

WILLIAM ROBINSON: THE WILD GARDENER. By Richard Bisgrove. (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008). 256 pages; illus. £30/\$60.

At long last we have an attractive and thoughtful book about William Robinson, one of the most influential garden writers of the early twentieth century. Mea Allan's earlier study (1982) makes for fascinating reading, but is dogged by myths and lack of documentation. Richard Bisgrove's new book is brought alive with beautiful colour photographs by Jerry Harpur, Andrew Lawson and others, but Robinson himself still remains an elusive figure. Unlike Gertrude Jekyll, there is no first-hand memoir by a dutiful nephew. It is known that William Robinson was born in Ireland in 1838, but it is still unclear whether it was in County Dublin or Queen's County (later County Laois). The circumstances surrounding his childhood are obscure, but he did work as a garden boy at Curraghmore. From there he went on to great acclaim in England, travelled, wrote dozens of books, edited many journals, and lived at Gravetye Manor in Sussex for fifty years before he died there in 1935. Where the fortune came from that enabled him to live as a country squire at Gravetye is still unknown. It certainly didn't derive from the proceeds of his writings and more likely came from shrewd investments and the property he owned in London. Bisgrove's book sheds little light on these and other biographical enigmas, but instead provides a fresh review of Robinson's prolific writings and editorial output.

Robinson's name was on the tip of every gardener's tongue from the mid nineteenth century through to the 1920s, but few people read his books today, mainly because they lack the spark of Gertrude Jekyll's ever-popular volumes. Whereas Jekyll was always modest and sympathetic to her readers, Robinson's fervent opinions and humourless writing style preached to rather than encouraged gardeners. Of all his publications, *The Wild Garden* (1870) and *The English Flower Garden* (1883) still enjoy popularity because they are filled with wisdom and offer inspirational advice that today's gardeners may find useful. Robinson's most influential book, *The Wild Garden*, lies at the heart of Bisgrove's and inspired its unfortunate

subtitle, ‘the wild gardener’, which conjures up visions of a frizzled Rasputin ranting in the garden, when nothing could be further from the truth. Most people only remember Robinson’s outspoken stance in the popular debates between architects and gardeners that came to a head in *Garden Design and Architect’s Gardens* (1892), a reprint of two reviews he published on Reginald Blomfield’s and John Sedding’s books, the latter of which Robinson claimed was about ‘vegetable sculpture’ (the disfigurement of trees by pleaching and topiary). Beyond that, his books were on fairly straightforward topics, such as alpine flowers, French parks and gardens, urn burial, mushroom culture, wood fires, and the like. One of his most personal books was *Gravetye Manor, or Twenty Years’ Work Round an Old Manor House* (1911 and reprinted by Sagapress in 1984). Gravetye was the love of his life and was as well documented as Jekyll’s Munstead Wood, although its scope was five hundred acres, not fifteen. In the end, today’s readers are still undecided as to whether his books are worth the candle in an era when most people derive their inspiration from pictures rather than words.

Richard Bisgrove’s study of Robinson is a worthy follow-up to his excellent books on Gertrude Jekyll. He carefully weighs the pros and cons of each topic against the paucity of personal information about Robinson. His thoughtful analysis of Robinson’s publications and the artists he hired, such as Alfred Parsons and Henry Moon, is most welcome. As a long-time educator, Bisgrove is also good at explaining bedding-out and other horticultural concepts to expand the scope of the book. One intriguing area of Robinson’s career that continues to elude researchers is the professional design advice he gave on other gardens. Munstead Wood and one or two others are known, but little information exists on this fascinating aspect of Robinson. Bisgrove only touches on some of Robinson’s influential friends and associates, such as Gertrude Jekyll, furnishing some enlightening correspondence that confirms their long-established friendship. But there are many other eminent colleagues in his circle who would have been worth investigating, such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Sprague Sargent, Ellen Willmott and Beatrix Farrand – the latter a long-standing devotee of Robinson who

attended his memorial service. Sadly, some of Mea Allan's old chestnuts resurface, including the myth about Robinson's 'latent syphilis'. For the record, Robinson broke his back while jumping over a stile and was confined to a wheelchair because of the accident, which was unlikely to have been caused by syphilis. Mea Allan's files contain not a shred of evidence to corroborate the syphilis theory she presented in her book, only a physician's note explaining some of the disease's symptoms. To that end, no one lives to the age of ninety-seven with syphilis. Oddly, Bisgrove's book (like Mea Allan's) lacks any reference notes for the extensive quotations from correspondence by and to him, as well as for other new material.

As Bisgrove concludes, Robinson left two legacies, his publications and Gravetye Manor. It is the latter which appeals to most people, and for that we must thank Peter Herbert who rescued it and turned it into a fine country house hotel (he recently retired after almost fifty years at its helm). In the end we wish that more nuggets had been revealed about Robinson's personal life, which he seems to have kept well hidden, but this new study of his accomplishments is most welcome.

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