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GARDENS OF EMPIRE: KEW AND THE COLONIES

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This lecture is the second in a series that explores the links between science and utopianism, two unlikely companions that meet in gardens, particularly botanic gardens. Today, we focus on the “gardens of empire”, particularly the connections between the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and various gardens founded around the British empire, such as the one at Sydney. Colonial gardens would eventually become important imperial assets, which helped to both supply and distribute valuable plants, but that role came about almost by accident and there were numerous, competing visions of what a botanic garden ought to be.

Today the Sydney botanic garden is a popular site for picnics, weddings and relaxing. But in 1816, soon after it was founded, a government proclamation complained about “Persons breaking down the Wall”, which surrounded it. And a few months earlier, the Governor of New South Wales (NSW), Lachlan Macquarie, had ordered three men to receive 25 lashes each – a beating that would have left them unable to walk – merely for setting foot on the Government Domain. Fifty years later, on the other side of the world, another wall around a completely different botanic garden, was also causing public protests. The local newspaper in Richmond, south-west of London, complained about the “walls high enough for a prison”, that surrounded the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The paper complained of the tyranny of the Gardens Director, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, and the “nonsense” he used to deny the public their rights – to enter and enjoy a publicly funded botanic garden. For the public trying to get in, these two gardens must have seemed anything but utopian. However, I want to argue that – despite the many differences between Sydney and Kew – they were connected in many ways; those much-disputed walls symbolise a clash between different visions of utopia.

The Garden of Eden?

In 1770, when Captain James Cook’s ship *The Endeavour* arrived on the east coast of the largely unknown Terra Australis, its botanist, the 27-year-old Joseph Banks, was so astonished by the variety of new plants that he named the site “Botany Bay”. During the voyage, Banks had recorded in his journal that in Australia “the trees [were] at such a distance from one another that the whole Country or at least a great part of it might be cultivated without being oblig’d to cut down a single tree”. Many early accounts of Australia (as had previously been true of early descriptions of America), described it as a paradise so fertile that it hardly needed cultivating. Australia seemed to some like a new Garden of Eden.

The Judaeo-Christian Bible recounted that “the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food”. But of course, this paradise did not last; after Adam and Eve defied God and ate the forbidden fruit, God punished them, telling Adam “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee”. Some commentators interpreted this passage to argue that the sweat and labour involved in agriculture was evidence of humanity’s fallen state. Before we sinned, the living had been easy.

Over the centuries, many different Eden stories arose, including the idea that the original garden still existed in some hidden corner of the world. These ideas were overlaid on various earlier ideas including that of Arcadia (a primitive but unspoiled place), or of a Golden Age (when a benevolent climate ensured that plants bore fruit all the year round without human assistance). But while some mourned our lost paradise, others imagined that Eden could eventually be regained through hard, human work. Numerous writers connected the recreation of Eden in a garden with a wider, seemingly practical proposal: gaining ever-greater knowledge of nature in order to recover the healing and other arts that had been known to Adam but lost because of the Fall. Gradually, through



agriculture and other similar useful arts, the condition of humanity would be improved until our original paradise had been regained. (Francis Bacon's vision of the *New Atlantis*, discussed in the first lecture, was perhaps the most famous embodiment of this tradition.) As European explorers and travellers discovered more of the world's vegetation, some wondered whether it might, perhaps, be possible to bring all the earth's scattered plants back together. A botanic garden that contained all the world's plants would be a new paradise on earth – a New Eden.

However, the Sydney botanic garden originally had no connection to such grandiose dreams. It was founded in the early nineteenth century almost by accident. From 1814–17, the numbers of convicts arriving in NSW rose sharply. Macquarie (who had been appointed governor in 1810), had orders to improve the moral and physical state of the colony and his Calvinist background made him a firm believer in the uplifting effects of honest toil; if the governor did not find work for the convicts' idle hands, the devil surely would. Under these circumstances, walling in a patch of land and declaring it to be a botanic garden must have seemed an ideal project: it allowed Macquarie both to find work for the newly-arrived convicts; it involved studying nature, which most people understood as God's handiwork; it was a place for innocent and educational amusement (at least for the colony's more respectable inhabitants); and, in addition to all these advantages, the garden was to make a practical contribution to improving the colony's agriculture (thus making it increasingly self-sufficient, and less of a financial burden on the British government).

We can get a sense of what the land that became the Domain and botanic gardens was like from a gubernatorial proclamation which decreed that “no Cattle of any Description whatever are ... to be permitted to graze or feed on the said Domain ... and any Horses, Cows, Sheep, Asses, Pigs, or Goats which may after this Notification be found trespassing thereon, will be taken up and impounded”. Yet, despite the governor's walls and edicts, some of Sydney's more disreputable elements continued trespassing and the governor issued a stern notice:

“the Government Domain ... has been much injured, not only by Persons breaking down the Wall that incloses [*sic*] it, but by their cutting down or burning the Shrubbery, destroying the young Plantation of Trees, quarrying of Stones, removing loam, and stealing the Paling.”

The nature of some of these intrusions – timber-cutting, quarrying, removing loam and grazing animals – suggest that some of Sydney's inhabitants were treating the area as common land, freely available for everyone to use. In a letter to the British government's secretary for the Colonies, Macquarie defended his anti-trespassing measures on the following grounds:

“[The] Public Entrances did not suit the Persons going thither for vicious and disorderly purposes, namely secreting stolen Goods ... I had long wished ... to save the Shrubbery and young Plantations of Forest Trees, which had been planted in the Grounds...”

The botanic garden can hardly have been the only place in Sydney where it was possible to hide stolen goods. More significantly, Macquarie's concern to “save the Shrubbery and young Plantations of Forest Trees” implies that the trespassers were also vandals, since newly planted trees would have provided neither timber nor firewood. These faint hints of vandalism suggest that perhaps the gardens were being targeted by protestors because of their direct links to the colony's government.

The idea that common land, freely available to all and thus the basis of English liberty, has been a potent one in English history.¹ During the English Civil War, Gerrard Winstanley, a spokesman for the Diggers or True Levellers argued that “for so long as the earth is a common treasury to all men, kingly covetousness can never reign as king.

¹ It has been argued by various historians that the loss of the commons is something of a myth, initially spread by generations of English radical protestors, and then reinforced by generations of English Marxist historians (See: Briony McDonagh and Carl J. Griffin, “Occupy! Historical geographies of property, protest and the commons, 1500–1850”. *Journal of Historical Geography*, Volume 53, 2016, Pages 1-10). Perhaps so, but the subject is too complex to go into here. More importantly, myths matter – if enough people believed that England had been free and equal before the imposition of the “Norman Yoke”, and that belief shaped their actions, then the Norman Yoke becomes a fact of English history, even if it was ultimately built on a myth.



Therefore his first device was to put the people to buy and sell the earth and the fruits one to another; for this would beget discontents”. In reality, Winstanley argued, “the earth with her fruits be a common treasury” and the goal of Diggers was “to restore the land again and set it free, that the earth may become a common treasury to all her children” (*The Law of Freedom*, 1652). These ideas persisted and motivated later protestors. For hundreds of years after Winstanley, generations of protestors and rioters would argue that their poverty was the result of the common land having been taken by force. As an anonymous C17 poem noted:

“They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
Yet let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose
The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take things that are yours and mine”

Pasturing animals and collecting firewood or building materials had been the main uses of common land in Britain during the eighteenth century, before the Enclosure Acts led to the loss of vast areas of commons and a resultant disruption of the communities whose subsistence depended on them. Enclosure and the social dislocation it caused resulted in an explosion of crime in Britain, which in turn created the country’s convict problem. In 1779, when the British government was looking for a new dumping ground for British convicts who were (understandably) no longer welcome in the former American colonies, where they had previously been sent. Banks (whose voyage to Australia had helped turned him into an influential figure) persuaded the government that the land around Botany Bay was fertile enough to sustain a new convict settlement (thus making it cheaper for the British government to run). And one of the early colonists, James Atkinson, assured would-be settlers that: “The esculent and culinary vegetables and roots of Europe are all grown in great perfection, together with many others that cannot be raised in England without the aid of artificial heat. Fruits are in great abundance and variety, and many of excellent quality”. However, it is worth remembering that most of the first Europeans to arrive in this supposed paradise were not free settlers; they had been transported to Australia for poaching on the newly-enclosed land or stealing to feed themselves – the crimes of people forced into poverty by the loss of the commons. A substantial proportion of the first Europeans to arrive in Australia were victims of the Enclosure Acts and one of the things that was supposed to make New South Wales a paradise for the early settlers was the ready availability of cheap convict labour. One person’s utopia was another’s dystopia.

And of course, it was not just the convicts who were excluded from this new garden of Eden; the indigenous people suffered even more. As Richard Drayton has argued, the moral duty to improve supposedly waste land became a justification for coercing anyone considered not to be making the best use of their lands. From there, it was a short, logical step to arguing that England was entitled to conquer Ireland (its first colony) because its land was left idle by its supposedly barbarous inhabitants. The same arguments were employed to justify expropriating the Indians in Massachusetts and Virginia: Robert Cushman argued in his tract on the lawfulness of colonisation, as the Indians “do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts” it followed that their land was “spacious and void” – and ripe for the taking. And the colonisation of Australia was justified using the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, the claim that it was “empty land”. The ideas that were used to justify enclosure of common land in England – that it was going to waste – were used to justify colonialism all over the world.

Improving the world

In 1667, Thomas Sprat (whose *History of the Royal Society* was mentioned in the first lecture) had urged on behalf of the newly founded Royal Society, that English farmers should experiment with exotic new crops, to see if Eastern spices, hemp or silkworms might be grown closer to home, perhaps in Ireland or Virginia. In 1759, the Society offered a gold medal to the first person “to preserve the seeds of spice trees” on their voyages from the east. The Society of Arts became enthusiastic promoters of transplantation, endeavouring to grow in Britain commodities that would otherwise be imported, and it promoted colonial botanic gardens to encourage the exchanges that would make this possible. And the Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus, was fascinated by the



possibilities of acclimatising exotic crops – from tea to coconuts – in order to end Sweden’s dependence on expensive, imported luxuries.

Drayton traced the founding of many botanic gardens to such initiatives but noted that it was increasingly government – usually in the person of colonial governors – who promoted such schemes, rather than independent gentlemen. The goal of improvement would have been familiar to someone like Macquarie, and he was lucky that a young Scot, Charles Fraser (or Frazer – there was no consensus about the spelling of his name), arrived in Sydney on 8th April 1816, just as the Sydney garden was being created. Fraser was then a private in the British army but had previously been a gardener to the Duke of Norfolk, so Macquarie appointed him to run the Government Gardens. With few resources, Fraser improvised as best he could and began trading seeds and specimens of Australia’s still unfamiliar plants with distant scientific men. An ad hoc network grew up; visiting ship’s captains with an interest in plants would be welcomed to the Sydney garden. Fraser would give them gifts of Australian plants – living, dried or as seeds – to take to their next port of call, where they would be passed on to his counterparts in other colonies, or to interested gentlemen gardeners wherever the ship happened to call next. Whenever possible, Fraser asked for cuttings and seeds of potential crop plants in exchange, from onions and cabbages to vines or exotic fruits; anything that might grow in NSW was tested and, if successful, distributed to worthy colonists.

A few years later, in May 1825, the NSW government’s *Sydney Gazette* proclaimed that “the Botanic Garden has been established with the liberal view of benefiting, not the Government, but the individuals under so considerate an Administration”. (Making the whole project sounds a good deal more planned than it really was). The *Gazette*’s editor also mentioned the establishment of government farms, and added:

“These establishments have been formed merely with the view of ascertaining the capabilities of our soil in order that the benefit resulting from such experimental establishments might be imparted to the Colonists generally. We are instructed to say, not only may exotics be obtained from our indefatigable Colonial Botanist (Mr Frazer), but also tobacco seed from Emu Plains, and the sugar-cane from Port Macquarie. Can government exercise a greater stretch of liberality?”²

The archives of Sydney’s garden show plants coming and going, criss-crossing the globe to wherever a sympathetic ship’s captain might be willing to take them. However, one garden is conspicuously absent from the early records: Kew.

Imperial Kew

In 1791, just thirty years after Kew had been founded by Princess Augusta, the poet Erasmus Darwin (grandfather to Charles) wrote:

“So sits enthron’d in vegetable pride
Imperial KEW by Thames’s glittering side;
Obedient sails from realms unfurrow’d bring

(From *The Botanic Garden, Part I: The Economy of Vegetation*, Canto IV).

However, that image of ships bringing the world’s unknown plants to the centre of a great botanical empire rather flattered the gardens. In reality Kew’s gardens fluctuated in importance, according to the monarch of the day’s interest in them. Under Augusta’s son, George III they had flourished as the king pursued agricultural improvement with great vigour (earning himself the nickname, Farmer George). Aided by his friend Sir Joseph Banks (now president of the Royal Society), the king bred sheep at Kew and experimented with new crops that would enrich and feed his people (and, with luck, would prevent them “rebellious” as his ungrateful American subjects had so recently done). However, both George and Banks died in 1820, and George IV showed much less interest in science, agriculture, or the “improvement” of anything other than his own opportunities for leisure. As a result, the formative years of the Sydney garden coincided with a period of decline at Kew.

² *Sydney Gazette*, op. cit. (4), 15/5/25.



In 1838, Kew's deterioration had become so serious (particularly when compared with France's national botanic garden, the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris), that the British government set-up a committee and asked the botanist John Lindley to examine the garden's condition. Lindley recommended that the royal family be relieved of responsibility for Kew, and the gardens be turned over to the nation and used as the botanical headquarters for the British Empire. The most interesting aspect of Lindley's report is his rationale for the change:

“There are many gardens in the British Colonies and dependencies: such establishments exist in Calcutta, Bombay, Saharanpur, in the Isle of France [Mauritius], at Sydney, and in Trinidad, costing many thousands a year: their utility is very much diminished by the want of some system under which they can all be regulated and controlled. ...there is no unity of purpose among them; their objects are unsettled; their powers wasted, from want of not receiving a proper direction; they afford no aid or assistance to each other, and it is to be feared, in some cases, but little to the countries in which they are established...”

The implication of this is clear: Kew did not establish the networks of which it eventually made such extensive use. From the way Lindley phrases his proposals, it would be accurate to say that the botanical colonies founded the “new Kew” and its empire: the need to manage the pre-existing colonial gardens, such as Sydney, was an important part of the case for saving and rebuilding Kew at a time when it was threatened with closure.

Kew was brought under government control in 1841, but it was not Lindley but William Hooker who became its first director (primarily because he had requested a lower salary). Hooker had been Regius professor of Botany at Glasgow University, a position that sounded more glamorous than it was; he was only too happy to take a modest reduction in salary, in exchange for moving closer to London and the influential people he knew who would help advance his career.

William Hooker worked tirelessly to make Kew an asset to the nation and corresponded with collectors and enthusiasts all over the world, including Fraser in Sydney. Hooker's curiosity about the plant world was limitless; as he told Fraser he would welcome any specimens, even seaweeds, as: “I am equally interested in them as other plants. I regard not any reasonable expense and am determined as far as lies in my power to make my Herbarium the richest of any private one in Europe”. However, he knew that his government paymasters were not interested in seaweeds. Much of the wealth of Britain's empire rested on plants: from the timber and hemp from which her navy was built, to the indigo, spices, opium, tea, cotton, and thousands of other plant-based products that the ships carried. So, Hooker focussed his efforts on acquiring specimens and samples of plants that provided, or might potentially provide, useful crops. In his first decade at Kew, he created its Museum of Economic Botany (f.1848) and filled it with plants that might prove valuable to the empire.

Economic botany was perhaps the single most important reason to study plants in the mid-nineteenth century. A few years after Hooker's museum opened, Thomas Croxson Archer published his *Popular Economic Botany* (1853) argued that:

“Vegetable products constitute nine-twelfths of the whole commerce in raw produce which employs the vast mercantile marine of this great kingdom. They furnish us with the bulk of our food and clothing, our medicine and our building materials, and with many other necessaries and luxuries.”

However, his book did not begin with botany, but with the garden of Eden:

“When the fiat went forth, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,” Almighty Justice pronounced a deserved sentence; but, much as fallen man had offended his Divine Creator, he was not forgotten entirely: labour, it is true, had become his lot, but the fruitful earth was left, as before the fall, clothed with every necessary for man's wants, and requiring only the full exercise of those powers with which his Maker had gifted him, for their development.”

Working the “fruitful earth” required identifying valuable plants and then transplanting them, persuading them to grow in new countries. This was not a new idea; as noted, Linnaeus had pursued exactly the same goal half a



century earlier. However, Hooker had the resources of Britain's vast maritime empire to draw on, not just its navy and networks of administrators, but the informal empire of missionaries, traders, explorers, settlers and farmers, many of whom were more than happy to find an "Obedient sail" that would bring the empire's "unnam'd progeny" back to Kew for evaluation and redistribution to the colonies.

William Hooker's management of Kew was so successful that by 1855, the work was proving too much for him. The government agreed to employ his son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, as deputy director and when William died in 1865, Joseph succeeded him as director. Under Joseph's directorship, Kew expanded its global reach and played a crucial role in obtaining the seeds of important crops, such as rubber, from various parts of the world and using its network of gardens to transplant them to British colonies where they could be cultivated profitably. His services to the empire led to him being made a Companion of the Bath, Knight Commander of the Star of India and president of the Royal Society (the first naturalist since Banks to occupy the "throne of science"). Yet despite Kew's imperial success, not everyone was pleased with the way Hooker ran it.

The Kew Gardens Question

Almost as soon as Kew had come under government control, there were rumblings of discontent from the public whose taxes funded it. The year after William Hooker was appointed, a contributor (identified simply as "An Erratic Man") described a trip to Kew in the newly founded *Florist* magazine. He was full of praise for the gardens and their contents but concerned about public access. Alongside the "genteel persons in plenty", whose carriages were parked outside, the writer was delighted to see "the mechanic and his family" were also able to enjoy Kew because the railway had reached Kew Bridge, offering "a speedy and cheap conveyance". It was a pleasure to see London's working classes "enjoying the exchange from London's dirty, crowded, pestiferous courts and alleys to this, in comparison, perfect paradise!". They were, he acknowledged, observing the long-standing English tradition of celebrating "Saint Monday's day" (adding a day to their weekend), but were far better off than "the poor tipling mechanic sitting it may be in a pot-house in town". It was therefore a great shame that the gardens were closed until one o'clock each day. The author urged the Department of Woods and Forests, which ran Kew, to reconsider:

"'Tis to tempt them away from the gin-palace, the public house, and the beer-shop, that we would have these delightful Gardens opened at nine o'clock; ay, and we would add to the beautifully kept ladies' cloak-room a building, where they should have an opportunity of partaking of any refreshments they might bring. As to misconduct, there are plenty of ways to prevent that; and we are happily getting repeated proofs, that the more our countrymen are trusted the better they behave."

Despite this plea, the gardens remained firmly shut in the morning. A few years later, in 1869, the London and South Western Railway reached Kew and Joseph Hooker had to build a new gate to admit the increasing numbers of visitors. In 1876 the Metropolitan and District Railway brought even larger crowds; visitor numbers grew from less than 500,000 a year in 1867 to almost 700,000 in 1875. A year later, the *Gardener's Chronicle* commented that although Kew "was not originally intended as a pleasure-ground" it had "become one of the most popular of such resorts near London".

The *Gardeners' Chronicle*, whose growing readership illustrated the increasing interest in gardening as a popular middle-class hobby, noted that although botanists and horticulturalists "might feel disposed to grudge the time, labour, and money expended on... fashionable garden decoration" at Kew, the editors had no doubt that it was really money well spent. Their argument was that "Kew is maintained by the public purse, and those who help to fill the public purse not unnaturally like to see something for their money". Acknowledging that most visitors were "incapable of appreciating the higher branches of horticulture", much less of "botanical science". And they could not be expected to take more than "a languid and vague interest in the supply of plants to the colonies". By contrast, if they could "see something they can understand and enjoy", they would "willingly contribute their quota to the carrying out of other and more important matters".

Another reason for the growth in visitors was the introduction of bank holidays in 1871. The MP who drafted the Bank Holiday Bill was John Lubbock, so the first secular public holidays in Britain were popularly referred to as 'St Lubbock's days' in his honour. The railways, 'St Lubbock' and the popular enthusiasm for gardening meant the crowds kept growing, and both Joseph and William Hooker worked hard to make Kew gardens attractive.



However, their success caused its own problems. Hooker's friend and supporter John Tyndall noted that because Kew "has been made so beautiful and so attractive to the public" that there was a danger that "its immense scientific importance is likely to be overlooked". That was certainly one of Joseph Hooker's concerns and explains why he continued to insist that the public be excluded each morning. However, he was facing a growing tide of visitors whose demands were proving increasingly hard to resist.

The *Times* reported that the 1877 August Bank holiday had brought 58,000 visitors to Kew, the highest ever total for a single day. A columnist called Atlas wrote in *The World* newspaper argued that it was "a scandal. On St. Lubbock's day and other fete days the public gardens at Kew are not open until one p.m. On the last Bank holiday, the people began to congregate before the gates at eleven a.m., with no other resource than the adjacent public houses till the gates were open". The local paper, the *Richmond and Twickenham Times*, made similar points and claimed that Hooker's obstinacy over opening hours was exacerbating the very problems he wished to avoid:

"...a large number of people came down in the morning [of the last Bank Holiday] expecting admission to the Garden, but finding the gates shut betook themselves in true British fashion, to drinking and dancing, and then some 2 hours later sought to refresh exhausted nature by falling asleep in the grass."

Finally, Hooker seems to have decided that, by comparison with the sight of visitors sleeping it off amid the flowers, early admission was the lesser of two evils; in October 1877, he agreed to open at the gardens at 10am, but *only* on Bank Holidays. He explained that "if opened the whole day the Gardens will be regarded as a Park. Park-licence will insinuate itself & demands for luncheons, picnics & bands of music will follow". Even more seriously, the scientific purposes of the garden would be damaged if "swarms of nursery maids and children" were allowed in before lunchtime.

However, Hooker's bank holiday compromise did not satisfy the public. The Kew Gardens Public Rights Defence Association was set up to campaign for early opening every day. William Robinson's popular magazine *The Garden* took up the campaign and regularly published sarcastic editorials on the demands of science. And the comic weekly, *Funny Folks* took up the challenge of trying to discover what the eminent researchers got up to in the mornings. Their correspondent ("Special Answer") explained that he had "disguised myself as a German botanist" by stuffing his pockets "full of dried herbs" and putting on "a pair of blue spectacles and a stoop". Armed with "a special order from Sir Joseph Hooker" (the only way to gain admission), he went to investigate. He found nine young ladies (who he suggested might have been Hooker's relatives) reading novels, five old gentlemen ("who may have been eminent botanists") fast asleep in deck-chairs, and eleven others who were "engaged in testing the effects of cigar smoke on open-air evergreens". The entire scientific research effort for the day consisted of three distinguished foreigners "sitting in solemn silence round a small shrub", which they were taking turns to examine "with a magnifying-glass". The correspondent sarcastically concluded that he was "amazed that the public has had the impudence" to demand early admission, which would obviously result in "widespread inconvenience and annoyance" to the scientific community.

Conclusion

Thanks to the various campaigns, Kew's opening hours became the subject of a parliamentary debate in 1879, during which Sir Trevor Lawrence rose to defend the British public from "the rather serious charge" Hooker had made "against the people that they resorted to the woods for immoral purposes." Having visited the gardens himself and consulted the police, he had found no evidence of such behaviour. Yet he admitted that he had been "himself some years ago making protestations of an honourable character to a lady in the gardens (laughter); he knew no fitter place for such a purpose". The claim that people misbehaved in garden has also been made by Macquarie, who gave as another of his reasons for walling in the Sydney gardens that they were "much frequented by lewd, disorderly Men and Women for most indecent improper purposes". The puritanical governor explained that "I had long wished to put a stop to these disgraceful Meetings and indecent assignations". The romantic uses of a garden are another potentially utopian strand in their history (think of Adam and Eve again, briefly naked and able to enjoy their paradise while it was still free from sin).

Botanic gardens remain a place where different visions of utopia meet – and compete. Most of today's visitors to both Sydney and Kew seem them primarily as a park, a welcome respite from the nearby busy, noisy cities. They



are still a practical resource; not common ground, perhaps, but a source of education, practical knowledge and even plants (most of the world's public gardens support themselves with regular plant and seed sales). And they are still a courting ground for many; Cambridge University botanic gardens includes a building called Cory Lodge, named after Reginald Cory, whose regular visits to the garden culminated in him donating a massive annual sum of £1,000 a year (about £65,000 per annum in today's money) in the decades after WWI. One reason for his close interest in the gardens became apparent in 1930, when he married Rosa Kester, secretary to the garden's director. And, of course, botanic gardens are major sites of scientific research, doing research in the utopian hopes of conserving species, discovering new medicines, improving crops and even tackling climate change. And these different hopes are sometimes difficult to reconcile. Given his opposition to “picnics and bands of music” Joseph Hooker would probably be appalled to discover that Kew hosts a major music festival each year and, even worse, his father's old museum of economic botanic, is now The Botanical Café (which even serves alcohol!) – one of Kew's more recent attempts the bridge the gap between the cost of running it and the government funding it receives. It would not be entirely surprising if one or two of the scientists at the world's botanic gardens are still secretly yearning for the days when “swarms of nursery maids and children” were excluded, leaving them to sit “in solemn silence round a small shrub”. But – happily for the rest of us – they are not likely to see that particular utopia realised.

Further reading

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