Shona Robin MacPherson

Muck Space Submission 23/08/2019
Gardens as Imported and Imposed Culture and a Botanical Family History

Open your doors and look abroad

From your blossoming garden gather fragrant memories of the vanished

flowers of a hundred years before.[1]

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener,* 1913

History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous."[2]

Introduction

Gardens tend to be seen as an innocuous, ephemeral and neutral arenas in which flowers, shrubbery, paths, and lawns are placed in a more or less random and inconspicuous manner. They are not often seen as relating to power structures, global politics or Empire. Through this essay I will look at the way in which gardens are actually zones where power, politics and history collide.

Through gardens, it is possible to see empire and imperialism from the inside out. I will look at the 18th century idea of an English garden and how this related to the picturesque, and how this was taken to India. I will also look at the lives of the English expats, and how they were becoming increasingly detached from Indian society. Through their search for a sense 'place', and through gardens, I will consider how they distanced themselves further from their surroundings. I will also look at the Delhi Durbur of 1911, an example of the how gardens, flower beds and lawns were used to demonstrate British pomp and power.

The main text I will refer to is the definitive book on the subject of British gardens in India, 'Flora's Empire' by Eugenia Herbert, in which Herbert traces the lives of many different British colonial officials and their wives. I will also look at the theories of W.J.T Mitchell and his book 'Nature and Power', to consider a broader sense of how power can be emitted through landscapes. I will also use some images from my own family[3] archive to illustrate these points and as an example of life working in the Indian Civil Service at the turn of the century.

In An English Country Garden
English Gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries

"OUR England is a garden"[4] proclaimed Rudyard Kipling proudly in his poem 'The Glory of the Garden', Kipling wasn't on his own with his garden associations, for literature of the 18th and 19th century was peppered with garden references. Another example is 'The Secret Garden' which was the popular children's book from 1913 in which the secret garden is discovered by the innocent girl Mary Lennox. The garden in this story is discovered, claimed and managed by the young characters.

It is suggested that Capability Brown (1716-1783) was at the forefront of this upsurge in garden enthusiasm, his didactic approach to landscapes and their meanings dominated the 18th century. The 'English garden' with its pruned shrubs, rose beds, its lawns for croquet, cricket and tennis were seen as the epitome of the English good life. The 'picturesque' was the highest accolade given to a garden, this involved a prioritisation of 'naturalness' and also a sought-after sense of timelessness. It was believed that gardens should blend seamlessly with the surrounding countryside or parks in a harmonious and pleasant way. As the architect John D. Sedding described in his timely essays on gardens in 1891:

---

[2] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An essay on the Human Condition,* Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2008

[3] My great grandfather Sir Hugh McPherson was born into an ordinary working-class family in Paisley in 1870. Quite commonly of young Scottish men at the time, the lure of India and Empire allowed them to work their way up, passing various exams, winning various scholarship's, they could become a part of the Indian Civil Service.

[4] Rudyard Kipling, *The Glory of the Garden*, in Complete Verse, 735-36

"Then comes the smooth-shaven lawn, studded and belted around with fine trees, arranged as it seems with a divine carelessness; and beyond the lawn, the ferny heather turf of the park."[5]

There is an inherent contradiction with this English concept of the 'picturesque', in that it combines a 'naturalness'; a sense of untouched purity, along with something being so carefully selected, shaped and formed by the human hand. Lawns are a product of this very middle-class 18th century ideal, the ultimate combination of the human and the natural. The lawn is also something which the victorians took so enthusiastically to India, regardless of it being completely unsuitable for the climate on the hot, dry plains. It was seen as "the center of social life" where they would hold garden parties and play croquet, badminton and cricket.[6]

Gardens and designed landscapes throughout the 18th and 19th century were also seen as having educational functions, they were associated with the 'betterment of man'[7], they should supposedly 'enhance ways of living, behavior and moral.'[8] Through gardens then, it could be suggested that the British could impose and demonstrate their idea of 'civilisation' on their Indian empire. The British created gardens everywhere they went in all their guises, large, small, private and public, Eugenia Herbert suggests that they not only could "embody aesthetic ideals but also philosophical understandings of the good life, of civilisation and the social and political order."[9]

W.J.T Mitchell in 'Nature and Power', with relation to landscapes and imperialism, suggests that these contradictions are always mediated and absorbed into a progressive, righteous European narrative that usually overcomes these contradictions. Mitchell also suggests that designed landscapes are a way of 'naturalising' cultural and social constructions.[10] As the British rule came to its climax in India around 1900, the British increasingly took this cultural interest with them, and also a superior sense of how a garden should look. As Herbert writes:

"The farther one ventured, the more one longed for familiar cowslips and hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies, for well trimmed lawns and neat flowerbeds."[11]

Birds Of Passage
The constant moving and upheaval in the lives of English expats

"The idea of home seems to be so unsettled in this world.." wrote Sir Hugh McPherson to his wife during an expedition in 1911, "It's a constant changing and striving.."[12] The life of the British working in the Indian Civil Service was one of constant upheaval, one post after another took them across the country time and again. Trips back to England on steamer ships, on which the journey alone could take up to four months, to see the children in boarding schools or to visit relatives, further increased the unsettled lifestyle. Parents would often send their children to boarding schools in England at the age of four, and not return to see them for another four of five years.

This constant moving and upheaval was therefore also felt by the woman of the empire; "we but birds of passage in India" Anne Wilson a Civil Servants wife recalled "we have to build our nests of

---

[5] John Dixon Hunt, *A World of Gardens*, p163
[6] Flora's Empire, Eugenia Herbert, p49
[7] Anne-Louise Sommer, *Nature Choreographed, The 18th Century Garden as a Knowledge-generating feature,* 2007, p.1
[8] Anne-Louise Sommer, *Nature Choreographed, The 18th Century Garden as a Knowledge-generating feature,* 2007, p.3
[9] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.15
[10] W.J.T Mitchell, Nature and Power, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.2
[11] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.xii
[12] Sir Hugh McPherson, letter to his wife from India 1911, Edinburgh National Library Collections

what material we can find."[13] Gardens and gardening was often the respite of the ladies who were stuck at home all day during the heat, uninvolved in the important business of administrating the empire. As Herbert suggests;

"The garden served as a sort of synecdoche, the part standing for the whole of one's response to an alien culture and to the life that exile imposed, especially on women"[14]

The British in India were also often described as 'travelling like tortoises', with all their worldly belongings in tow due their frequent moves. This could also be seen as a way of "keeping the outside world at bay".[15] In this way they were distancing themselves from the outside world, cocooning themselves within their culture, just to feel more secure in their shaky position of 'power'. Gardens were similarly a way of quite literally putting space between their own homes and the rest of Indian society.

Betweenity - The Garden of Transition
The absorption of Mughal and eastern garden design, in British colonial design

Throughout the 18th and 19th century they gradually began to take influences from the Indian/Mogul gardens of the period, which typically meant incorporating water features, and geometric patterns from Mogul gardens. For example Edwin Lutyens, the famous architect of Imperial Dehli, along with Gertrude Jekyll the influential English garden designer, were commissioned to design the garden for the Viceroy's House, New Delhi. Lord Hardinge (as Viceroy at the time) oversaw this and his preference was clearly stated as "western architecture with an Oriental motif"[16]. Lutyens set about this task and one of his most famous Anglo-Indian designs included a lotus flower fountain, the lotus flower itself often appeared in Mughal art to symbolise fertility.

This style became the status quo of Imperial design 'a pleasing hybridity' mingling 'eastern exoticism with European familiarity.'[17] Along with this fetishising and assimilating of Indian aesthetics there also remained a steadfast superiority where the often very large teams of Indian gardeners would have to follow the directions of the British. As Flora Annie Steel wrote in 'The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook' of 1888 the "dim view of 'native gardeners' who have no real sympathy, they claim, for flowers and must be trained to obey orders and nothing more."[18] What emerged was a style neither authentically European nor authentically Indian, it was an altogether new style, an 'incarnated nature'[19].

W.J.T Mitchell suggests landscape itself can be been used as a tool for social and economic control. At the beginning of his book he describes how landscape should be changed from a noun to a verb.[20] He asks that we think of landscape not as a fixed space but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. Gardens in this way are not a fixed space, but a constantly mutating cultural construction and a tool of social control.

---

[13] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.52
[14] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.57
[15] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.57
[16] Geoffrey Moorhouse, India Britannica, Harpercollins, 1983, p.234
[17] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p37
[18] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.45
[19] Anne-Louise Sommer, *Nature Choreographed, The 18th Century Garden as a Knowledge-generating feature,* 2007, p.3
[20] W.J.T Mitchell, *Nature and Power,* University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.1

Mitchell also suggests that imperialism is not a 'one-way' phenomenon, but a complicated process of exchange, mutual transformation, and ambivalence.[21] Perhaps the garden can be seen as a platform for social exchange, a site on which culture, identities and traditions can be transferred. As Mitchell questions;

"It is possible that landscape, understood as the historical "invention" of a new visual/pictorial medium, is integrally connected with imperialism?"[22]

The Coronation Durbur, Delhi 1911
Held in Delhi in 1911, to annouce George V as emperor of India

The Delhi Durbur's were the quintessential Victorian invention of pomp and power, 'a ritual of subordination'[23] suggests Julie Codell in her essay on the subject. There were three Durbur's throughout the time of the British Colonial rule which marked the occasion of the English monarch's becoming emperor or empress of India. The one I would like to look at in particular is the 1911 Durbur which instated George V (r.1910-36) as emperor of India, King George V himself and Queen Mary also actually famously attended this event. The King announced during the event, quite controversially and surprisingly for many, that Delhi was to take Calcutta's place as the new capital of British India.

The 1911 Durbur was no exception in terms of lavish statements of wealth and power. The camp spread over a large tract of empty land, it was an imported collection of pleasure grounds, lawns and flower gardens.[24] The kings camp alone stretching to 85 acres, while the main amphitheater in which the official ceremony took place could seat up to 250,000 people. There was an old Mughal fort, called 'The Red Fort' which was refurbished for the occasion, which was once a wilderness but was "built up with fountains, water runnels, green lawns, shrubberies and stately pavilions"[25]. Lord Hardinge who was Viceroy at the time made sure that the event was as English as possible; with roses even being sent out especially from England for the occasion.

The Indian and the European camps were in great contrast, the European camps were immaculately ordered according to a hierarchy out from its center, the viceroy's camp, with straight streets and neat rows of tents stretching out from there. (see fig 2) While the Indian camps were up to nine miles away and in comparison they consisted of a more random assortment of tents, eating areas and areas for parties, they said to look however, far more colorful, livelier, and altogether more inviting to many Europeans.[26] All this division and distance helped to reinstate and generate the legitimacy of the British rule in India. The Delhi Durbur is perhaps a miniature empire in itself, which then continued into the re-building of New Delhi in the following years, as Julie Codell suggests;

"The revivification of North Delhi was described as a miniature empire-building, bringing civilisation from barrenness, gardens from dust, and order from chaos" [27]

---

[21] W.J.T Mitchell, *Nature and Power*, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.9
[22] W.J.T Mitchell, *Nature and Power,* University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.9
[23] Codell, Julie, *On the Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911*. BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History. p. 1
[24] 1st. Baron Hardinge of Penshurst Charles Hardinge, *Old Diplomacy: the Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penshurst,* Murray, 1947, 28-30
[25] Codell, Julie, *On the Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911*. BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History. p. 2
[26] Cohen, *Representing Authority*, 197-98
[27] Codell, Julie, *On the Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911*. BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History. p. 5

Lord Hardinge notes one of the most unusual sites during the run-up to the Durbur was “hundreds of native gardener’s sitting on their hams in long serried lines sowing blades of grass to make out of waste land polo grounds and lawns.”[28] With all the turf required for these vast areas the planners even had to commission a local diary farmer to set up a grass-farm near the camp to supply the requirements.[29] The whole event was quite literally a stamp of civilisation on the Gangetic plain.[30]

Conclusion

Through my research into the topic of gardens and landscape design in the time of the British colonial rule in India, it has been possible to see the way they were used as mechanisms of demonstrating a certain idea of civilisation. Considering this idea of gardens deployed as spatial tools, that put distance between the lives of the British and the Indians, a ‘naturalised’ and ‘righteous’ facade of power is evident.

The interface of private colonialist and native public lives, at the site of the garden, seems to me to situate an interesting juxtaposition, of charming and seductive aesthetics, along with a darker side of power, control and imposed hierarchy. It can be observed in The Viceroy’s wives’ private botanical projects and the public gardens of the Delhi Durbars how the British brought a clear idea of the ‘English garden’ to India. At both the scales of individual households and larger colonial ceremonial proceedings the employment of gardens demonstrated the pinnacle of self congratulatory mastery over nature. Botany, as Eugenia Herbert notes, was the peak of scientific achievement during this period of Empire.[31]

As W.J.T Mitchell suggests, that ‘Empires have a way of coming to an end, leaving behind their landscapes as relics and ruins,’[32] landscapes; natural and human constructed are our constant companions, and through these relics and ruins we can trace a clear reflection of our culture and histories. I have observed during the course of researching and writing this essay that the idea of ‘Englishness’ is actually a fluid and constantly evolving idea, and as much the British influenced Indian culture during the period of colonial rule, the British were also very much influenced by Indian culture as well. The highly developed sense of Englishness may actually just be a response to living in an alien, climate, culture and environment which emphasised the need to create an idea of home and of belonging.

In closing, something I have observed, not only were the British able to inscribe ideas of Englishness into the Indian landscape through gardens, but also the literature which reflects upon this perpetuates an emphasis on colonial perspectives. Just as the Indian gardeners were not given freedom of expression under the likes of Flora Annie Steel (ibid.), it appears that there are still a lack of Indian voices within the after-empire discourse of garden and landscape design.

---

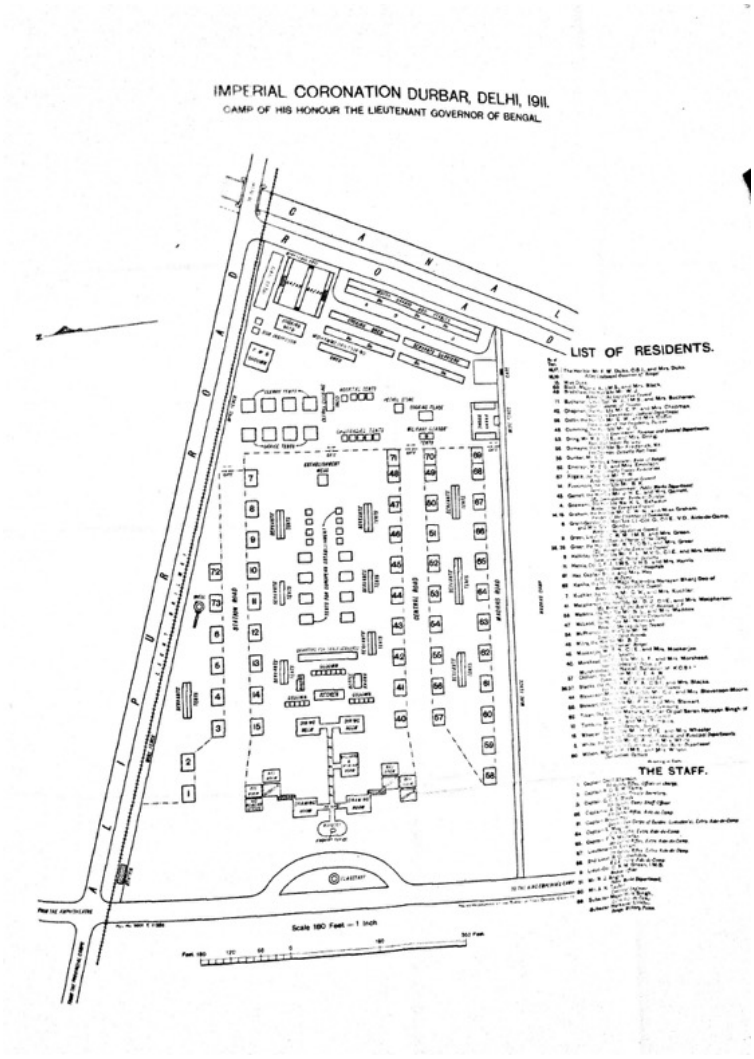
[28] 1st. Baron Hardinge of Penshurst Charles Hardinge, *Old Diplomacy: the Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penshurst,* Unkown Binding, 1947, 28-30

[29] 1st. Baron Hardinge of Penshurst Charles Hardinge, *Old Diplomacy: the Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penshurst,* Murray, 1947, 28-30

[30] Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora’s Empire*, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011, p.15

[31] Eugenia Herbert*, New Books Network podcast,* South Asian Studies, 2013

[32] W.J.T Mitchell, *Nature and Power*, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.19



Map and image of the Delhi Durbar 1911, showing the way in which ordering, layout and lawns were used as method of control and showing an idea of civilisation.[33]

[33] Documents from Sir Hugh McPherson collection of letters and papers, Edinburgh National Library Collections

Bibliography

Books

1st. Baron Hardinge of Penshurst Charles Hardinge, *Old Diplomacy: the Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penshurst,* (Murray, London,1947)

Eugenia W.Herbert, *Flora's Empire*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2011)

Geoffrey Moorhouse, *India Britannica*, (Harpercollins, US, 1983)

John Dixon Hunt, *A World of Gardens*, (Reaktion Books, Reprint edition, London, 2015)

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener, (*Martino Fine Books, US, 1913)

W.J.T Mitchell, *Nature and Power*, (University of Chicago Press, US, 2002)

Journals

Danijela Petkovic, *India is Quite Different From Yorkshire, Empires, Orientalism and gender in Burnett's Secret Garden,* Faculty of Philosophy, Nis, Serbia

Web

Anne-Louise Sommer, *Nature Choreographed, The 18th Century Garden as a Knowledge-generating feature,* The original version of this paper was presented at the "Leisure and the making of knowledge in 18th century Europe" conference at Hamburg University, 31st Oct. – 2nd Nov. 2007 (http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic27/sommer/4_2007.html) [Web accessed 17th April 2016]

Codell, Julie, *On the Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911*. BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. (http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=julie-codell-on-the-delhi-coronation-durbars-1877-1903-1911) [Web accessed 17th April 2016]

Rudyard Kipling, '*The Glory of the Garden'*, The *Kipling Society,* (http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_garden.htm) [accessed 24th March 2016]

Archive

Sir Hugh McPherson, Indian Civil Servant, Collection of letters and papers, Edinburgh National Library, Special Collections Room, (accessed 24th March, 2016)