Lives of New England Gardens: Book Review

“The Kingdom of England don’t afford so Fine a Prospect as I have.”
—Thomas Hancock (1702-1764)

Phyllis Andersen


Regionalism, as defined by Marc Treib in a recent Dumbarton Oaks publication, is based on the interaction of geographical, biological, environmental, and cultural factors. Regionalism in Treib's definition is a dynamic entity constantly evolving and modifying garden form. Building a case for regional identity on too sweeping or static a construct can lead to perilous scholarship. Alan Emmet avoids this pitfall in her admirable new book on historic New England gardens by her very careful rendering of the physical character of site and the personal visions of the garden creators. Certainly there are themes in New England gardenmaking: Anglophilic models, the need for a country seat to balance lives based in commerce, the valuing of horticultural pursuits in a region with a rich nursery tradition. In her elegant style Emmet renders the life of over fourteen gardens—some our grand masterworks: Wellesley, the Hunnewell estate; Shelburne Farms, the Webb family country home, Edith Wharton's The Mount. Others, small, eccentric: Potter's Grove in Arlington, Massachusetts; Roseland in Woodstock, Connecticut; Celia Thaxter's garden on Appledore Island. Of the gardens covered, four are lost and recreated through documentation, most are extant and open to the public in some form of preserved condition, still others remain in private use.

Emmet reflects on the definition of “garden” and establishes her own: “The best gardens convey this sense of their own separateness, a feeling of seclusion and sanctuary from the workaday world...their appearance owes as much to what they exclude as to what they contain.” Like Olmsted, Emmet values the garden as prospect as well as refuge, albeit a prospect that is controlled and exclusive. She is precise in her selection criteria: the garden must typify a particular period or exemplify an innovation and must have a sufficient written record. She begins with the gardens of the early republic in Boston and in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and ends with Eolia, the Harkness estate in Connecticut, completed just before World War I.

One of the most interesting early gardens is that of the Boott family in Boston. In a chapter aptly titled “Radishes and Orchids,” Emmet describes the fascinating and sometimes sad saga of a family of amateur horticulturists with ties to England. The Boott garden was located in Bowdoin Square on the site of what is now the twenty-two story state office building on Cambridge Street in downtown Boston. Kirk Boott, the founding father, marked his success as an importer of English goods with a substantial mansion and attached greenhouse. With an amateur’s zeal he grew tender flowers and fruit. His sons added orchids to the family collection. Emmet captures the spirit of horticultural competition that affected the Boott family and that was supported by such role models as Theodore Lyman and his estate, the Vale, in Waltham and Gardiner Greene and his exquisite terrace garden at the foot of Beacon Hill.

Emmet's rendering of the “lost gardens” is poignant because their loss had as much to do with the fickleness of the second generation as it had with failing fortunes and the imposition of the personal income tax. The ghostly garden traces of Vaucluse, the classically inspired landscape built by the Elam family near Newport, Rhode Island, owes much to Rousseau's romantic, melancholy retreat at Ermenonville. Several families were associated with Vaucluse, none
capable of sustaining its beauty. Sadder yet is the story of the spectacular “Bellmont,” the 117-acre Cushing estate garden in Watertown, Massachusetts. Downing described it as a “residence of more note than any other near Boston” on account of its extensive range of glasshouses and the “high culture of the gardens.” The mansion and glasshouses were designed by Asher Benjamin, but the garden was designed for the most part by its owner, John Cushing, whose fortune was made in the opium trade in China.

Using a vaguely Reptonian model, Cushing focused on display: fruit trees, rose and flower gardens, fountains. His interest in technical innovation was as strong as his desire for plants of rare and exotic origin. Cushing’s fortune and social and business connections made his garden the setting for extravagant entertainments for prestigious visitors. Four years after Cushing’s death his sons sold the property for $100,000, not because they needed the money but because their interests were elsewhere.
Emphatically in this category of personal creation is the garden of Celia Thaxter on Appledore Island in the Isles of Shoals off the coast of Maine. This garden, well known in its day to a coterie of writers and artists who gathered in cultish form around Thaxter, is equally popular today through the reissue of her book, *An Island Garden*, and its Childe Hassam watercolor illustrations.

Leon Edel, the noted biographer of Henry James, has noted that “no lives are led outside history or society.” Emmet has produced a series of garden biographies that are as enlightening in their rendering of ideas about garden design and social history as they are in their revelations about personal character. Garden creation is a messy business. Books are read, friends give advice, travel inspires new ideas, plants die. Emmet has breathed life into archival documentation to produce a work of scholarship that will inform our garden visits as well as broaden our knowledge of this important segment of New England culture.

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