


FLORI-CULTURE; OR, THE VICTORIAN IN THE COTTAGE GARDEN

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ne of the most appealing and enduring images of Victorian country life is that of the cosy thatched cottage nestled amid a colourful riot of massed summer flowers, deep in the heart of the English countryside. It is a picture that readers today have gleaned both from the paintings and writings of Victorians, and from the chocolate boxes and calendars of current nostalgia. Yet this image is a relatively recent one, imposed on country cottage gardens by a quite different order of society. The Victorian middle classes identified a number of aesthetic, political, and spiritual qualities with the humble gardens of their country workers and by their efforts first transformed, and ultimately appropriated, these gardens for their own purposes.

The romantic idealisation of the cottage garden was already part of the middle-class ethos in 1837 when John Ruskin opened his series of articles on “The Poetry of Architecture” with a description of an English cottage:

The whitewash is stainless, and its rough surface catches a side light as brightly as a front one; the luxuriant rose is trained gracefully over the window; and the gleaming lattice, divided not into heavy squares, but into small pointed diamonds, is thrown half open, as is just discovered by its glance among the green leaves of the sweet briar, to admit the breeze, that, as it passes over the flowers, becomes full of their fragrance. The light wooden porch breaks the flat of the cottage face by its projection; and a branch or two of wandering honeysuckle spread over the low hatch. A few square feet of garden, and a latched wicket, persuading the weary and dusty pedestrian, with expressive eloquence, to lean upon it for an instant, and request a drink of water or milk, complete a picture, which, if it be far enough from London . . . is a very perfect thing in its way. (12)

Descriptions such as this helped to seal an image of the country cottage and its garden in an unbroken timelessness. Yet the images presented by Ruskin have to do more with middle-class desire than rural reality. Here the cottage is “a picture,” a word which resonates through much of the writing about cottage gardens and, indeed, landscaping in general. No longer the residence of a country worker (only the observer, leaning over the gate, is painted into the picture), the cottage is elevated into an artistic object which holds within itself revelations of a higher, spiritual dimension. It is set “far . . . from London;” and the garden, though tiny, is filled with summer-scented flowers. The composition offers solitude, simplicity, sensuous beauty, an organic melding of building and environment. In this way the garden becomes what is expected of a romantic picture: it reveals within its ordinariness glimpses of the ideal. It becomes, that is, a projection of middle-class idyll onto labouring life.

This idyll was one in which the middle classes at first could not participate. Ruskin's definition of a cottage clearly delineated it as a peasant's abode, erected "where he likes, and as he likes" (66). Quite different was the villa, "the ruralised domicile of the gentleman" (75). Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, the distinction was all but lost. In their need to preserve the cottage and its garden as the locus of so many of their values and aspirations, the middle-class Victorians found it necessary to recreate in their own terms the simple country living they so desired. By weakening the distinction between cottage and villa, by codifying the types of plant to be grown in the cottage garden and by revising the image of the cottager to fit more closely with the ideal, the middle classes gradually re-shaped the entire picture of the cottage garden. The appropriation of the term "cottage" was perhaps the easiest of these deeds. "Cottage" became the word used to describe any unassuming dwelling in a rural setting. It embraced anything from the single-roomed home of the peasant labourer to the wealthier family's modestly-staffed country retreat. By expanding the word to include a mode of living in which they too could participate, the middle classes began the process by which they could preserve and perpetuate those ideals which they associated with the cottage garden.

The importance of the flower garden to so many Victorians was based on a number of important and interacting impulses. One of these was reaction against the values inherent in the industrialisation of England: pragmatism, order, control and, in particular, efficiency. Another was the connected impulse to collect and dissect and categorise which found expression in botanical treatises for ladies, as well as in the botanical evidences of British exploratory genius on display in Kew Gardens which was opened to the public in 1841 and subsequently greatly enlarged to accommodate the enormous quantity of botanical specimens arriving from all parts of the globe. A third was a response to the attack on religion, particularly natural religion, perceived in the works of Charles Darwin and other evolutionary naturalists.

Such trends in science and manufacture toward new paradigms of practical efficiency were met by a converse popular movement towards old-fashioned human sentimentality, often expressed in terms of flowers. Queen Victoria pressed flowers, but not for scientific study as her predecessor Queen Charlotte had done. She kept them instead as personal mementoes of weddings, deaths, and the like (Scourse 9). Botanic treatises such as Darwin's work on orchids which discussed seed production in terms of efficiency (277) were challenged by the introduction of sentimental books on the language of flowers, such as those of Kate Greenaway which are still popular today. In the same contrary spirit, as traditional relationships between God, humanity, and nature came under threat from evolutionary science, and as often dreary urban landscapes formed the dominant vistas of a majority of the middle-class population of England, the natural theology discredited by science became the myth of a people eager to affirm their own place in a more natural world.

These typical human responses to perceived dehumanising trends in society focused on the garden as a site in which could be recognised a number of closely intertwined traditional ideals. The foremost of these was religious: in the abundantly flowering gardens of country folk Victorians found an earthly version of the Garden of Eden manifested in the simplicity of life, closeness to God's creation, and proof of his benevolence in the abundance and beauty of the garden. Closely allied to these idealised views was a deep moral sense which many Victorians were unable to separate from true

religious feeling: a cottage garden was a Christian garden, a place in which morality and closeness to God were nurtured and flourished. Also closely connected to the Christian ideal was a patriotic vision, the cottage garden was seen as quintessentially English, a visible link with a great pastoral heritage. Here were to be found, preserved in their simplicity, the same flowers of which Chaucer and Shakespeare spoke, while all around greater gardens discarded them in favour of gaudy and temperamental exotics representing empire and colonisation (Thomas 226).¹ Fads in plant choice and methods of display passed by the cottage garden which thus became both symbol of a noble heritage and the bastion of tradition and stability in a rapidly changing world.

Another value that the combination of religion and tradition applied to the cottage garden was truth to nature. When contrasted with the grey streets and unhealthy air of industrial cities, cottage gardens presented a green and teeming fertility which recalled the not too distant past when England was a rural, agricultural nation. Here was the "true" England, free of the grit which disguised the cities. In the cottage garden middle-class Victorians could rediscover their birthright in a beautiful arrangement of Christian faith and English heritage, bound by the ties of tradition.

Such a complex of ideas woven around the gardens of peasants had its problems. The peasants, for a start, had no part in defining all these virtues with which their labours were invested by the middle class; nor did they have any interest in perpetuating them. Although the notion of a peasant entering the picture long enough to provide refreshment for the observer at the gate was an enticing one, any element of independence offered a threat to the bucolic dream. This problem was dealt with artistically by eliminating unruly and antagonistic elements in order to more perfectly represent middle-class aspirations and by re-presenting cottagers as charmingly old-fashioned rural cousins whose lives became the human equivalent of the spiritual and social values already associated with their gardens. Even had the cottagers any interest in revising these images of themselves, they had no means of doing so which could compete with the technology at the service of their urban revisers. Willy-nilly, cottagers and their gardens were gradually sentimentalised and gentrified into perfect images of middle-class desire.

Little is known about cottage gardens before 1830. They were not considered suitable subjects for paintings; nor did they come under the attention of landscapers. The tradition of landscape painting within which Gainsborough worked in the late 1700s identified English gardens with landscape, not flowers. The development of the picturesque landscape, with its move away from formal order to a wildness which was no less contrived, found no place for the brightness of flowers in compositions which attempted to express the dread and magnificence of mighty land forms. Even trees in blossom, according to Uvedale Price, were too gaudy to be suitable for landscape paintings (Clayton-Payne 9). Gainsborough's "cottage door" series of paintings gives no indication that gardens existed to brighten the golden gloom of his subjects' lives.² In

¹ Thomas estimates that in 1500 there were 200 cultivated plants in England; in 1839 there were 18,000 (226). He lists some imports of each century, most of which by the Victorian age were considered traditional cottage plants: sixteenth century: tulip, hyacinth, anemone, crocus; seventeenth century: lupin, phlox, virginia creeper, michelmas daisy; eighteenth century: sweet pea, dahlia, chrysanthemum, fuchsia.

² For instance, the "Cottage Door" painting of 1780 depicts a family outside their cottage, lit by a yellow light filtering through the surrounding forest. No cultivated garden is in evidence. The dark and artificial

the 1820s artists were still producing sombre and awesome portraits in which the human figure was dwarfed by the immensity of nature. When Turner and Constable broke with the traditions of the picturesque making it acceptable to depict natural colour accurately, their move was adopted with enthusiasm. Both water colourists, whose medium was so well suited to bright colour, and the Pre-Raphaelites, with their emphasis on exact observation of nature, found the re-introduction of bright colour a liberating influence on their work. By the 1860s, under artists such as Birket Foster and Helen Allingham, flower garden painting had become an accepted subject.

Meanwhile, landscapers had also been busy disregarding cottage gardens. The broad, expansive vistas of Capability Brown in the second half of the eighteenth century had little to say to the cottager. Humphrey Repton, working at the turn of the century, made a move toward the development of landscaping plans suitable for the estates (and pockets) of the moderately well-to-do. And in the 1820s John Loudon introduced the idea of the “gardenesque”—a phrase which had affiliations with the idea of the picturesque. The gardenesque acknowledged the artificiality of the landscaped garden, and emphasised the idea of presenting each tree and plant to bring out its individual beauty. Loudon’s landscaping adapted well to the artistic and botanical pretensions of the middle class. But cottages and their gardens only came under scrutiny when they impinged in some way upon the landscaping desires of the wealthy. Thus, the destruction of an entire village and its replacement out of sight of an expansive vista, the sort of activity carried out in the 1770s by Capability Brown for Lord Milton and recorded in poetry by Oliver Goldsmith, attracted attention. So too did the retention of dilapidated cottages deliberately preserved for their picturesqueness; for the sake of picturesque effect some landowners refused to replace thatching with permanent roofing despite the attendant ills of leakage, infestation by rodents and insects, danger of fire, and inconvenience of replacement. Repton, who advocated the retention of the occasional cottage in a broad vista for the purposes of perspective and visual interest, still criticised those who failed to make sure that they functioned as effective dwellings and were not solely retained for their picturesqueness, at whatever cost to the unfortunate inhabitants (Loudon 244, 249n).

Writers, like painters, focused on the cottage garden in the 1830s. In similar fashion their work idealised it as an icon of English tradition, simplicity, honesty, and religious values. Elizabeth Gaskell’s descriptions of country life gained extra poignancy from the contrast between the grey, plantless streets of manufacturing towns, dedicated to efficient production, and the perpetual summer of untrammelled excess of production thought to typify the traditional English country cottage garden. In *Mary Barton* her description of a farm house lists an eclectic mixture of plants grown for use rather than beauty, in a heady blend of colour and scent:

The porch of [the] farmhouse is covered by a rose-tree; and the little garden surrounding it is crowded with a medley of old-fashioned herbs and flowers, planted long ago, when the garden was the only druggist’s shop within reach, and allowed to grow in scrambling and wild luxuriance—roses, lavender, sage, balm (for tea), rosemary, pinks

colours of such paintings were rejected by the Pre-Raphaelites in preference for brighter, more “natural” tones.

and wallflowers, onions and jessamine, in most republican and indiscriminate order. (2)

The link between such "old-fashioned" cottage plants and the lost rural delights of an earlier and more innocent age was based on the common myth that cottage gardeners were the preservers of England's horticultural heritage. They alone continued to raise traditional plants while wealthier people spent fortunes on unusual specimens such as Himalayan rhododendrons, South American water lilies or African proteas. Such plants represented another aspect of English superiority: British exploration and colonisation of much of the world was represented by the botanical variety to be met with in all but the poorest gardens. Only in country gardens, it was thought, were the old favourites, delphinium, sweet pea, wallflower, lavender and primula still brightly blooming. As Ouida remarked:

Educated taste will spend large sums of money on odontozlossom, catleya and orchid whilst it will not glance perhaps once in a lifetime at the ruby spots on the cowslip bells and the lovely lilac or laburnum flowers blowing in a wild west wind. It will be a sorry day for the flowers and the nation when the cottage gardens of England disappear and leave the frightful villa garden and the painfully mathematical allotment field alone in their stead. An English cottage, such as Creswick and Constable, as old Crome and David Cox saw and knew them, and as they may still be seen, with roses clambering to the eaves, and bees humming in the southern-wood and sweetbriar, and red and white carnations growing beside the balsam and the dragon's-mouth, is a delicious rural study still linked, in memory, with foaming syllabub and ruddy cherries, and honey-comb yellow as amber, and with the plaintive bleating of new-born lambs sounding beyond the garden coppice. (48)

Yet the identification of cottagers with tradition was no more true than many other myths about cottage gardens. Superficially, it appeared that way: Flora Thompson records that all the gardens in her hamlet sported the same plants, down to the same one type of rose grown from cuttings handed on from neighbour to neighbour (115). There was nothing intrinsically superior about that particular rose, however, or any of the other flowers. It was merely that financial constraint limited gardeners to plants which could be taken from cuttings or seed, or which were donated by neighbours or the nearby gentry. These all tended to be perennial types, not because they were traditional but because they were available, reliable and simplest to obtain and grow. In any case, the cottage gardens of Lark Rise were not the final preserve of these plants or of any others. The great nurseries of England kept large stocks of traditional perennials, and were able to supply them when they once more became fashionable in middle-class gardens. Moreover, cottage gardeners, with a pugnacity and stubbornness not trained out of them by middle-class attentions, often grew non-traditional plants, delighting in their successes with half-hardy or tender plants such as geraniums or auriculas which required individual attention. Some species became so popular in various areas that they were dubbed "mechanics' flowers" and considered beneath the attention of any but the

labouring classes (Scourse 23).³ And even the garden designs of wealthy houses were imitated and adapted by simpler folk. John Constable's mother, for instance, redesigned her kitchen garden to reflect the formal arrangements of bedding in vogue in other gardens of the time.⁴

Such scenes as Gaskell and Ouida describe might be thought typical of the time but in reality there was no such tradition. Certainly, gardens had existed for centuries, but not with consistency or in abundance. Donald Beaton in 1852 stated that the many excellent gardens in his own area had all been created in the last twenty years—that is, since 1830 (Clayton-Payne 17). And the plants grown in them, considered so quintessentially English, were not: at the end of the century, D.C. Calthrop described the archetypal cottage garden as a miniature lesson in world geography:

Ploughman Giles, sitting by his cottage door, smoking an American weed in his pipe while his wife shells the Peas of ancient Rome into a basin, does not realise that his little garden, gay with Indian Pinks and African geraniums, and all its small crowd of joyous-coloured flowers, is an open book of the history of his native land spread at his feet. Here's the conquest of America, and the discovery of the Cape, and all the gold of Greece for his bees to play with. Here's his child making a chain of Chaucer's Daisies; and there's a Chinese mandarin nodding at him from the Chrysanthemums. (57)

Yet although Calthrop explodes the idea of the cottage garden as quintessentially English, he still upholds the romantic notion of the garden as a bright reflection of simple family life.

Just as the sentimental idea of tradition overlooked the historical realities of introduced flowers, it overlooked, as sentiment is apt to do, other realities of nature. The rustic vision of simple life in a snug little country cottage, surely one of the most abiding dreams of urbanised humanity, depended on a series of contrasts between what was perceived as reality and what was perceived as ideal. The reality, discovered within the walls of factories, was discerned as pragmatic, efficient, modern, ugly, and inhumane. The obvious visual and spiritual counterpoint was the cottage set in a country garden. Here humanity was valued; overflowing abundance was perceived as generosity, not inefficiency; old-fashioned values such as honesty and appreciation of beauty regardless of production were still of worth. The reproduction in word and paint of the ideal country garden emphasised such qualities. These were not complete fictions: after all, Foster and Allingham painted cottages which really existed. What they did do however, was paint those which most nearly represented the ideals they admired, offering an unrepresentative sample which came to be considered the norm. Even the flowers were subjected to unity of representation; particularly in Stannard's works the same selection

³ These "mechanics' flowers" were not only the popular varieties such as the auriculas prized by Lancashire and Yorkshire men, but included all the traditional flowers grown by cottagers: ranunculus, anemones, pinks, polyanthus, hyacinths, and tulips, to name a few.

⁴ As can be seen by comparing "View from the Gardens over East Bergholt 1814" and the later "Golding Constable's Flower Garden."

of plants is depicted, often in very similar arrangements, in the gardens of quite different cottages.

Despite efforts to idealise the garden and gentrify its inhabitants, the writings and paintings of middle-class Victorians also served to highlight the reality of rural poverty in a dark counterpoint to the uplifting patriotic and traditional idyll they wished to advance. As urban experience came to dominate English life, there was a move from painting sweeping panoramas of the countryside to more intimate portraits of country life, and the artist's gaze narrowed from grand distances to the near and human. This immediately caused a problem as it became very apparent that the rural poor, when subjected to close scrutiny instead of being viewed with indifference or sentimentality, made very unsuitable symbols for the closeness of God and the English through nature. Moreover, the untamed cottager in his garden showed a dangerous resistance to the civilising influences of English middle-class life (Bermingham 161), having withstood the move toward all that the city represented in terms of efficient management of resources, progress, and order. To a large extent, the cottager was also removed from the socialising processes of politics, community living and religion. Only by introducing elements which would control tendencies toward too much individualism or isolation could cottagers, and the gardens they tended, be made to retain their symbolic connotations.

This could be done by removing the working poor from the picture, as Ruskin did, or by creating cosily gentrified images of country life in literature and painting. Such early works by Foster as "Cutting Cabbages" depict gardens which are scrappy, untidy, and given over in large part to the unromantic practicalities of daily life: cabbages rather than cabbage roses.⁵ The people in these pictures show unmistakable signs of poverty: poorly dressed children work alongside adults in these gardens. But later works by Allingham present a more acceptable view of the cottager as the bastion of tradition: she deliberately chose to paint out modern improvements to cottages, replacing them with the original features, and cottagers were portrayed neatly clothed in the styles of an earlier time (278). Children were shown at play rather than work. In her paintings, and in those of other cottage painters such as Stannard, flowers come to take up more and more of the garden plot. The weather is pleasant: spring and summer, the seasons of blossom rather than fruit, are most commonly represented. Gradually, even the adults stop working in the gardens. In imitation of paradise the joyous riot of colour and scent and beauty is self-perpetuating and self-sustaining, and those who live in the midst of this abundance have nothing to do but enjoy it.

A literary version of this ameliorative process can be found in Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*. Ethel decides to civilise a nearby hamlet, a process which is carried out by providing a Sunday school where the first lessons are in personal appearance and behaviour. The culmination of her work is the dedication of a new church whose minister is her brother Richard:

Cocksmoor . . . was not a desolate sight, as in old times, for the fair edifice, rising on the slope, gave an air of protection to the cottages, which seemed now to have a centre of unity, instead of lying forlorn

⁵ Foster began exhibiting his water colours in the 1860s. He worked mainly in Surrey, and was a strong influence on Helen Allingham who settled nearby in 1881.

and scattered. Nor were they as wretched in themselves, for the impulse of civilisation had caused windows to be mended and railings to be tidied, and Richard promoted, to the utmost, cottage gardening, so that, though there was an air of poverty, there was no longer an appearance of reckless destitution and hopeless neglect. (561)

Despite their artistic, literary and architectural efforts, the images of which city dwellers dreamt continued to owe very little to reality. Instead, as the city became more and more a symbol of all that was opposed to the natural and good, the cottage garden took on more and more the image of Eden. This trend culminated in the work done at the end of the century by Gertrude Jeckyll and Edward Lutyens who, drawing on the myth that a garden was a natural object and not an artefact, unified buildings and grounds in a careful melding of art and artlessness deliberately designed to imitate God's hand in Eden. This was not a new trend by any means; the typological connections between the Garden of Eden and the gardens of earth had been long recognised and widely understood and those who saw themselves as part of the urban, industrial movement saw also that they were, in a way, cast out of Eden. The result was an idealisation of the living conditions of rural workers who had not sold their birthright. But it was hard to wax lyrical over cabbages and onions, or about a poverty which demanded every space around a cottage for food production. Flowers-in-the-front was a gentrified response to the realities of rural existence in which flowers were often incidental to the root, seed, sap, fruit, or branch—any of which, being useful, had once served as the rationale for growing any particular plant in the first place.

Eventually the middle-class desire to see their own symbols in the gardens of country folk became a self-fulfilling ideal. The creation of attractive estate villages which replaced run-down cottages were designed as testimonials to the taste of the landowner. Some landlords demanded that flower gardens be maintained around their cottages (Clayton-Payne 17). The aesthetic considerations in such cases were matched by economic ones: the cultivation of flowers was one of the first signs of a society living above subsistence level so a cottager who grew flowers with no medicinal or edible value demonstrated both that there was time to indulge in aesthetic activities purely for the pleasure of it, and that there was space to spare for non-productive vegetation. Cottagers who grew flowers were not so hungry that every piece of soil must be used for growing food; not so overworked that every moment of time must be spent working for gain; not so spiritually barren that every action must have a utilitarian purpose. Flower gardens thus signalled to passers-by that here was a landlord who was so generous that his dependents were not bound to the necessities of survival, but had both leisure and land in excess. This was a very valuable advertisement in a developing industrial society where so many people were dispossessed of land through industrialisation of farming, urbanisation, and enclosure. It indicated the presence of a benevolent and caring landlord and prosperous and happy tenants who were not so bowed down by the exigencies of daily survival that there was no time for the creation of pure beauty and pleasure.

In such ways, the impulse to improvement which was so bound up in Victorian ideals of progress and efficiency did eventually impinge upon the lives of cottagers. Dorothea's attempts to design suitable cottage dwellings for the local inhabitants in *Middlemarch* had their real-life parallel in Loudon's designs for workers' cottages, one

of which came complete with rustic railings along which to train roses. Yet even the improvement offered in the model villages created by some landlords for their workers failed to convince country workers of the superiority of the middle-class dream, as Flora Thompson describes in *Lark Rise to Candleford*:

The village was so populous and looked so fine, with its pretty cottages standing back on each side of an avenue of young chestnut trees, that Laura thought at first it was Candleford. But, no, she was told; it was Lord So-and-So's place. . . . It was what was called a model village, with three bedrooms to every house and a pump to supply water to each group of cottages.

Only good people were allowed to live there, her father said. That was why so many were going to church. (302)

The sardonic comment made by Flora's father suggests that even such improvements entailed a trade-off with which he, for one, was not content: in return for decent living room and attractive surroundings, there was a loss of independence and individuality—an imposition of standards from outside the family circle.

As cottagers themselves (for whom poverty was not noticeably lessened by the scent of scrambling roses) remained only slightly affected by the manipulations of their urban compatriots, it finally became necessary for the middle classes to move beyond the appropriation of the garden in the displaced activities of art and literature and rural renewal. By the 1880s the demarcation between country cottage and suburban villa had become blurred in both word and deed. New suburban areas were designed after model villages such as Milton Abbas to provide the qualities, such as privacy and individualism, thought to exist in rural life; it is ironic that each cottage in Milton Abbas had housed four families, an average of thirty-six people each. As suburbs grew, and gardening became a respectable activity for a householder, the demarcation between cottage garden and villa garden also became blurred. This late in the century middle-class gardeners were bringing their dreams to life by producing their own versions of cottage gardens which were difficult to distinguish from those of country folk. By the end of the Victorian era the cottage garden had become a trim, mixed herbaceous border which obeyed the rules of art in its colour schemes and design, and displayed to the world those reclaimed values of the Victorian middle class: efficient use of land, tradition, patriotism, independence, order—all under the banner of religious truth. Calthrop claimed that to plant a garden was to pull heaven down to earth (54), and Gertrude Jeckyll at the very end of the nineteenth century said that to plant a garden was "the nearest thing we can know to the mighty force of creation" (25). Together with the declaration in 1883 by William Robinson that the cottage garden was an indigenous style, these remarks suggested that Eden was to be found in England (Clayton-Payne 57). That England, and that Eden, were now triumphantly located in the tidy urban gardens of middle-class Victorians.

Through an idealisation of country life, the reification of the cottage garden, and the appropriation of the imagined styles and spaces of cottage life, middle-class urban dwellers maintained and reshaped the country garden to reflect their desire for a return to a vanishing spiritual, national, and traditional heritage. As the locus of such important ideals, the country cottage garden became a powerful image for them. Indeed, it was so

potent a symbol of all that was considered decent and right that, for the most part, they were forced to invent it.

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