

Book reviews

BEATRIX FARRAND: Private gardens, public landscapes

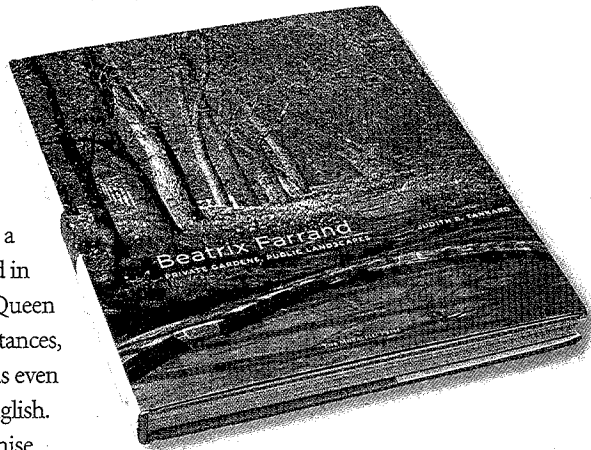
by Judith B. Tankard The Monacelli Press, £40, ISBN 978-1580932271

The American garden designer Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959), a scion of one of New York's high-society families (she was the niece of novelist Edith Wharton), was a starchy character who dressed in tweeds and was nicknamed 'Queen Elizabeth' by English acquaintances, since she could come across as even more aristocratic than the English. Not an easy subject to empathise with, and wisely Judith Tankard has not tried to make Farrand appear cuddly in this monograph. Instead she makes a compelling case for Farrand's importance as a designer, implying that she was nothing less than the American Gertrude Jekyll.

Farrand successfully negotiated the personal and professional pitfalls of becoming a landscape designer when 'it was considered almost social suicide and distinctly matrimonial suicide', as one of her female contemporaries put it. In the event, though, she married late, and happily. As for the suggestion that her work was on a par with Jekyll's, the jury must stay out on that, despite the evidence in this well illustrated and deeply researched book, which is written with a keen sense of pace and discrimination.

Farrand completed hundreds of residential commissions for high-society clients on the East Coast, but hardly any survived the Great Depression, and restored versions do not always impress. Farrand's early work can appear conventional to the point of dullness, for despite an acute architectural sensibility, unlike Jekyll she never found a Lutyens with whom to collaborate.

Farrand's reputation has always rested, and must continue to rest,

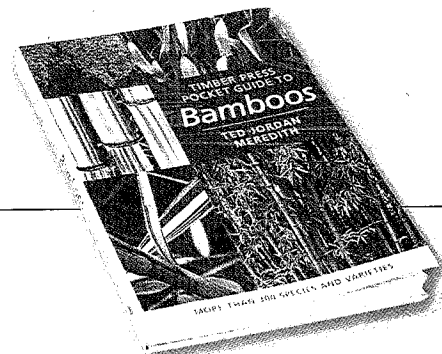


on her masterpiece: Dumbarton Oaks, a complex garden on a steeply sloping site in Washington DC. It is now an impeccably maintained outpost of Harvard University, and is justly accorded a chapter to itself here. However this book makes it clear that 'the Oaks' was not a one-off, since there were numerous other flashes of originality in her design work as her career developed; the recently restored sunken octagonal garden at Hill-Stead, Connecticut, for example.

Farrand's later life is a story of disappointment. A new career in California failed to take off and a plan to turn her holiday retreat at Reef Point, Maine, into an educational institution, foundered. Farrand's decision to 'tear down' the house at Reef Point and 'discontinue' its garden is presented here as the rational decision of a perfectionist rather than a fit of pique mingled with despair. This book will surely remain the standard work on Beatrix Farrand for years to come. *Tim Richardson is a garden writer whose latest book is Great Gardens of America (Frances Lincoln, 2009).*

book offer

RRP £40. Reader offer price £37 inc p&p.



BAMBOOS

By Ted Jordan Meredith Timber Press, £14.99, ISBN 978-0881929362

Ted Jordan Meredith's pocket guide to bamboos, although requiring a largish pocket, is a welcome addition to the significant number of recent books dedicated to this versatile and multi-faceted plant.

To date, most works on bamboos have been written for enthusiasts, but here Meredith caters as much for the interested novice as the already-converted. His book not only reflects the changing taxonomy of the subject and the steady stream of new introductions, but bamboos' acceptance into mainstream gardening.

The main concerns around bamboos for the uninitiated revolve around their behaviour – particularly, how to control their spread. Meredith answers these concerns clearly and concisely, and goes on to deal with other practicalities in an authoritative yet reader-friendly manner.

A minor drawback is that the guide is written mainly for the American market and a handful of the more than 300 bamboos featured are too tender for the UK.

However, that still leaves plenty of superbly photographed bamboos to savour, and Meredith's expertise and enthusiasm shine in his ability to identify a defining characteristic in each, however similar it might look to another at first glance. *Tom Gard is a gardening writer who lives in Devon.*

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