

Aster borders at Munstead Wood (photo: Martin Wood) Right: Beatrice Parsons, *West Paved Garden, Gravetye Manor*, watercolour, early 1900s.



Reading the Edwardian garden

Judith B. Tankard explores the best books for understanding of the Edwardian garden



In the early days of garden history, the terms Elizabethan, Georgian, Victorian, and Modern seemed to work well. However,

the term Edwardian presented problems due to the shortness of the period (reign of Edward VII) and lack of definition. For one thing, it is an era more closely identified with the pre-war social scene of which country houses and gardens played an essential part. Osbert Sitwell's engaging quartet of memoirs, *Left Hand, Right Hand*, sums up his coming-of-age in pre-war England and the upper-class reverence for country estates and all their trappings, from expectations for privileged families to such practical matters as dressing for the occasion and the management of vast estates, including gardens.

In recent years the term Edwardian has grown to represent a period from the early 1890s through World War I. In America, the period is known as the Gilded Age (1890s) followed by the Country House Era (1900s-1920s). It was not until the publication of David Ottewill's groundbreaking book, *The Edwardian Garden* (1989) that we began to understand the full range of components and styles. In his book, Ottewill systematically examined all the threads and guises of the era, making a case for the revival of so-called 'old-fashioned' gardens, 'naturalistic' gardens as promoted by William Robinson, Lutyens and Jekyll gardens, Arts & Crafts gardens, and Italian-style gardens as perfected by Harold Peto. In all, the book presented a catch-all for a medley of topics worthy of further investigation by numerous scholars.

Ottewill's book followed on the heels of Jane Brown's excellent study, *Gardens of a Golden Afternoon: The Story of the Partnership: Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll* (1982), which revitalized Jekyll's waning reputation. From there the ball was picked up by other Jekyll experts, including Michael Tooley, Richard Bisgrove, Fenja Gunn, Martin Wood, and others, including myself. Jekyll's colleague, William Robinson, also inspired new biographies following on the heels of Mea Allan's pioneering study, *William Robinson 1838-1935: Father of the English Flower Garden* (1982), which curiously omitted references.

From there, Richard Bisgrove's *William Robinson: The Wild Gardener* (2008) and other studies by Rick Darke and Charles Nelson have further elucidated this important figure. Victorian gardens have been thoroughly investigated by Brent Elliot and numerous publications have documented some of the artists who painted them. Robin Whalley's *The Great Edwardian Gardens of Harold Peto: From the Archives of Country Life* (2007) has certainly piqued the interest in this important architect's work as well as Janet Waymark's study, *Thomas Mawson: Life, Gardens, and Landscapes* (2009), one of the great garden designers of the era. Helena Gerrish's book, *Edwardian Country Life: The Story of H. Avray Tipping* (2011), has also brought to light the architecture and garden design work of the long-time architectural editor of *Country Life*.

My own specialised interest in the Arts & Crafts Movement in all its manifestations from architecture and decorative arts to

garden design has been long-standing. It brought me in contact with Lutyens and Jekyll, of course, but also introduced me to the diversity of other architects and garden designers, such as M.H. Baillie Scott, C.F.A. Voysey, Robert Lorimer, and C.E. Mallows to name just a few. Finding the commonality among them was the challenge. More elusive was the so-called 'Old Fashioned Garden' which, in part, was a source of inspiration for the Arts & Crafts garden.

As John Sedding wrote in *Garden-Craft Old and New* (1890), 'The old-fashioned garden represents one of the pleasures of England, one of the charms of that quiet beautiful life of bygone times.' Because these gardens are 'beautiful yesterday, beautiful to-day, and beautiful always. . . we do well to turn to them, not to copy their exact lines, . . . but to glean hints of our garden-enterprise to-day; to drink of their spirit.' His words inspired most garden designers of the era and still resonate today. And some of the best representations of these gardens are paintings by Edwardian artists such as George Elgood, Alfred Parsons, Beatrice Parsons, Thomas Hunn, Helen Allingham and Ernest Arthur Rowe. They showed the cream of Edwardian gardens in all of their manifestations.

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