, who had co-discovered the principle of natural selection with Darwin and who is now considered the originator of biogeography,¹³ published no less than twenty-six articles in Robinson's *The Garden* and '... more Wallace items are now known to have appeared in *The Garden* than in any other serial, except *Nature*' (Smith 351).¹⁴ Anne Helmreich has shown how Robinson's aesthetics had been influenced by post-Darwinian natural science, and in particular how 'the principles regarding relations between organisms and their environment set forth by Wallace clearly informed Robinson's gardening practices' (Helmreich 1997, 94).

- 28 It can be further argued that Robinson's garden aesthetics reflected the changing representation of nature which slowly became evident in the visual conflict between two strands of natural history art: a Linnaean representation of nature (Fig. 5) and a naturalistic representation that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century (later known as the ecological style)¹⁵ (Figs. 1 and 3). In the architect's garden, only one aspect was deemed useful or beautiful—in keeping with the Linnaean style which focused on characteristic anatomical features—such as the reproductive part of the plants, i.e. flowers and fruit—whereas for Robinson, the entire cycle of growth was to be taken into account, and a plant should not be isolated, but rather placed in a suitable environment with which it might interact—in keeping with the naturalistic style. In the Robinsonian garden, this was translated as a non-hierarchical, cyclical type of organisation, both in time and space. First of all, the full cycles of growth were taken into account, over the four seasons—not merely a separate feature, for one season only, or following the fashion of the moment, which prevented gardeners from disposing of specimens at will. Then, species and colours were connected and mixed in borders (Fig. 4), so as to avoid any monotonous display of the same colour, or the mechanical repetition of artificial-looking patterns, and to avoid 'dotting' specimens on bare ground 'as regularly set as Cabbages . . . by some well-meaning but not clear-seeing person' (Robinson 1872c).
- 29 This cooperation induced peaceful relations between plants: hence the lexical field of social cooperation and variety. Plants lived in 'colonies', stayed 'grouped together', and 'mutually relieved each other in ways innumerable and delightful' (Robinson 1883c, 5). In much the same way, this cooperation induced harmonious relations between plants and humans who were assimilated into this peaceful non-hierarchical garden community through all their senses: sight but also smell, touch and taste. Robinson was, for instance, a leading proponent of scented climbers and tall herbaceous perennials, which afforded garden strollers sensory surroundings and protective cover.
- 30 In this garden utopia, specimens were deemed equally worthy of admiration, hence the rediscovery and reappraisal of humble or local species on the one hand, and the naturalisation of hardy exotics on the other hand. This seems paradoxical since Robinson's aesthetics has often been described as the promotion of a national English identity (Helmreich 2002). It is true that he resorted to local history to justify his choice of 'wild' gardening. He promoted the beauty of local flora, of which he had become keenly aware when he was cataloguing the British native plants and rediscovering the beauty of the British Isles at the beginning of his career. He also described old-fashioned cottage gardening at 'the time of Shakespeare' as a golden age (Robinson 1864b, 1060), but that

was to justify a return to perennials and a more rational, less ostentatious gardening system. Finally, when he promoted the use of English and published a few selected pages of *A Dictionary of English Names for Plants in The Garden* (Robinson 1885a, 52), for instance, it seems he mainly aimed at debunking pedantic discourse on gardening to make it more accessible and draw his readers' attention on practice rather than theory. For all these reasons, his work was obviously compatible with a certain kind of nationalist perspective since modern beauty could be found in England's natives and landscapes.

- 31 However, one could also argue that his vision of gardening was not incompatible with cosmopolitanism and that his advocacy of native plants, the famous *English Flower Garden* (Robinson 1883a) among others, stemmed mainly from the scientific observation of what was best adapted to English soils and climate. His cosmopolitanism is also visible in the worldwide network of plant-lovers he developed, many of whom would contribute articles to his newspapers. One must not forget that, as a Francophile, he drew most of his inspiration from France, where he had travelled extensively as a correspondent during the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*. When he speaks about naturalising exotic plants in British gardens, for instance, he merely alludes to alpine and subtropical ones, which he had admired in the open air in the Buttes-Chaumont or in the Alps, and which could thrive without specific care under British weather.
- 32 His dismissal of the use of tender exotics and topiary work in gardens might be interpreted in terms of a critique of capitalistic exploitation, mechanisation and imperial domination, whose aesthetic formal manifestations he was targeting. I have already mentioned the intense labour a regular design required on the workers' part and the unhealthy conditions a cold climate entailed for tender specimens brought from exotic colonies and which were disposed of after blooming.¹⁶ Robinson's garden was English because what grew in it thrived on English soil: what mattered most were the living conditions of plants, their wants and needs, rather than their provenance or origin. In a sense, his 'wild garden' aesthetic was a break away from the public display of wealth and power that topiary art and the bedding-out system might have embodied, and offered instead the privacy of a safe haven for people and flora. And in showing how the adapted specimens from far-flung regions of the world naturalised in Britain, he could reconcile internationalism and nationalism since England offered the climatic, geological and social environment for a perfect garden where the entire creation could thrive under a moderate climate.
- 33 Thus, it might be possible to construct a figure of the gardener as a 'cosmopolitan peacemaker' who is 'able to control the struggle for life, and . . . expresses the most charming aspects of vegetation of a score of different climes' (Robinson 1872d, 334). So middle-class Victorians could still feel pleasure in domesticating the wild world in their own suburban or countryside gardens without travelling to the Himalayas, the Alps or Asia Minor: 'there can be few more agreeable phases of communion with nature than naturalising the natives . . . from almost every interesting region the traveller may bring seeds or plants, and establish near his home the pleasantest souvenirs of the various scenes he has visited' (Robinson 1870b, 7).
- 34 To conclude, Robinson managed to convey the middle classes' social aspirations in a new aesthetic form that rejected architecture and geometry as embodiments of mechanisation and exploitation of living things. By making the well-being of plants the basic principle of his garden organisation and layout, and putting into practice the new principles and

discoveries of natural sciences, he managed to reconcile yield and beauty in a new form of 'natural' gardening.

- 35 To Robinson, a garden was indeed 'an artificial contrivance', not a mere 'patch of wild nature' (Hibberd 279), but he vehemently opposed the then-commonly held conception that its beauty thus lay in its purposely unnatural-looking, geometric features. On the contrary, to Robinson, the artificiality of a beautiful garden was to be found in the fact that it expressed and displayed, through the work of a peacekeeping and domesticating gardener, the utmost healthiness and fully-fledged expression of the physiological features of plants—a state unseen and almost impossible to reach in the wild natural world because of the competition between species and the struggle for life.
- 36 Such 'civilising' of plant relations within the space of the garden was mirrored by his endeavour to harmonise the competition going on within the social world of gardening, between gardeners and architects on the one hand, and between professional and amateur gardeners on the other hand. He was a 'gardener with a social conscience' (Bisgrove), who made gardening less toilsome for professional gardeners and less wasteful in plant specimens, thus helping it spread as a more democratic, affordable, and respectable leisure activity and profession among the Victorian amateurs.
- 37 Indeed, via his numerous newspapers and journalistic work, he contributed to the propagation of garden knowledge and technical improvement to feed—physically or spiritually—the increasingly urban masses. William Robinson turned the garden into an ideal place of biological and social levelling, where classification, social or botanical, was made less relevant than cooperation, for shared pleasure and mutual gain.

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NOTES

1. 'In October 1848 . . . the weekly *Cottage Gardener* was launched [edited by George W. Johnson]. Sub-titled the 'Amateur and Cottager's Guide to Out-Door Gardening and Spade Cultivation', it was started with the idea of advising the middle and working classes of the operations to be attended to in a small garden . . . It was the first time that the amateur . . . was put at the top of a list of prospective readers' (Wilkinson 2006, 41).
2. Bedding or change-bedding denotes the practice of planting beds with different subjects at different times of the year, by removal and replanting . . . The bedding system 'was a term used in England in the 19th c. for the art of ornamenting flower-beds by bedding-out [i.e. the operation of stocking a bed during the warmer months with tender or half-hardy exotics which

need protective covering in the winter]. From 1840s to 1870s the favoured plants were pelargoniums (which have always remained prominent), petunias, salvias, lobelias, verbenas, and calceolarias; these were planted for high contrast of colour' (Jellicoe 42).

3. See in particular the frontispiece to Robinson's *Wild Garden* with a quote from Bacon's *Essay 46, Of Gardens*, 1625: 'I wish it to be framed, as much as may be, to a natural wildness.'

4. *Summer's Golden Crown*, by George Vicat Cole (1833–1893) was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1866, but it is likely that Robinson saw the painting in 1867 at the Paris International Exhibition where it was lent by its owner, Alderman Salomons, and 'created a veritable sensation'. It was 'a vivid, realistic view from Holmbury Hill, irradiated with the full sunshine of an August noonday' (Chignell 87).

5. *Turner's Rivers of France* by Leitch Ritchie is a three-volume book series of engravings done on steel plates that combine the watercolour designs Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) created during his successive visits to France between 1821 and 1832. The middle-class readers could embark on this 'annual tour' in the artist's footsteps.

6. Then, of course, came Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, whose landscape gardens swept away parterres, topiaries, knot gardens or any remnant of regularity in English gardens.

7. Note the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, and more precisely the paraphrasing from Chapter XXIII, *Isolated Remarks on Natural Beauty*, from *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. II. Robinson used a quote in 1905 as a foreword to the third volume of *Flora and Sylva*: 'Yet how æsthetic is nature! Every spot that is entirely uncultivated and wild, *i.e.*, left free to itself, however small it may be, if only the hand of man remains absent, it decorates at once in the most tasteful manner, clothes it with plants, flowers, and shrubs, whose unforced nature, natural grace, and tasteful grouping bears witness that they have not grown up under the rod of correction of the great egoist, but that nature has here moved freely. Every neglected plant at once becomes beautiful. Upon this rests the principle of the English garden, which is as much as possible to conceal art, so that it may appear as if nature had here moved freely; for only then is it perfectly beautiful' (Schopenhauer 171).

8. 'The profession of landscape architecture was formally established in Britain on 11 Dec. 1929, just 30 years after its American equivalent, [by] the British Association of Garden Architects . . .' (Jellicoe 323).

9. The painting was acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark in 1941 under the name *Un Terrassier*. It is now held by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts under the name *The Artist's Gardener*. <http://www.clarkart.edu/Art-Pieces/3918>, accessed on 22 April 2018

10. For a complete history of *The Wild Garden's* editions, see Nelson, Charles, 'William Robinson's *The Wild Garden*: Origins and Editions, 1870–2003'. *MOOREA*, The Journal of the Irish Garden Plant Society, vol. 14 (2005): 25–34.

11. This famous Morrisian theme is part of his housekeeping doctrine: 'If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.' From *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham, 1878–1881*, Ellis & White, London, 1882.

12. For further details on the ethical dimension of natural gardening and Robinson's link to Vitalism, see the in-depth analyses by Anne Helmreich and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn in Volume XVIII of *Dumbarton Oaks's Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, Nature and Ideology, Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Wolschke-Bulmahn 1997).

13. Biogeography is a science that deals with the geographical distribution of species and ecosystems. The latter usually vary in a similar manner according to latitude, elevation, climate, etc.

14. For further details on Wallace's contributions to *The Garden* between 1875 and 1912, see Smith's article available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/66, accessed on 21 May 2018.

15. Judith Magee, curator of rare books at the London Natural History Museum, has published extensively on the history of natural history art. See especially: *Art of Nature: Three Centuries of Natural History Art from Around the World*. London: N. H. M., 2009.

16. However, there might still be hints of imperialism in his discourse. In fact, this 'bringing together of natures from elsewhere' had been at the heart of imperial commercial and scientific expansion from the beginning. In the Caribbean, for instance, 'by the 1790s, most people and plants . . . had come from somewhere else' (Bewell 2009). By the middle of the 19th century, the Irish gardener was in fact opening up mainland England to a cosmopolitan nature for the sake of beautifying the 'English' landscapes and increasing its fruitfulness.

ABSTRACTS

William Robinson (1838–1935) was an influential Irish gardener and journalist who came to be known as the main instigator of the English flower garden and cottage aesthetics that emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. His adamant rejection of artificial forms and colours in gardens came as a blow to the fashionable high-Victorian gardening style in which straight lines and geometrical patterns dominated in the form of topiary art, unvaried masses of colours, and flat land terracing. This paper purports to analyse, mainly through a corpus of Robinson's newspaper articles, the socio-economic implications of his aesthetic choices. It seems that his rejection of artificiality and laudation of a more natural style of gardening was indeed a way of promoting the socio-professional figure of the gardener at the expense of the architect. By putting the plants' needs and forms at the core of his definition of beauty, thus making horticultural knowledge the prerequisite to garden creation, he endeavoured to oust architects from the landscape profession. This natural aesthetics also theoretically entailed less care and fewer costs, which appealed to aspiring Victorian middle-classes who could acquire and share horticultural knowledge in the columns of Robinson's popular gardening magazines. The community of gardeners gathered in those pages reflected a larger *Weltanschauung* in which the figure of the gardener embodied the possibility of harmonious coexistence and symbiosis between Victorians and Nature.

William Robinson (1838-1935) est un jardinier et journaliste irlandais considéré comme le principal instigateur de l'esthétique du jardin fleuri de cottage anglais qui est apparue dans la dernière partie du XIX^e siècle. Son vif rejet des formes et des couleurs artificielles dans les jardins a profondément remis en cause le grand style victorien alors en vogue, dans lequel lignes droites et motifs géométriques dominaient, sous formes de topiaires, d'aplats de couleurs monotones et de terrasses planes. Cet article se propose d'analyser, principalement au travers d'un corpus d'articles de presse écrits par Robinson, les implications socio-économiques de ses choix esthétiques. Il semble en effet que son aversion pour l'artificialité et ses prêches pour un style de jardin plus naturel soit une manière de promouvoir la figure socio-professionnelle du jardinier aux dépens de celle de l'architecte. En mettant les besoins et les formes des plantes au cœur de sa définition de la beauté, faisant ainsi du savoir botanique un préalable à la création d'un jardin, il s'est efforcé d'évincer les architectes de la profession paysagère. Cette esthétique naturelle impliquait également, du moins en théorie, moins d'entretien et de frais, ce qui répondait aux aspirations des classes moyennes victoriennes, qui pouvaient acquérir et partager leurs connaissances horticoles dans les colonnes des journaux à succès consacrés au jardin et édités

par Robinson. La communauté de jardiniers rassemblée dans ces pages était le reflet d'une *Weltanschauung* dans laquelle la figure du jardinier incarnait la possibilité d'une coexistence harmonieuse et d'une symbiose entre les Victoriens et la nature.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Robinson (William, 1838-1935), jardin naturel, jardinage, architecte paysagiste, presse horticole, parterre, art topiaire

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