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Popularising Gardening: William Robinson and the Transmission of Garden Knowledge in the Illustrated Press

Vulgarisation dans la presse illustrée : William Robinson et la transmission des savoirs hortésiens

AURÉLIEN WASILEWSKI

Résumés

English Français

William Robinson (1838–1935) was one of the most influential gardeners of the Victorian period. His publishing empire in particular can be considered as one of the strongest impetuses that fostered the self-definition of the British people as a nation of gardeners. Robinson's journalistic work and editorial enterprises, rather than his landscape creations, have indeed contributed to the recording and cataloguing of a national tradition in the late 19th century by giving written and visual space—a voice and views—to an imagined community of gardeners. This paper will read William Robinson's garden periodicals as a fertile ground from which a number of gardening practices, aesthetic forms and representations developed into shared customs. As such, gardening, gardens and landscapes emerged as an invaluable heritage to be preserved. I will first explain how his magazines opened a new space to a broader readership, a more diverse set of contributors, and even to other editors. This was accompanied by new ways of sharing and disseminating knowledge via text and illustration, which was largely co-constructed in popular gardening newspapers and magazines, further contributing to the creation of a sense of community among readers, and to the constitution of a shared 'garden lore'. I will then ponder over the notion of collective horticultural heritage, which I suggest materialised in his publications out of the amalgamation of the myriad personal accounts, experiments, and views, and I will explain the extent to which this was attuned with modernity.

William Robinson (1838-1935) est l'un des jardiniers les plus marquants de l'époque victorienne. Son empire éditorial, en particulier, peut être considéré comme l'un des facteurs ayant conduit les Britanniques à s'auto-définir comme une nation de jardiniers. Son œuvre journalistique et ses

entreprises médiatiques, bien davantage que ses créations paysagères, ont, en effet, contribué au catalogage et récolement d'une tradition nationale dans la dernière partie du XIX^e siècle en offrant un espace d'écriture et de mise en images — une voix au chapitre — à une communauté imaginée de jardiniers. Dans cet article, les périodiques dirigés par William Robinson seront lus comme le terreau grâce auquel un certain nombre de pratiques jardinières, de formes esthétiques et de représentations se sont développées pour constituer un ensemble de coutumes partagées. Ainsi, le jardinage, les jardins et les paysages ont pu apparaître comme un patrimoine précieux à préserver. Il s'agira d'abord d'expliquer comment ses magazines ont ouvert un espace nouveau à un lectorat plus large, des contributeurs plus variés, et même d'autres collaborateurs éditoriaux. Cette ouverture s'est accompagnée de nouvelles modalités de partage et de diffusion du savoir, en mots et en images, en majorité coconstruit dans les magazines et journaux de jardinage, contribuant davantage encore à la création d'un sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté chez les lecteurs, et à la constitution d'une « tradition hortésienne » partagée. Il sera finalement question de ce patrimoine hortésien collectif, qui, selon nous, se concrétise dans les pages de ces publications par l'amalgame des innombrables témoignages, expérimentations, et points de vue individuels, ce qui relève d'une démarche résolument moderne.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : jardin, médias, vulgarisation, mémoire collective, environnement, science participative, illustration, Robinson (William), transmission, patrimoine, travail éditorial, lectorat
Keywords: garden, media, popularisation, collective memory, environment, popular science, illustration, Robinson (William), transmission, heritage, editorial work, readership

Texte intégral

Horticulture is becoming a living force among us, not merely commercial horticulture but the man in the street with his small patch, as well as the owners of large domains, are seeking knowledge . . . We know this from the increasing applications for assistance in our daily post.
(An. [Robinson] 1901a)

- 1 'Botanical and horticultural publishing is a neglected subject', observed garden historian Brent Elliott (Elliott 2013, 85), himself one of the first to explore the untapped research material of gardening magazines and journals¹ (Elliott 1993). Ray Desmond had blazed a trail in 1977 when his seminal 'Victorian gardening Magazines' opened a whole new field in the comparatively new branch of media studies.² The next milestone in the historiography of garden publishing was Sarah Dewis's study devoted to John Claudius Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* (Dewis), which also happened to be the first gardening magazine in Britain (Elliott 2013). The periodical was published from 1826 until Loudon's death in 1843 and, as the Scottish gardener and journalist put it, was meant to 'bring the contents of [more] expensive publications to the attention of the ordinary gardener, who could not afford a journal printed in quarto, with hand-coloured engravings' (Elliott 2013, 7). When William Robinson (1838–1935), a professional gardener turned journalist and editor, launched his first magazine entitled *The Garden* in 1871, he acknowledged this legacy and dedicated the first yearly volume to John Loudon (1783–1843). It was met with a warm international welcome, as in this review of French garden designer Édouard André (1840–1911)³, who predicted and explained its success (my translation):

Another publication of the utmost importance and seemingly destined to a bright future, judging by its good start . . . Cleverly divided, printed on fine quarto paper, studded with drawings and relevant sketches, written by worthy practitioners, in a word, composed of documents as only the English can gather, *The Garden* stands out as an original and elegant newcomer before the English horticultural press. . . . We shall often quote from this new leaflet, which will be published weekly. (André 1871)

- 2 The magazine's influence even spread across the pond as archives show it was read by prominent American figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841–1935) (King 2004),

Henry Winthrop Sargent (1810–1882) (Holmes) and most probably Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) (Olmsted 96–97).

3 At home the potential for readership had never been so great: no fewer than ‘125,000 newspapers and periodicals’ were published between 1800 and 1900 in England alone (North; King 2016, 1) and the number of titles and their volume peaked in the 1870s. Magazines and newspapers became ‘a part of everyday life’ (Wale 7), thanks to ‘improvements in printing technology; advances in methods of information gathering and dissemination; increases in literacy rates; and the elimination of taxes on knowledge’ (King 2016, 1).

4 William Robinson was one of the most prominent and lasting figures⁴ of the gardening circles of the late Victorian period. His position at the junction of two cultural phenomena, i.e., the rise of magazines as ‘significant agents of mass communication’, and the advent of gardening as ‘an unprecedented popular’ leisure activity (Tuttle Clayton 131–32), explains why he was dubbed a ‘remarkably successful populariser’ (Elliott 1985 as cited in Bisgrove 244). This pivotal position also accounts for the ‘reading’ of his garden, ‘in its physical manifestation . . . but also in its represented form’ in the print media as a ‘symbol of national identity’ (Helmreich 2). Magazines structured readers’ reality as much as they ‘could separate [them] from their immediate surroundings, launching them into an “imagined community” of national affiliation, the idea of a reading public’ (King 2). However, as put forward by garden historian John Dixon Hunt, the notion of modernity sometimes ‘overtook the mere question of national identity’ and the garden also became a ‘weapon of modernist attack’ (Hunt 696).

5 In this paper, we posit that the gardening styles that developed in the last third of the 19th century were formally influenced by the rise of the first mass media: the illustrated press. The development and success of the Robinsonian garden was inextricably linked to the media form in which it first appeared: gardening articles and their illustrations. William Robinson only started the creation of his own garden in August 1885, when he bought Gravetye Manor. It was thus through the periodical genre that Robinson, who was strongly opposed to theoretical discourse and jargon, was able to transmit textual and visual evidence of the appropriateness and suitability of his new gardening style and reach ‘a broad literary audience that extended into the respectable working classes’ (Helmreich 2). In 1892, Reverend Samuel Reynolds Hole (1819–1904), an early contributor to *The Garden*, reflected in his memoir on how Robinson’s first magazine ‘ha[d] been so powerful in its advocacy of pure horticulture, of the natural, or English, school, free from rigid formalities, meretricious ornaments, gypsum, powdered bricks, cockleshells, and bottle-ends’ (Hole 1892, 211 as cited in Wilkinson 47) and biographers have interpreted his journalistic enterprise as ‘a platform for [his] ideas’ (Allan 113) or an ‘opportunity to proselytise . . . and recount his own experiences’ (Bisgrove 105–6). In a pleasant, accessible and affordable manner, the magazine form gave him a way to put forward practice, rather than theory, thanks to the polyphonic nature of the written and visual contributions by professional correspondents, leading figures in the field, or anonymous readers. What’s more, the periodic dimension of the medium enabled him to focus on the daily routine, experience and experiments of amateur gardeners and to fully include seasonality and change in the management of the garden space.

6 In his numerous magazines, the editor aimed at spreading knowledge and good practice by creating a community of gardeners / readers, ‘a gardening fraternity’ (Bisgrove 90) that could create and share a common ‘garden lore’ (Robinson 1887). The compiling of texts and images into this kaleidoscope of experiences in the weekly, monthly or annual volumes, constituted a new space within society that could gather hitherto separate social spheres around a shared occupation: gardening. As garden historian Anne Wilkinson aptly put it, ‘he started the cheapest papers and yet he also brought into publishing a new class of writers’ (Wilkinson 49). Such an imagined community (Anderson 6) drew on existing forms, practices and plants, which came to constitute a biological and cultural heritage to be preserved. I will first explain how his magazines opened a new space to a broader readership, a more diverse set of contributors, and even to other editors. This was accompanied by new ways of sharing

and disseminating knowledge via text and illustration, which was largely co-constructed in popular gardening newspapers and magazines, further contributing to the creation of a sense of community among readers, and to the constitution of a shared ‘garden lore’. I will finally ponder over the notion of collective horticultural heritage, which I suggest materialised in his publications out of the amalgamation of the myriad personal accounts, experiments, and views, and I will explain the extent to which this was attuned with modernity.

New Voices in *The Garden*: Readers, Contributors and Editors

7 William Robinson’s personal journalistic and publishing career, in many respects, reflected the evolution of the position of the gardener in the social and symbolic landscape, and the ways in which garden knowledge transmission through text and images evolved. He first acted as the spokesperson for a profession. From 1863, he contributed to a number of newspapers as a professional gardener, to eventually become editor of the ‘horticulture and gardening’ section of *The Field*, from 1867 to 1871. He then launched his own periodicals, some of which became instant and lasting commercial successes. *The Garden*, published under his direction from 1871 to 1899, more abundantly illustrated and better organized than other weeklies, with its ‘separate sections with decorative headings’ (Wilkinson 48), was a sweeping revolution. It was also the first weekly to introduce a coloured plate in 1875 (Robinson 1875) ‘at such a price [fourpence] as is usual for similar class journals with few or no illustrations’—which, according to its editor, increased the weekly sales by 2,500 copies (Robinson 1881a). *The Garden*’s influence was enormous and it ‘quickly upset the balance of the established papers. . . . All the weeklies changed their format. . . . By 1875 there were more gardening papers than there had been for forty years, but now they were mass-produced, cheap papers, full of information and news and available to everyone’ (Wilkinson 49).

8 Soon after came *Gardening Illustrated*, published from 1879 to 1918 under his direction: the first gardening paper to cost only one penny (Wilkinson 49). Such a low price greatly expanded Robinson’s readership: it ‘appeal[ed] to the public to the extent of at least 40,000 copies a week more than’ *The Gardener’s Magazine* which was published by James Shirley Hibberd (1825–1890) (Robinson 1881c; 1881d). Two years after its launch, Robinson could even boast that ‘for every copy of their magazine sold, or any other on horticulture that now exists, there are seven of *Gardening*’ (Robinson 1881d) and that by mid-1881, one and a half-million copies had been issued in six months (Allan 125; Wilkinson 213). Again, the magazine became a reference and its formula copied, so much so that a restraining order was issued after a lawsuit that Robinson had filed and won against Ward and Lock,

. . . perpetually restraining the defendants from printing, publishing, selling, or disposing of, and from advertising, offering, or exposing for sale any newspaper, periodical, or publication by the name of ‘Gardening Illustrated’, or by any other name so similar to *Gardening Illustrated*, as to induce the public to believe that such newspaper, periodical or publication is the paper published by the plaintiff.
(An. 1897)

9 After each magazine launch, he published several books that consisted in the reshuffling and extension of content and ideas previously spread in his papers. This period of editorial success, from 1863 to 1899, constituted the climax of his work as a creator of a social space in the media in which a community of gardeners could emerge by communicating.

10 Robinson’s career reflected the rise of the gardener in public opinion and of gardening to an art form. He had started his career as a garden boy in Ireland and had

climbed the professional and social ladder to become head gardener for herbaceous and British plants at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Regent's Park in 1863. However, he resigned from this position to become a journalist, a 'horticultural editor' (King 2004) and 'author' (Nelson XIV). I posit that in doing so, he had two goals in mind. He wanted to escape the hardships of manual labour and wished to change the perception of the public on the profession. To a commentator in *The Spectator* who had stated that gardeners were 'just as little civilised as any other labourers', Robinson had answered that 'the "gardener" of the present day, though he oftentimes uses the spade with his own hands, is a man carefully trained to his craft . . . always able and ready to impart . . . many items of information in a domain of science' (Robinson 1874). In dedicating his life to journalism, he could make his voice heard, 'mediate' (Couldry) his views on gardening and make a living out of transmitting his knowledge and know-how. One must indeed keep in mind that the tricks of the trade were then still closely guarded by the professionals who looked unfavourably at the rise of the middle-class amateurs and their 'quest for information' (Wilkinson 33). Indeed, after John Loudon's *The Gardener's Magazine*, targeted specifically for an audience of gardeners, rather than botanists, and up until the 1860s, only a series of monthlies specialised according to professional sectors existed, and they remained hardly affordable for the bulk of the middle-classes and rather unattractive visually.

11 With *The Garden*, but especially with *Gardening Illustrated*, Robinson opened his columns to a wider variety of readers. The 'Law' section on the last page of each issue, in particular, allows us to delineate the sociology of this diverse readership since readers had to explain the particulars of their personal situations to be able to receive relevant legal advice. People of all walks of life shared the written space: a domestic servant who 'help[s] in stable, in garden, and with cows and clean[s] knives and boots', wondering about the length of his notice (C. H. S.); a gardener living out with his wife as tenants, asking whether their landlord was allowed to cut down trees in their garden (T. J. W.); a landlord reluctant to repair a greenhouse attached to the house he was letting in South Devon (An. 1898a); a landowner worrying about his cattle straying due to his neighbour's tenant neglect of the fence (H. S. M.); a 'working man' who had ordered rose bushes from a nurseryman, being sued by the latter for sending them back because they were deceptively small upon delivery (J. S.); or two nurserymen in business partnership willing to go their separate ways (A. B.). Some readers mention having subscribed to the magazine for a whole year, even if they further explain that they occasionally sell the fruit and vegetables they grow in their small patch to make ends meet (An. 1898b).

12 Of course, owing to its higher price, *The Garden* catered to a wealthier audience: advice was required on the best acacia to buy in the market at Cannes for a garden in the southern counties (L.); or on the place, 'in any country', to see the most beautiful wisteria growing on trees (An. 1878a). However, most readers actually gardened without the help of professional staff and, for instance, some could not afford to have a tree stump removed from the ground (An. 1878b). Readers were also invited to contribute answers to the wide range of queries sent by fellow-gardeners, more than often specialists in the domain. For instance, a correspondence running over several weeks regarding the usefulness of birds in gardens brings together amateur ornithologist Evelyn H. Pollard, owner of Hainford Hall and author of *The Birds of my Parish* (Pollard 1898); an amateur fruit grower from Devon who, despite his professed 'love for these birds . . . as part of a glorious creation', seems rather disinclined to 'waste days of labour . . . , and gets his gun and shoots them' (An. 1898c); as well as a Fellow of the Zoological Society (Greene).

13 Quite tellingly, at the height of his career in 1916, Robinson was awarded the George Robert White Medal of Honor for Horticulture 'for his educational work in horticultural literature', rather than his landscape creations. Knowledge and its transmission were key factors in defining the new type of gardening that developed in the last third of the century. On the one hand, it had to cater to the rising numbers of amateurs eager for information and guidance. On the other hand, these readers and amateurs stemmed

increasingly from the middle-classes and took care of their gardens themselves as a leisure activity. The acceptance of Nature and the understanding of its laws, i.e., a return to a less regular, thus less labour-intensive, gardening style, as well as the incorporation of post-Darwinian natural sciences—doing *with* nature rather than *against* it—, were supposed to enable a single individual to maintain a beautiful and fruitful garden in their backyard (Wasilewski 2019).

- 14 This knowledge sharing also transformed the symbolic place of gardeners in society. As gardening was not presented as a mere manual task, but rather an artistic endeavour and scientific activity, it could be considered a respectable and productive pastime, worthy of ‘a gentleman’ (Robinson 1889, 489). The promotion of the figure of the gardener in the social hierarchy is best exemplified in this excerpt from a serialised novel published in 1872 in *The Garden*:

When young Mr Chiswick, the gardener at the Hall, made his first appearance in our village, he was generally supposed to be an officer of cavalry on leave, or a foreigner of distinction on his travels. Great was the surprise accordingly, when, coming to church the Sunday after his arrival, he took his place with the domestics, and not with the Squire. Nevertheless, though he fell in the social scale, he rose in the estimation of our villagers. (Hole 1872)

- 15 In this serialised novel, the readers of *The Garden* could follow the adventures of a club of six gardeners, *The Six of Spades*, stemming from various social backgrounds, ‘whether they serve or rule’ (Robinson 1872c), who were gathered by the love of gardening. Readers from various extractions could identify with one of the members and the series was apparently met with great enthusiasm as it was later published in book format (Hole 1892).

- 16 This sense of community was further created by the polyphonic dimension of the editorial work and the periodical genre itself. Robinson’s editorial work has seldom been studied. He was actually not the sole participant in the editing process. William Goldring (1854–1919), a landscape and garden designer, assisted him for *The Garden* in 1879 and then *Woods and Forests* from 1883 to 1886. Another ‘assistant editor’ was John MacHutcheon (Robinson 1887). The latter assisted Robinson from the onset of his editorial enterprise until he died in 1887. The ‘conductor’ recalls the first moments of their collaboration:

Those who deal with established journals have often an easy task compared with that of the beginners! Trouble may be got over when the ship is anchored in smooth water. But when our so-called Venture sailed first it was a time when we had to ‘Do or Die’, and then ‘Mac’ did his duty—faithful as an oak-beam. And so we sailed away ever since, and after many days got into pacific seas and even among the flowery islands. (Robinson 1887)

- 17 Both William Goldring and John MacHutcheon were professional gardeners turned journalists. MacHutcheon was described in his obituary as a knowledge holder who transmitted not only a theoretical knowledge, but also a practical one and a traditional wisdom that had gradually built up over time among generations of gardeners:

No other man had so long an experience of gardening journalism, he having been, before joining *The Garden*, over twenty-five years with Dr Lindley on *The Gardeners’ Chronicle*. No one has passed so much garden lore through his hands. For over forty years the writing of the best gardeners in England was prepared for the press by him—himself a gardener. Such experience led to the acquisition of a mine of gardening knowledge and to excellence as a judge of the value of gardening writings. (Robinson 1887)

- 18 Here, Robinson also indirectly describes his own approach. The lexical field of transmission, experience and memory all point to illustrating what he was striving to do in his magazines: keep a record and share the memory of the best practices, results, and gardening figures all gathered in a ‘collective memory’⁵ laid down on paper.

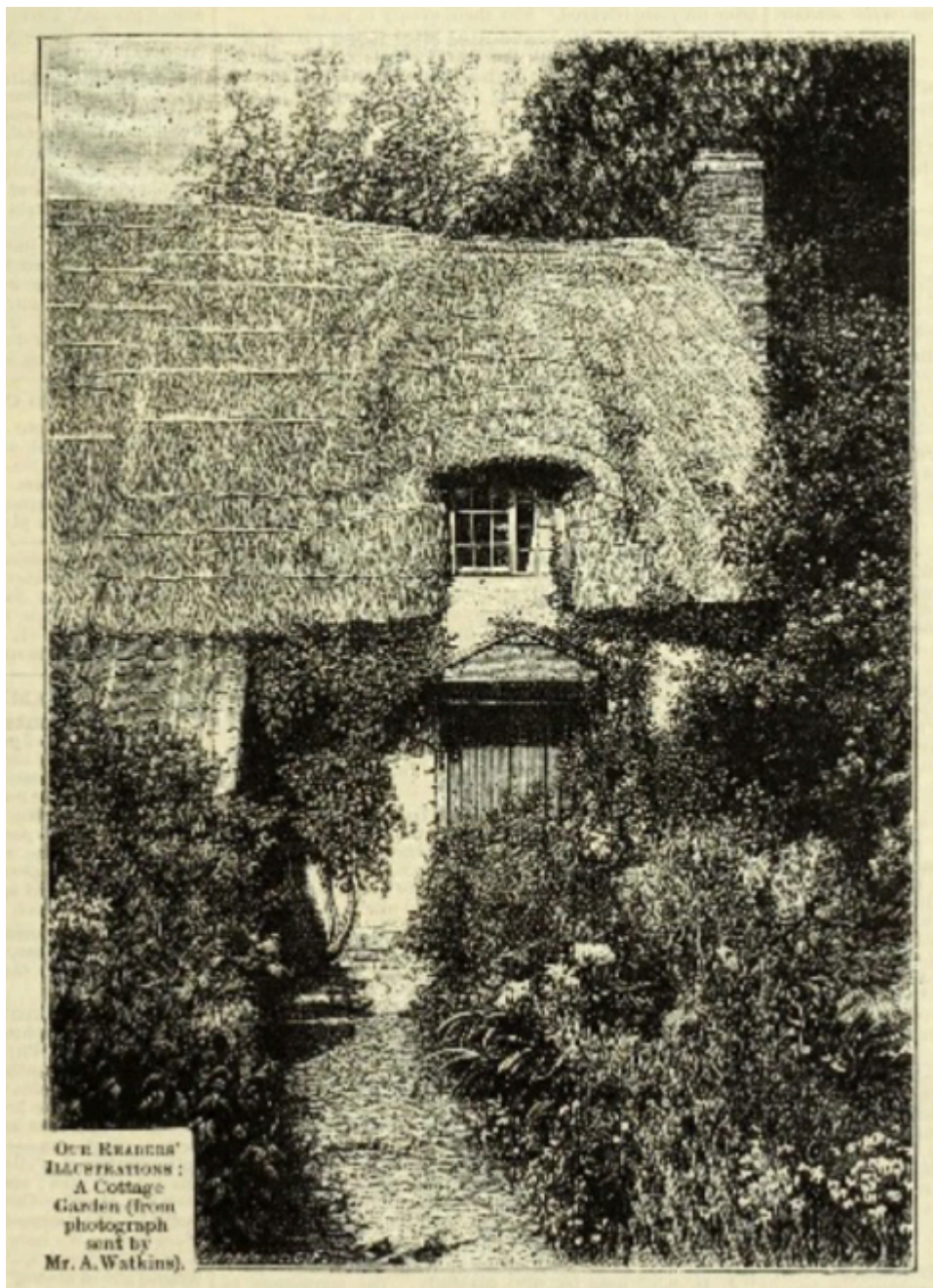
Editing the Practical Garden Knowledge of a New School of Thought

19 However, William Robinson's project was not encyclopaedic as it entailed subjectivity in the chorus of individual voices who expressed their tastes and recounted their personal experiments. For instance, most of the illustrations in *Gardening Illustrated* were actually sent by readers, be they amateur archaeologist Alfred Watkins⁶ in Herefordshire (figure 1) or cosmopolitan royalty with Princess Kotschoubey in Nice (figure 2). There's also the delicate and painstaking process of selecting and editing the content of the papers, which is here humorously compared to arranging a garden and weeding:

A great eradicator of weeds, ever seeking flowers and fruit among ranker herbage, and ever patient so long as there was the least chance of finding any! So strong a mower, when swishing his scythe through Docks and Twitch, now and then perhaps cuts down a pretty alpine flower or delicate annual! If met by a number of irate gardeners, soon after he had robbed them of their flourishes, we fear they would have punished him; but many of those he edited would be the first to speak well of his work. (Robinson 1887)

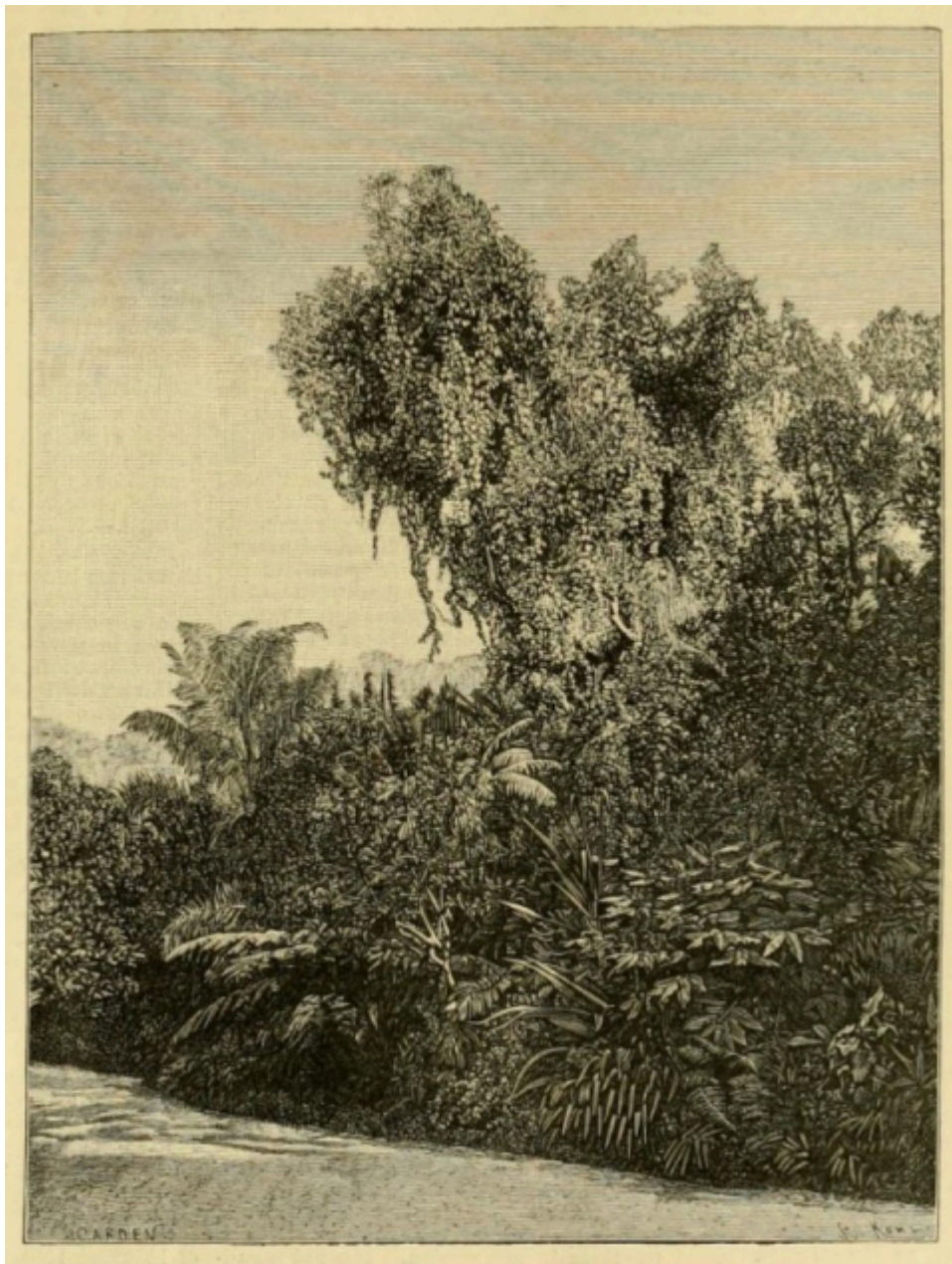
20 The description of the editor's work illustrates how a network and a community of like-minded gardeners was created on a daily basis. The magazine acts as a metaphorical mixed border (figures 1 and 2) that is informed by the work and contributions of multiple exogenous inputs, just as a garden is the result of the work of explorers, botanists, horticulturalists, architects, gardeners, historians and painters who have all in some way enriched and added to the materials available to the amateur. In figure 1, ancient plant introductions, such as carnations, irises and peonies, that have become staples of English gardens, are presented as 'old-fashioned'; in figure 2, the native olive (in Nice) is smothered in passion and nasturtium vines, both American natives, and the rest of the border filled with subtropical plants. Both illustrations showcase encroaching plants 'elbowing each other for their very existence' into a 'charm[ing] . . . irregular crowded border' that has been edited, or lightly 'cropped' by an 'unpretending' gardener (Robinson 1886).

Figure 1



'Our Readers' Illustrations. A Cottage Garden (from photograph sent by Mr. A. Watkins)', Alfred Watkins (photograph), Gardening G. F. (engraving). Illustration for William Robinson and Alfred Watkins, 'Our Readers' Illustrations. A Cottage Garden', *Gardening Illustrated* 7(358), Jan 16, 1886: 653.

Figure 2



'View in the garden of the Villa Montboron. Old Olive tree 15 feet high, covered with Passion flowers, Tropaeolums, and Roses. Engraved for *The Garden*', Armand Kohl (engraving). Illustration for William Robinson, 'Gardens around Nice', *The Garden* 29(760), Jun 12, 1886: 542-543.

21 I read Robinson's first magazines—and gardens—as heterotopias⁷ (Foucault; Brunon), i.e., places within society that follow different rules, and where, in our case, new actors, who had been excluded from the writing sphere on the subject so far, and a new type of garden, could flourish. This shift had visual consequences on the pages of the magazines, which reflected on paper the garden spaces in the real world. With the launch of *The Garden*, the contributors of the gardening press changed and the professional gardeners were replaced partly by amateurs who could be paid for their contributions: members of the church, women, landowners, members of the 'professions', but also simple readers, who could take part in the conversations and debates via the 'correspondence' section and be rewarded financial compensation if their photographs were chosen to illustrate the magazines. The layout of this 'other space' was also altered and it mirrored, as well as upset, the outside garden. From its title page *The Garden*, to the names of the different sections ('the flower garden', 'the garden in the house', 'the arboretum', etc.), the magazine became spatialised, turned into different garden rooms, rather than sections organised according to botanic classification as would have been the case in botanical journals, or haphazardly laid out into articles broken up over several pages with unrelated illustrations, as was the case in other gardening weeklies (Wilkinson 48). Each usage and natural environment had its section, and the periodicity of the magazine made it the perfect medium to take

seasonal changes into consideration and to guide and assist gardeners on their day-to-day practice. The layout of the periodical was made all the more spatial that illustrations became abundant and a driver behind the sales as magazines became increasingly available without subscription at railway bookstalls, for instance. 'It was not the content of *The Garden* which was so revolutionary, but its appearance' (Wilkinson 48). For instance, from the first issues, Robinson offered his readers full-page representations of gardens or landscapes that he called 'views'. These only could be 'read' by rotating the magazine and were meant to enable readers to feel the general effect of an arrangement (figure 3). The magazine itself, with its visual thresholds, page setting and abundance of illustrations, can be read as a metaphorical garden into which the readers were invited to stroll in imagination (figures 1 and 2).

Figure 3



'View of a portion of the fernery in the new winter-garden at the pine-apple nursery', G. T. J. (engraving), *The Garden* 4, Dec 13, 1873: 487.

Figure 4



'*Nymphaea marliacea carnea* drawn for The Garden (natural size) by A. F. Hayward, October 10, 1893, from plants grown in open water at Gravetye, Sussex', A. F. Hayward (drawing), Guillaume Severeys (lithograph and print). Illustration for William Robinson, 'The New Hardy Water Lilies', *The Garden* 44(1153), Dec 23, 1893: 582-583.

22 Robinson was very conscious of the power of images over his readership and he acknowledged that his choices in terms of illustrations accounted for his 'kill[ing] the old floral periodicals' (Robinson 1890) like *The Gardener's Magazine*, *The Floral Magazine* or *The Florist*. Those were devoted to florists' flowers (such as auriculas, tulips, carnations, etc.) and aimed at a very specialised readership of growers and collectors who grew particular plants for competitions held by florists' societies across the country. Robinson wanted to get rid of theorists of horticulture and give his readers representations that would correspond more accurately to the reality of what the flowers would actually look like in their gardens. Indeed, he considered the florists' representations of flowers 'false drawings and coloured lies' that were too 'conventionalised' (Robinson 1890)—'the petty tyrannies of the "florist" or show judge', as garden designer Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932) put it (Jekyll 4). His goal was to show his readers the real world, and he was the first to introduce a weekly coloured plate, painted or drawn by artists *en plein air*, as early as 1875 (Robinson 1875): it would show the 'natural size' (Robinson 1893) of flowers and its effect within the garden space (figures 4 and 5). When his competitors accused him of showing 'representations of fine subjects in a state of imperfection' (figure 5), Robinson wrote back that he was 'seeking absolute truth to nature' (Robinson 1890) and that the editor's job was not to retouch the artist's work, but 'to grow the flower fairly well and to leave the rest to the artist [Henry George Moon (1857–1905) in figure 5 or Alfred Frederick William Hayward (1857–1905) in figure 4], who takes his own choice as to the blooms he thinks typical of the beauty and character of the plant' (Robinson 1890). In particular, he made fun of stereotyped representations that abided by the rules of horticultural canon, rather than the reality of the plant, and that eventually did not allow viewers to recognize the plant in the real world. He mentioned for instance representations that were so idealised that they were mistaken for new varieties. His aim was rather to guide amateurs and make beauty accessible, and not to 'go astray in quest of the "ideal"' (Robinson 1895).

Figure 5



'Drawing by H. G. Moon at Gravetye Manor', Henry George Moon (drawing). Illustration for William Robinson, 'Some of the newest tea roses, with a plate of Comtesse Vitali', *Flora and Sylva* 2(17), Aug 1904: 232-234.

23 In order to introduce amateurs to the world of professional gardening and to pass on knowledge, Robinson also changed the way written information was shared and tried to use a lighter tone and a more entertaining style. In 1879, he created a section humorously entitled 'Leaflets' that was overtly devoted to garden gossip:

I observe that the gardening papers generally are crucibles in which thoughts too often become molten to a dead level. If gardeners would but learn to write as knowingly and lovingly of their plants as Buffon wrote on animals and Michelet wrote on birds, readers might be comforted and cheered instead of wearied. All this is difficult to be brought about, but a 'gossipy' style can often be made to do duty for a really learned and original one. (Robinson 1879)

24 Humour was also a way to create bonding among readers. A number of short-items resorted to humour and irony to poke fun at certain excesses and thus contributed to debunk botany and horticulture. Such was the case of a newly-discovered variety of 'agave telegraphica', which recalled the debates over the preservation of landscapes, blotted by railway lines and utility poles (Hole 1871); of the minutes of a court case between art and nature, the 'Shearington Cutbush QC (Queer Cutter) vs. Freegrove' case; or the review of a new variety of roses obtained by Robinson in the summer of 1872, named '*Souvenir de chaleur*', and growing very peculiar flowers (Robinson 1872b).

A Modern Take on ‘an ancient art’: from Personal Accounts to Collective Heritage

25 If journalistic writing appeared as the best medium to compile the voices of a community of gardeners, it also was key in preserving, or at least exhuming older forms, practices and plants. The very act of drawing up lists, describing and showing allowed for a better knowledge, a wider transmission and hence protection. William Robinson did not conceive of the ‘modern garden’ as a blank slate that had only emerged thanks to recent scientific discoveries and technical advances (Wasilewski 2020). On the contrary, his approach belonged to a broader reaction to certain excesses of modernity, which entailed a rediscovery and reappraisal of a forgotten horticultural heritage. He evoked, for instance, ‘old science’ and ‘the knowledge of older peoples’, and regretted that it had often been overlooked and forgotten, sometimes leading to fake discoveries in the present day. He did not think that what was called ‘science’ was the prerogative of Victorian Britain only, and believed that scientists would often merely ‘recover fragments of an ancient art’ (Robinson 1904a). For instance, figure 4 illustrates the life size results of the latest achievements of modern horticulture, since they prove visually the possibility of growing, in a British climate, waterlilies that could rival in size, colours and beauty, their tropical counterparts. However, this new hardy cultivar selected by French horticulturist Joseph Latour-Marliac (1830–1911), was also contextualised within archeo- and ethnobotanical knowledge (Blomfield).

26 In a press clipping that Robinson chose to republish from *The Monthly Review* (Geddes), Scottish biologist and pioneering town planner Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) reminded readers of the fact that gardeners and farmers had known about sexual differentiation in plants way before the work of Thomas Millington (1628–1704) or that of Carl von Linné (1707–1778). Geddes also explained that the experiments conducted by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) or German biologist August Weismann (1834–1914) regarding plant selection and crossbreeding harked back to what he called ‘prehistory’ in the gardening collective memory. He ended up questioning the so-called superiority of modern science. If he admitted that the Victorian era, which he dubbed an age of ‘selectionists’ (Robinson 1904a, 174) had led to the creation of an unprecedented number of cultivars and animal races, it never equalled ancient civilisations that created the stock of species that had been cultivated to that day, and from which only scientists were able to select interesting varieties. The fact that ancient peoples ‘engineered’ the passage from wild grasses to cereals, or that from the wild inedible fruit to delicious ones, represented a much more significant breakthrough for humanity than the mere selection within a species of various cultivars. Any gardener was thus but the discoverer—like the historian or the archaeologist—and the guardian of an ancient knowledge that had been handed down from a distant past:

The scholar when he records, the archaeologist when he finds a hoard of noble art workmanship, is perfectly clear that the people who made and used these things were proportionally civilized. . . . Do we not see that the ancient garden, in which these goodly fruit and herbs were grown, was no mere transient Eden, still less a theologic parable, but a long-enduring place of labour and happiness, and wealth and peace? (Robinson 1904a, 174)

27 Gardening is here presented as a *technè* in the Aristotelian sense,⁸ i.e., an art or a craft, born from memories gathered into a single experience. In Ruskinian terms, it would amount to ‘confirming and concluding, the labours of [one’s] ancestors’ (Ruskin).

28 This explains why Robinson advocated for the use of forgotten plants and a return to preindustrial garden styles (namely cottage gardens and flower borders, figure 1) and why he made it something utterly modern simultaneously—a ‘weapon of modernist attack’ (Hunt 696). This was not only a question of going back to an idealised past as a reaction to the destructive aspects of ‘progress’, but also and foremost a question of

keeping the best of the past and merging it with modern technique and knowledge, in a garden that completed and enriched its biological, technical and aesthetic heritage (figures 1, 2 and 4). This approach also accounts for his rejection of ‘fashion in gardening’, which he equated to ‘the most despotic of tyrants’ (Baines) since it banished entire chapters of horticultural heritage to focus merely on new things, and did so very fleetingly. By way of example, a section in *The Garden* is devoted to ‘deserted favourites’ (Humphreys; Flos), i.e., ‘old plants . . . passed gradually out of fashion’ (An. 1903).

29 The latest discoveries of archaeology at the time, e.g., the discovery of extinct sequoia forests in England (An. 1872; Yuval-Naeh), had made people aware that plant life could have a history far longer than that of human beings and that their geographical distribution could be changed naturally or by gardeners, according to a geo-botany organised into climatic zones. What’s more, the fact that such forests could have disappeared reinforced the feeling that nature was not a given but a fragile balance that could disappear. Robinson was especially aware of the issue of species extinction and protection. He was friends with biologist Richard Owen (1804–1892), who specialised in the history of extinct birds, and showed great awareness regarding the preservation of natural heritage. Such preoccupations were translated in the very materiality of the medium through / on which information was transmitted. For instance, Robinson paid special attention to the font style, to the paper and print quality, and to the engravings, against what he called ‘the hot chase after process illustrations, small type, tin-shine paper, smudge lithographs, tomb-stone weights, and the less delightful features of modern books’. He really wanted to conjure up ‘the spirit of old things’, and so ‘. . . went home for the Baskerville’s Virgil, and asked [the printer] to get as near to it as he could in type, went with flower drawings to the best colour-printer in Europe; to the paper mills that still made real paper, and found surviving a wood-engraver who understood [his] good artist’s drawings, and so began’ (Robinson 1903). Of course, here, there was a wish to preserve ancient techniques and to come back to craftsmanship rather than mechanical production. In true Morrissian fashion it was justified by the enjoyment of the consumers (readers and gardeners) and the well-being of the producers (printers, engravers, paper makers and artists) (Casement 357; Morris 1888).

30 This ethics of production was pushed a step further when Robinson considered the sustainability of the paper production itself. The ‘profusion of [printed] material’ (King 2016, 2), because paper was made out of plants, had already, as early as 1871, led to a shortage of natural resources. In particular, paper was made out of esparto grass, a perennial endemic to the Western Mediterranean that had been used there for millennia in handicraft:

. . . most of our leading journals and periodicals were printed on paper made from this material; the imports into this country having increased from 50 tons in 1836, to over 100,000 tons in 1870, and exceeded 130,000 tons in eleven months of the present year When the sudden demand took place, . . . the collectors called on the coast for double crops, which had a most deteriorating influence on the crop, and in some districts led to the complete extinction of the plant Careful cultivation is essentially necessary for the growth and preservation of the plant, which otherwise will vanish away. (An. 1871)

31 This notion of heritage preservation, be it cultural or natural, was ubiquitous from the onset of Robinson’s journalistic production which coincided with ‘the extraordinary environmental awakening of the 1870s’ (Mathis 272) and ‘ran with the grain of modernity, not against it’ (Readman 197). As early as 1871, he advocated, along with friend and correspondent Frederick Law Olmsted, for the ‘preservation from pollution’ of the Niagara Falls and supported the creation of ‘National Parks for the British Isles’ (Robinson 1871; Robinson 1904b; Drabelle; Figueiredo). His newspapers were also the locus of an awareness campaign against ‘injudicious botanising’ (An. 1901b) and the preservation of native plants and their habitats (J. S. W.), and when he organised photograph competitions, he really meant to save from oblivion the built heritage of the rural countryside (Robinson 1892b) (figure 1)—which is, for instance, reminiscent of

William Morris's rationale behind the creation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877 (Morris 1877). All in all, Robinson really meant to save from destruction as much as possible of what remained of the beauty of the natural and rural world (Bruchardt 71):

To-day the ever-growing city, pushing its hard face over the once beautiful land, should make us wish more and more to keep such beauty of the earth as may still be possible to us. The horror of railway embankments, where were once the beautiful suburbs of London, cries to us to save all we can save of the natural beauty of the earth. (Robinson 1892a, 22)

Conclusion

32 In 1872, in a piece in which he was attempting to raise awareness on the poor state and management of the public parks in Great Britain, Robinson used—and probably coined—the phrase ‘us a nation of gardeners’ (Robinson 1872a). Appealing to his nationwide readership, he was already trying to show that the only sustainable course of progress should be spearheaded by this community he was striving to federate: a fellowship of gardeners. Sixty years later, *The Times* seemed to prove his point in acknowledging, in an obituary for the death of his ‘much-valued’ friend Gertrude Jekyll (Jekyll 194) that the ‘wide diffusion of knowledge and taste [had] made us almost a nation of gardeners’ (An. 1932). Three years later, upon his own passing, Robinson bequeathed his estate to the nation via the *Forest Commission* (An. 1935). Beyond this built, aesthetic and natural heritage, the British people certainly owe him part of their most beautiful landscapes, as he taught them to see, appreciate and preserve them thanks to the constant mediation and mediatization of his magazines: ‘the pages of *The Garden*, supplemented by Mr. Robinson’s books, have been the means of bringing all England into close touch with, and accurate knowledge of, all that is best in hardy gardening’ (K. L. D.). Robinson can be considered a ‘remarkably successful populariser’ (Elliott 1985 as cited in Bisgrove 244), indeed, and one of the personalities who contributed the most to allow a great number of British people to become keen gardeners thanks to the ‘diffusion of useful knowledge’ (Bawden 138; Morris 2004). His publishing enterprises still live on in spirit in today’s long-running British gardening TV shows⁹ in which his down-to-earth, hands-on and visual approach is still enduring.

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Notes

- 1 The *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900* (Houghton) 'did not extend to specialist genres' (Elliott 2013, 85).
- 2 The Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) was founded in 1968.
- 3 He conducted the Belgian *L'Illustration horticole* from 1870 to 1882 and the French *Revue horticole* from 1882 to 1906 (André 2001).
- 4 *The Wild Garden* went through fourteen editions (1870–2014) and *The English Flower Garden* through sixteen (1883–1984).
- 5 Defined by Pierre Nora as 'the memories or the shared pool of memories, whether conscious or not, that a living community experienced and/or mythicised of their identity of which the sense of the past is an integral part.' (Nora 1978)
- 6 See Stephen Daniels, 'Lines of Sight: Alfred Watkins, Photography and Topography in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *Tate Papers* 6, 2006. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate->

papers/06/lines-of-sight-alfred-watkins-photography-and-topography-in-early-twentieth-century-britain (last accessed 12/06/2023).

7 See Michel Foucault: 'A heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. . . . perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. . . . The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of Antiquity'. (Foucault 1984)

8 Aristotle links the concept of *technè* to that of memory: 'Now from memory experience is produced in men; for the several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience. And experience seems pretty much like science and art, but really science and art come to men through experience; Now art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgement about a class of objects is produced.' (Aristotle)

9 Namely *Gardeners' World* (1968–today) on BBC Two, *Beechgrove Garden* (1978–today) on BBC Scotland and *Love your Garden* (2011–2021) on ITV.

Table des illustrations

	Titre	Figure 1
	Légende	'Our Readers' Illustrations. A Cottage Garden (from photograph sent by Mr. A Watkins)', Alfred Watkins (photograph), <i>Gardening</i> G. F. (engraving). Illustration for William Robinson and Alfred Watkins, 'Our Readers' Illustrations. A Cottage Garden', <i>Gardening Illustrated</i> 7(358), Jan 16, 1886: 653.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/cve/docannexe/image/14587/img-1.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 539k
	Titre	Figure 2
	Légende	'View in the garden of the Villa Montboron. Old Olive tree 15 feet high, covered with Passion flowers, Tropaeolums, and Roses. Engraved for <i>The Garden</i> ', Armand Kohl (engraving). Illustration for William Robinson, 'Gardens around Nice', <i>The Garden</i> 29(760), Jun 12, 1886: 542-543.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/cve/docannexe/image/14587/img-2.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 513k
	Titre	Figure 3
	Légende	'View of a portion of the fernery in the new winter-garden at the pineapple nursery', G. T. J. (engraving), <i>The Garden</i> 4, Dec 13, 1873: 487.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/cve/docannexe/image/14587/img-3.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 323k
	Titre	Figure 4
	Légende	' <i>Nymphaea marliacea carnea</i> drawn for The Garden (natural size) by A. F. Hayward, October 10, 1893, from plants grown in open water at Gravetye, Sussex', A. F. Hayward (drawing), Guillaume Severeys (lithograph and print). Illustration for William Robinson, 'The New Hardy Water Lilies', <i>The Garden</i> 44(1153), Dec 23, 1893: 582-583.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/cve/docannexe/image/14587/img-4.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 181k
	Titre	Figure 5
	Légende	'Drawing by H. G. Moon at Gravetye Manor', Henry George Moon (drawing). Illustration for William Robinson, 'Some of the newest tea roses, with a plate of Comtesse Vitali', <i>Flora and Sylva</i> 2(17), Aug 1904: 232-234.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/cve/docannexe/image/14587/img-5.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 284k

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