
There is a particular form of academic review that ignores the stated purpose of a book or article and instead complains that the author has not approached the subject in the right way. Such a reviewer will ask: “Why didn’t you write about x using y or z as your approach?” The reviewer ends up criticising the piece for not accomplishing what its author never intended to accomplish in the first place. This kind of review is annoying, of course, churlish even, but I’m afraid I can’t help myself here. I was so eager to read Willes’s *The Gardens of the British Working Class* but so disappointed.

The publisher has clearly identified a gap in the market. Fifteen years after Jane Brown’s middle and upper-class centric—but still classic—social history *The Pursuit of Paradise*, the literature on British gardening awaits its equivalent working class monograph. Willes’s stated aim in *The Gardens of the British Working Class* is to present a history of those “ordinary gardeners” submerged below the water line of history (7). Trawling through diaries, memoirs, novels, oral history archives, and ephemera, Willes shows dogged determination in collecting a hyper-abundance of material (though the referencing can make it hard to discern what has been gathering afresh and what has been cribbed from secondary sources). There are some real gold nuggets here. The 1882 diary of Charles Snow, a stonemason, gives a rare voice to artisanal gardening (138). The story of social misfit John Duncan, a Scottish weaver and shortsighted botanizer beset by Dickensian hardship, is really rather moving (198–200). The book contains plenty of illuminating material along these lines, and demonstrates admirable commitment to rescuing these voices from the condescension of garden historians.

But an odd condescending tone keeps cropping up nonetheless, which is, I think, a symptom of the book’s biggest flaw: a lack of clear political commitment. Repeatedly, the
book employs rather patronizing stereotypes, describing the “determination,” the “fortitude,” the “perseverance” of working class gardeners. The “thrifty Scot” appears time and again. Aristocratic and upper class authority remains uncontested; the benevolence of royalty is a continual touchstone (the nadir is an account [312] of Queen Mary’s patronage of the London Gardens Society, which was certainly not a working class body). Substantively, Willes fails to explain the different genres of working class garden: she merely describes them, and in any case tacks far too easily between country house gardens where working class laborers were alienated from the fruits of their labour by aristocratic or industrialist privilege, to leased cottage gardens where the rural working class labored for their own production, to owner-occupied lower-middle-class gardening. Time and time again gardening emerges as a compensation in the face of appalling labor conditions and as a necessary means of subsistence. There is no sense of the potentially transformative nature of gardening, or of the historical agency of the working class to produce their own space (topics covered so well in George McKay’s 2011 *Radical Gardening*). Moreover, the historiography is weak. Nowhere is the idea of what “working class” means interrogated, and the book motors through the momentous changes of industrialization, two world wars, and the shift to consumption-based identity of the later twentieth century, all the time treating “the working class” as a self-evident, transhistorical category.

Stylistically, the writing is clear if prone to awkward nominalizations and gerund-based sentence bloat, while the structure is repetitious, and the chronology rather blurry. For example, wartime gardens crop up in two different chapters in quite an odd way, while the penultimate chapter (“Ancient and Modern”) seems to be a grab bag of leftovers. The book is skewed towards the nineteenth century, although early chapters cover gardening from the sixteenth century on and a couple of later chapters focus on the twentieth century (these include by-the-numbers accounts of interwar suburbia and the two world wars). The book
ends after the Second World War for no obvious reason. The title doesn’t indicate any particular historical purpose—the last seventy years are not covered, but no explanation is offered as to why. This is a glaring omission, for the last fifteen years have seen a great deal of social science and historical study of everyday, postwar domestic gardens.

Willes set out with admirable intent to give us a fuller picture of gardening. For me, however, this extensionist mission isn’t enough to sustain the reader through 373 pages. *The Gardens of the British Working Class* is straightforward garden history, a trade press compendium rich in material, low on exposition, devoid of analysis. That is of course what Willes and the publisher set out to achieve, and they’ve done it well enough. But it isn’t the book about working class gardening that this reviewer would like to have read.

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