

Gardens in History: a political perspective (Windgather Press, Oxford, 2012). By Louise Wickham. 280 pp. 138 illustrations. 978 1 9051 1943. Price £29.95.

In the introduction, Louise Wickham states that her intention is to look at gardens (in England and elsewhere) through a political 'lens', moving the debate from aesthetics towards 'deeper issues'. She is particularly interested in how gardens were influenced by the political positions of their creators and also how gardens reflect and legitimise those positions. The result is an ambitious and thought provoking exercise.

Gardens in History is organised into ten chapters, each with a 'Case Study'. The chapters follow a roughly chronological format, beginning with ancient gardens and Islamic gardens, where the very powerful created gardens in particular forms that were standardised and then copied by or imposed on conquered peoples. It is in the Renaissance that the political power of the Medici was displayed so emphatically within gardens (Chapter 3), which were widely admired throughout Europe and influenced the later 'absolutist' landscapes of Louis ^{xiv} (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 covers the eighteenth-century landscape in England, investigating whether Horace Walpole was correct in stating that the English landscape garden was the natural product of Whig ideas. The Picturesque debate of the late eighteenth century, Wickham explains in Chapter 5, can be interpreted as a metaphor for conservative, Brownian visions of England (Humphry Repton) versus sympathies for radical events in France and America (Richard Payne Knight). Chapter 7 deals with the creation of public parks as a result of Reformist politics and as a ploy to stave off revolution, followed by an intriguing chapter on the relationship between botanic gardens and colonisation (Chapter 8). Chapter 10 focuses on the many revivals of styles in the early twentieth century, on the socialist implications of the Arts and Crafts garden (like the art, far too costly for many people) and on the growing interest in preservation and conservation. The flow of chapters on English garden history is interrupted by a foray into Japanese gardens (Chapter 9), emphasising the importance of rigid conformity in garden art to the ruling classes but also reminding us of the religious and philosophical overtones in these gardens. After spending so much time listening to the loud banging of propaganda in the west, the contemplative quiet of these simple, abstract and gentle landscapes comes as a relief.

Gardens in History: a political perspective is handsomely, if not lavishly, illustrated and Wickham writes fluidly and with enthusiasm (lots of exclamation points!). She has clearly read and digested a huge number of articles and books on the subject, providing a wide-ranging survey of garden history in the main chapters. Where the book disappoints, however, is particularly in the case studies, which are all too familiar to garden historians to offer any new insights. Hadrian's Villa, the Taj Mahal, the Medici villas, Versailles and Stowe have all been the subject of articles and books that explored the political nature of the garden. Hadrian, Shah Jahan, the Medici, Louis ^{xiv} and Sir Richard Temple (Lord Cobham) were hardly typical patrons and the qualities that make a garden political generally required extravagant amounts of money and land, access to abundant natural resources and sometimes the power to redirect those resources into one's private domain. Could the author have used lesser known gardens with political overtones?

What about Blenheim, a political project from the start? The size of the palace and the magnificence of the formal garden celebrated the triumph of the Duke of Marlborough (England) over Louis XIV (France). When the garden was altered by Capability Brown in the later eighteenth century, was it down to a change of political allegiance on the part of the Churchills or simply a matter of taste? One of the pitfalls of concentrating on a particular theme is the temptation to skew historical facts to fit an argument. The Earl of Pembroke's garden at Wilton, for example, is associated by the author (and her sources) with the 'balanced and non-absolutist governments of future generations, particularly the Whig aristocracy', when, in fact, the gardens at Wilton were created well before the 4th Earl changed his allegiance from Charles I to the Parliamentary cause and are stylistically aligned with the late seventeenth-century 'Franco-Dutch' formal gardens. In fact, when the future William III was marching with his army toward London in 1688, he made a quick detour to Wilton with William Bentinck to view the gardens there. William's supporters would be the creators of the many English versions of Versailles that were recorded by Kip and Kniff early in the eighteenth century, each an exaggerated version of Pembroke's Wilton. Although there are flaws, *Gardens in History* is an engaging book that will be enjoyed by those readers interested in landscape history who are not already familiar with the literature on the subject.

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