

REVIEWS

Descriptions of Lord Cobham's Gardens at Stowe 1700-1750. Ed. G. B. Clarke, pp. 188, illustrations. Buckinghamshire Record Society No. 26, ISBN 0 901198 25 0.

Stowe has been called a palimpsest for garden designers. It was literally a palimpsest, indeed a Rosetta stone for the writers of poetry, letters, travel diaries, journals, notebooks, guidebooks, and other miscellaneous commentary that George Clarke has collected in this useful anthology. 'The aim of the present volume', he writes in the Introduction, 'is to collect into one place the most important pieces written on Stowe between 1700 and 1750, so as to throw new light on the development of the gardens and reflect the changing attitude of informed opinion towards them' (p. 7). The limiting dates coincide with the lifetime of Sir Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham, who began the layout in the 1720s. The collection includes extracts of poetry by Pope and Thomson, complete poems by William Congreve, Gilbert West, and Samuel Boyse; local history and travel by Browne Willis, Jeremiah Miles, and Defoe's *Tour* (1742) as revised by Samuel Richardson; journal and diary entries by or attributed to Edward Southwell, Sir John Evelyn, Thomas Knight, Charles Lord Cathcart, John Loveday, George Vertue, John Whaley, and Lady Newdigate; guidebook descriptions and commentary by Benton Seeley, William Gilpin, and George Bickham; passages from letters by John Viscount Percival, Jemima Marchioness Grey, Anne Grenville, and the King of Poland.

Two important pieces, Gilpin's *Dialogue* (1748) and Bickham's *Beauties* (1750), are too long to be reprinted, but Clarke refers us to readily available modern facsimile reprints edited by John Dixon Hunt and himself. A few of these selections are familiar, but even the best schooled student of Stowe will find treasures here surrounded by enlightening commentary in headnotes by the leading authority on the history of the gardens. Many are printed from manuscripts in county record offices (Bedfordshire and Warwickshire), Yorkshire Archaeological Society, British Library, Christ Church Oxford Library, Huntington Library; and rare imprints include a unique copy of a French pamphlet in a private collection (*Les Charmes de Stow*, 1748). The collection is generously illustrated with six plans, two modern reconstructions of the layout in 1700 and 1724, engraved plans dated 1739 and 1753 with a detailed key, plus numerous illustrations throughout the book from the three major collections of Stowe engravings by Rigaud, Seeley, and Bickham. The reprinted texts are not facsimiles, but 'extracts from printed eighteenth-century books have been laid out in the same way as the originals' (p. 12), and they make an attractive, legible appearance on the page. The texts of eighteenth-century verse follow standard modern editions, but Clarke has taken the trouble to restore 'capital letters authorised by eighteenth-century editions' (*ibid.*). For example, he prints Congreve's neglected poem on Stowe, 'Of Improving the Present Time' (1728) from the British Library manuscript (BL Add. MS 57804, f. 31),

following F. W. Bateson's 1930 edition for spelling and punctuation, and Curll's edition of 1729 for capitals.

Clarke's commentary solves a crux (p. 36) in Gilbert West's underrated estate poem from a manuscript annotation in a copy in the Princeton University Library. He points out that the earliest commentator on the gardens, Viscount Perceval, 'put his finger on the essential character of Bridgeman's layout . . . when he contrasted the *irregularity* of the whole design at Stowe with the *regularity* of the parts' (p. 14). Jeremiah Miles's account (1735) is remarked as the 'first to describe the Elysian Fields in any detail' (p. 60). He notes the 'heavy-footed, jocular tone' (p. 66) of the anonymous commentator who makes light of the fragility of the Shell Rotundo in the Elysian Fields 'since the Designer and Lord of it is as expeditious in Building as ever was Amphion, the Fortune of the one supplying him with as much Capacity as the harp did the other' (p. 74). He identifies Defoe's *Tour* in Richardson's 1742 edition as 'the source of the long line of Stowe guides' (p. 78) by Seeley and others. He gives an equally discriminating account of the sources of Boyse's secondhand descriptions in his poem on Stowe, *The Triumphs of Nature* (1742), and prints a reply from *The Gentleman's Magazine* (p. 111). He sums up the career of Benton Seeley, whose *Description* of Stowe (1744) was the first country-house guidebook, and who published the anonymous *Dialogue Upon Stow* (1748) reliably attributed in this century to William Gilpin. He has discovered a previously unknown source for John Bickham's *Beauties*, the rare pamphlet *Les Charmes de Stow* (1748) addressed to a lady the anonymous author soothes after mentioning the Temple of Venus: 'A ce mot, *Mademoiselle*, vous rougissez, le Coeur vous bat, & Votre aimable pudeur sent quelque allarme! Mais de grace ne vous effrayez point. Mylord *Cobham* est un Seigneur trop modeste . . .' (pp. 161-3).

This splendidly edited collection is a labour of love that will be treasured by every Stoic garden historian. And while one might quibble about a principle of selection that prefers literal to literary accounts (pp. 7-8), giving entry to John

Whaley's inconsequential paragraph (p. 59) while relegating Joseph Warton's important lines in *The Enthusiast* (1744) to the notes (p. 180), Clarke has added significant unknown documents to the record. The letters of Pope and Walpole, Clarke believes, cannot be trusted on details of the development of the garden design, but it is to these unreliable witnesses we must turn in order to understand the poetic ethos of the English landscape garden.

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High Wycombe: a Pictorial History. Ivan G. Sparkes. Phillimore, 1990, ISBN 0 85033 751 8. £10.95.

'An easy-to-read account of its [High Wycombe's] past, and of the making of the present environment' is how the publishers describe this pleasant book. Since the reading matter is confined to captions the description is accurate enough, but it means that an 'account', as the word is commonly understood, is not to be expected. Nevertheless there is much here of interest, both verbal and visual, material that anyone who knows the town will find appealing, and a stimulus to regret for what has been lost since World War II. The losses are not only of what was pleasing to the eye, but of much that brought employment and made sure that virtually all a family's needs were made locally.

The pictures—paintings and drawings as well as photographs—are well chosen and the captions clear and informative, though they do not always answer all the questions raised by the illustrations. Mr Sparkes's book gives a vivid notion of the appearance and economy of the town up to the 1980s.

That the only map is one showing the town's mills must be noted as a shortcoming. Maps of High Wycombe 'then and now' would have made it much easier for the mind's eye to superimpose the past on the present. We may regret, too, that more of the photographs are

not dated, though acknowledging how difficult it can be to do. Finally—an extraordinary omission for a publisher of Phillimore's standing—the pages are not numbered.

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