



NINFA: The Most Romantic Garden in the World. By Charles Quest-Ritson. (Frances Lincoln, 2009) 128 pp; illus. £25.

The subtitle of this book is an accurate description, not an advertising blurb. There used to be a drawing of a famous nearby city in my grandfather's study with the caption, 'See Naples and die'. I dreamed some day I would see Italy and Vesuvius, and visiting Ninfa added to that dream.

Situated between high hills on one side and a plain leading to the sea on the other, with several small rivers running through the garden, Ninfa is what is left of a medieval town that thrived for six hundred years, until 1382, when it was laid waste by a local war. Later malaria plagued the area so that it lay in isolation until the reclamation of the land began in 1921.

During its greatest days there were fortified walls, churches, streets, a town hall, shops and workshops. Pietro Caetani, a nephew of the pope, built a tower between 1298 and 1303 that still dominates the garden. The Caetani family owned the property from that time until 1977, when the family line ended. It has been under the protection of several groups, including the World Wildlife Fund (there are more than one hundred and fifty bird species recorded there).

Once Ninfa began to be restored, thousands of trees, shrubs, roses, and other plants were imported from around the world. In May the ruins are covered with cascading roses and vines. In every season the garden shows a different face.

Charles Quest-Ritson begins the story with a history of the place

up to 1900. It has all the features of an epic. For the visitor, the parts telling of how the paradise grew holds the most interest – ‘a garden of ruins covered by flowers’.

The next three chapters are devoted to the Caetani family members who began the reclamation – using the remains of the medieval buildings and walls to incorporate them into part of the garden’s design. Next he tells the wonderful story of Lelia Caetani and her husband Hubert Howard, who, more than anyone else, created what we see and enjoy today. Hubert was particularly ahead of his time with his grasp of the environmental principles of preservation. Lelia’s love of English gardens and her long deliberations were deciding factors in the planting and revision.

In the chapter ‘Ninfa Today’ the author speaks of Lauro Marchetti, the present curator, who continues the ideas he learned from Hubert and Lelia. I myself was once taken on a tour by him and I was impressed by his love and knowledge as he spoke of its ancient history and future plans. He knows every square inch of the place, even the invasive weeds. I share his love of the climbing roses.

Today there are five full-time gardeners who help to maintain it without artificial chemicals, a dramatic example of what can be done without them.

‘Ninfa in the Future’ and ‘Ninfa through the Seasons’ close this charming and well written book. The photographs, many by the author, will urge every reader to make plans for a visit. Once seen, no one could ever forget the sound of water in every part of the garden, the flowering trees dipping into the River Ninfa and the stirring views in every direction. Of the many visitors over the ages to have left their impressions, my favourite is by the archbishop of Marseilles, Marc Lallier, who wrote ‘I have discovered an earthly garden free from original sin’.

The garden is open by appointment over the first weekend of each month from April to October. Those wishing to visit should write to Giardini di Ninfa, Latina, Italy.

WILLIAM GRANT

MR HAMILTON'S ELYSIUM: The Gardens of Painshill. By Michael Symes. (Frances Lincoln, 2010) 176 pp; illus. £35.00.

I was there when the Painshill Park Trust launched its appeal for the restoration of this enchanting place. I remember Jenny Burford's enthusiasm in the face of what seemed an almost impossibly daunting task. While hopeful, I was also somewhat sceptical, because I nearly always prefer the 'lost' garden before it is found. So many historic garden restorations, whether for lack of taste or money or both, in attempting to create an 'attraction', end up debasing the original.

At Painshill that has not happened.

I have paid a number of visits and written several articles about this Surrey garden since then, consistently appreciating the progress made.

Michael Symes's well-researched book has however, drawn my attention to many fascinating new facts and provided me with the answers to a number of questions. His aim, to provide an account of the gardens and their maker, together with an understanding of the elements with which it is composed, is amply fulfilled. He places the garden within the aesthetic of the period and points out the ways in which it was planned to evoke emotion and mood by creating a series of scenes designed to be viewed in sequence. Central to the scheme are both the lake, which appears to change size and shape according to your standpoint, and the follies, which are usually first seen at a distance and then encountered on the circuit by an indirect route, illustrating the then fashionable dictum, 'Lose the object, and draw nigh obliquely'.

The individual buildings are dealt with in some detail and many valuable illustrations of them in their original, pre-restoration state are provided. It is made clear that if the buildings are crucial to the theatricality of the concept, a fitting backdrop was provided by Hamilton's planting of New World trees and shrubs.

That a magnificent feat of landscaping was achieved by Hamilton in a relatively small acreage was indicated by its almost immediate success – it was one of the most visited gardens of the period as

is effectively illustrated by the many contemporary quotations that are one of the chief joys of this book.

Michael Symes is a garden historian and a member of the Painshill Park Trust and the book is accordingly rich in historical detail. As some elements of the story are still uncertain however, it is inevitable that the author has had to engage in a certain amount of speculation. Thus we encounter many a ‘possibly’ or ‘may well have’, which can sometimes be a little disruptive of the otherwise exemplary text – but preferable of course to unsubstantiated facts, especially as a book such as this will surely be a major source of reference for a long while to come.

I was particularly pleased to learn more of the life of The Hon. Charles Hamilton. I had always been moved to think how in the end mounting debts forced him to sell Painshill and I had imagined him moving to Bath a broken man. I was thus pleased to learn that the sale did at least provide sufficient funds for him to settle in the most fashionable part of the city, marry a third wife and create a new ten-acre garden in which his great-nephew William Beckford found ‘a thousand beauties’.

This handsome volume does justice both to the creator of Painshill and his truly remarkable creation and the fact that, unlike so many historic gardens, it is there for us to see and understand its splendour, unblemished by modern vulgarity: a blessing indeed.

PATRICIA CLEVELAND-PECK

ROMANTIC GARDENS: Nature, Art, and Landscape Design. By Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, Elizabeth S. Eustis, and John Bidwell (New York: The Morgan Library and Museum, in association with David R. Godine and the Foundation for Landscape Studies, 2010). 200 pp; illus. \$50.00/£45

Romantic Gardens is possibly one of the most beautiful books ever published on garden history – and no wonder, since David R. Godine of Boston is a renowned ‘small press’ noted for its fine graphics

and traditional designs. This handsome book accompanies a recent exhibition at the Morgan Library in New York City that earned unprecedented rave reviews in the press. The exhibition and book bring to the fore the nature of Romanticism and the Romantic Movement. As the opposite of Classicism, Romanticism gave primacy to the imagination, the senses, intuition, and inspiration. It delved deeply into the mysterious and the dramatic. As the authors note, 'Romantic gardens were a source of sensory delight, moral instruction, spiritual insight, and artistic inspiration'.

The subject has been brought alive through a range of drawings, water-colours, and engravings, illuminating the scholarly yet accessible text by several experts. Elizabeth Barlow Rogers writes in her introduction, 'Romanticism transformed human consciousness and social behavior so deeply and thoroughly that we speak of the Romantic Movement as a revolution in Western culture'. Definitions of the movement and its ideals are notoriously difficult to define, but in landscape design we think of scenic vistas, winding paths, bucolic meadows, and rustic retreats for solitary contemplation. England (or the concept of 'Englishness'), in particular an Englishman's love of green pastoral countryside and gentle landscapes, provides one of the primary strains of the movement. We are offered a brief romp through the movement's main advocates, from John Locke and Joseph Addison to Lord Burlington, Horace Walpole, and 'Capability' Brown, concluding with John Ruskin and J. C. Loudon.

Equal exposure is given to Romanticism in France (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the *Jardin Anglais* and the *Jardin Anglo-Chinois*, Baron Haussmann, and Charles-Adolphe Alphand and the development of parks in Paris). Somewhat less familiar is the spread of Romanticism to Germany through the work of Christian Hirschfeld, Goethe and, especially, Prince Pückler von Muskau. In America, where the movement was not 'a single cultural attitude but rather one of an ambivalent, multifaceted dialectic', the diverse figures of Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson are among those discussed. Perhaps the most famous examples are Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School of artists, the naturalist-philosopher John Muir, and the popular author Andrew Jackson Downing. The grand finale is

New York's Central Park. Sometimes it's a bit difficult to follow the timeline from country to country and dates are often absent.

The illustrated exhibition catalogue which follows the introductory essay draws upon the extensive resources of the Morgan Library as well as private collections, including those of the authors. From delicious eighteenth century hand-coloured etchings and pen-and-ink drawings to folding aquatints by Repton and water-colours by Turner, there is a feast for the eyes with nary a glossy photograph. Among the treasures depicted are manuscripts, letters, sketches, and landscape plans, including Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's historic Greensward Plan for Central Park, 1858. The items representing Germany, including the water-colours for Prince Pückler's book on landscape gardening, will be the least familiar to most people. The catalogue entries, filled with much insight, are meant to be pored over along with the artwork. They offer a lot to digest in one reading, so you will want to revisit this section of the book again and again.

This book definitely raises the bar for landscape history, taking it from workaday compilations of facts and events to something that invites the reader's curiosity and inspires sensory delights.

JUDITH B. TANKARD