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TWO CENTURIES OF REPTON'S REPUTATION

The reputation of Humphry Repton over the last two centuries has not shown the common pattern of decline and revival, but rather one of wobbling between the two phases of his career. During the Victorian period, he was looked on as the founder of modern gardening, his Fragments and his plans for the Brighton Pavilion seen as sparking the revival of topiary and the flower garden. The twentieth century saw the increasing dominance of neo-Georgianism in British architecture and gardening, but Repton's reputation did not suffer greatly as Victorian gardening was repudiated; attention shifted to his early works, seen as the continuation of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's aesthetic.

Humphry Repton's reputation has had a degree of stability denied to most of his predecessors and successors. Interpretations of his work may have varied, attacks may have been launched, but when one considers the way in which Brown's reputation plummeted in the nineteenth century, to be relaunched in the mid-twentieth, one must say that Repton's has been enviably stable. There are two main reasons for this. The first is Repton's change of styles in mid-career. He began as the self-appointed successor to Brown, the culminating representative of the English landscape garden; but from c.1800 he began to reintroduce into his schemes formal terracing, flower gardens and other devices that Brown and his coevals had removed, sometimes with gunpowder. So, whatever the fortunes of the landscape style or of the Victorian garden that arose in reaction against it, Repton could be held up as an exemplar. The second reason is the accessibility of Repton's writings. Brown, William Kent and Charles Bridgeman did not publish. The writings of so many garden designers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are for the most part scattered through the poorly indexed volumes of long runs of periodicals. More than any other British designer before the mid-twentieth century, Repton lived on through his published works.

But before we go any further, we need to ask: how accessible were his writings? Jane Austen's reference to him in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Thomas Love Peacock's lampooning of him in *Headlong Hall* (1816) under the name of Mr Milestone, both appearing during his lifetime, show that he had a solid reputation among the landowning classes,¹ but to what extent did gardeners, who in the ensuing generations assumed ever greater importance, know about him? The average gardener would only have seen *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1794) or *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803) if his employer owned copies and allowed him to see them.² So when Charles M'Intosh published *The Flower-Garden* (1838), incorporating into the engraving of the 'Italian garden' a glass structure copied from Repton's plans for Brighton Pavilion, we can assume that he had direct access to some at least of Repton's works.³ M'Intosh was head gardener at Claremont, and his employer had been Leopold, Prince of the Belgians, who could undoubtedly have afforded copies, and may well have been given the Brighton volume by his father-in-law, George IV.

Gardeners at less prominent estates would have had to rely on report rather than direct access. But all that changed in 1840 with the publication of a pocket-sized anthology of his writings, under the editorship of John Claudius Loudon.⁴ So the history of Repton's reputation really starts with Loudon, and his changing attitude to Repton.

LOUDON'S REPTON

Loudon began his career as a disciple of Uvedale Price, whose quarrel with Repton over the Picturesque had generated immense quantities of smoke, and possibly occasional light, at the end of the eighteenth century. Therefore, it is not surprising that in his first comments on Repton he definitely took Price's side. In his early *A Treatise on ... Country Residences* (1806), Loudon criticized Repton's works at Valleyfield in Fife, which Repton had discussed in his *Observations* (1803):

Had the reader seen it previously to the commencement of these operations, about five years ago, it would probably fill him with the deepest regret to see it at present, fresh from the improver's desolating hand. [...] The flower-garden, a right-lined canal, which its contriver endeavours to defend from the principles of contrast, and almost every other operation of wit at this place, in which effect is the principal consideration, is equally unnatural, misplaced, or out of character. The proprietor has thrown away an immense sum of money in counteracting nature, and deforming his grounds.⁵

Repton had not visited Valleyfield in person, but quite possibly Loudon had not either.

This is not the place to describe Loudon's gradual conversion to the idea of formality in garden design. Suffice it to say that by the 1820s he was re-evaluating Repton. His references to Repton's landscaping projects became gradually more approving, at first with qualifications ('It is but justice to the late Mr. Repton to say [...]') and eventually more wholeheartedly ('Mr. Repton's taste as a landscape-gardener is universally acknowledged').⁶ By the time he wrote his introductory notice to his edition of Repton, he was praising:

what may be called Repton's School, and which may be considered as combining all that was excellent in the former schools, and, in fact, as consisting of the union of an artistical knowledge of the subject with good taste and good sense.⁷

'As all arts are necessarily progressive,' he added, it was time to move beyond Repton into the new school of the Gardenesque (i.e., Loudon's School), but Repton was now the acknowledged predecessor and foundation of future progress.

Loudon's aim was to make the works of Repton accessible to the ordinary gardener. He announced his plan for the edition in his *Gardener's Magazine* in 1838:

The above works, the publishing prices of which amount to upwards of 20*l.*, by reducing the engravings so as to come within an 8vo page, and by printing in the same type as that used for the *Gardener's Magazine*, will be comprised in one octavo volume, which will be sold at 20*s.* or 25*s.* The copyright of such of Mr. Repton's works as had not expired in 1838 was purchased by Mr. Loudon in June in that year; and the engravings have been in hand since that time; so that it is expected the work will appear in February or March, 1839. Mr. Repton's taste as a landscape-gardener is universally acknowledged; and the publication of the whole of his works, at such a price as will enable every gardener to possess them, cannot fail to serve the cause of landscape-gardening.⁸

His plan for a follow-up volume containing other miscellaneous works on landscape design was not to be carried out, but nor did the eventual work appear at the originally intended price. By the time of the *Gardeners' Chronicle* advertisement for the work

(9 January 1841), the estimated cost of Repton's original works had gone up to twenty-five pounds, and Loudon's volume was offered at £1 3s. 6d. plain, or £1 10s. coloured. After Loudon's death, when his widow was trying to pay off his debts, Loudon's works were advertised in the *Chronicle* (12 April 1845), and his Repton volume now cost £2 6s. or £3 6s. with coloured illustrations. Still expensive, and not the sort of thing an under gardener could be expected to afford, but within the means of a well-off head gardener or your average estate owner. At least it meant that Repton's writings, and versions of his illustrations, were far more accessible to the gardening world than before.

Repton's opponent Price was not to be left behind, however, and Sir Thomas Dick Lauder emulated Loudon by publishing a single-volume, pocket-sized edition of *Sir Uvedale Price on the Picturesque* in 1842.⁹ For this, Price not having illustrated his *Essays*, Lauder commissioned new illustrations from Montagu Stanley; so the advantage for the ordinary gardener of having access to Price's work was somewhat compromised by the possibility that the illustrations showed views that were not what Price would have wished his ideas to be represented by. Loudon's edition was reviewed anonymously in the weekly magazine the *Athenaeum* by John Lindley, who began by describing Repton as 'the head of a profession of great importance to the comfort and beauty of rural residences', who, by his writings, made the principles of landscape gardening available to 'the uneducated eye', even though:

Their dearness has hitherto kept the writings of Repton unknown to the great mass of readers [...] we therefore hail with satisfaction the present beautiful edition by Mr. Loudon, himself a distinguished landscape gardener, which, by the substitution of good wood-cuts for costly engravings, has reduced the price within the means of any possessor of a library.¹⁰

REPTON'S SLIDES

Repton's use of slides to depict gardens before and after his works were carried out was his great innovation in both marketing and book illustration. How these views were presented in subsequent editions of Repton, and publications about him, is an important point. Before the modern age of offset photolithography, there was only one attempt to replicate his use of slides – John Nolen's American edition of *The Art of Landscape Gardening* (1907).¹¹ For this, the after view was printed by halftone block on a leaf of shiny paper; the before view was similarly printed, but the leaf was cropped so that the lower half of the image was a stub, attached to the after view by an adhesive strip near the gutter. The before view could easily be pulled back to reveal the after view and caption. The frontispiece was printed in colour, the remaining images in monochrome.¹²

Loudon, in the interests of cost and accessibility, had copies of Repton's illustrations made by wood-engraving, and had the before and after views face each other on opposite pages.¹³ The uncoloured versions are for the most part reasonably accurate representations of the outlines of objects, though with approximations of detail; additional clumps, variations in the number and positioning of human figures, alterations in structures visible on the skyline, can readily be found. In some instances, such as the gatehouse garden for Woburn Abbey in *Fragments*, the image shows right-to-left reversal, a common enough effect in the copying of illustrations; it is remarkable how many of the illustrations show the scene the right way around. The reason for all this is quite simple: no one was going to allow valuable copies of Repton's works into an engraver's workshop; the engravers would have worked not from *Observations* or *Fragments*, but from someone's sketched copies of the illustrations. There was therefore a certain degree of licence for the engraver's imagination. The most significant difference appears where the topiary specimen in the

gatehouse garden at Woburn Abbey is not cut to the same pattern as Repton's version: anyone wanting to imitate Repton's topiary using Loudon's edition would have ended up with something simpler and more angular.¹⁴ William Robinson once praised a clipped tree that strongly resembled Repton's; it was in a cottage garden in Kent – would the owner of the cottage have seen *Fragments*?¹⁵

Let us quickly deviate from chronology to follow attempts to reproduce the slides into the twentieth century. Alicia Amherst, in her *A History of Gardening in England* (1895), followed Loudon's example of separating the before and after views as separate illustrations, and in the first edition did not even present them in the same spread, but in the 1910 third edition had them facing each other.¹⁶ *Landscape and Garden*, the journal of the recently founded Institute of Landscape Architects, made two attempts at representing the slides in Madeline Agar's pioneering articles on Repton in the 1930s.¹⁷ In 1936, they followed Loudon, on a smaller scale, reproducing before and after images of Lathom, one above the other. But they then tried for something more ambitious in 1937: the after view of High Legh was printed, but with a line superimposed on it marking the boundary of the altered image, with the corresponding shape arranged higher on the page incorporating the relevant portion of the before image. The attention thus focused on Repton's slides, probably explains why Christopher Tunnard, the following year, could attribute his longevity as an influence to his forethought in leaving behind him 'explanations of a simple and adaptable technique and descriptions of easily reconstructed effects, together with ingenious paper slides showing rural scenes before and after "improvement"'.¹⁸

Dorothy Stroud, in her biography of 1962, reproduced various illustrations from Repton's published works, and even more from his Red Books, as paired images on the plate, and garden historians could follow her example.¹⁹ It remained for Charlene Garry, the proprietor of the Basilisk Press, to produce the first facsimile editions of the Red Books. Repton had notoriously dictated that the Red Books never be printed, but Garry reasoned that, since Repton had not lived to see the invention of photography, let alone offset photolithography, he could not have included that process in his definition of printing, so it was no violation of his diktat to use that method to create facsimiles. And so, in 1976, the Basilisk Press issued a boxed set of four volumes: facsimiles of the Red Books for Antony House, Attingham Park and Sheringham Hall, with a little volume of commentary by Edward Malins.²⁰ She kept the work on display at her bookshop in Hampstead, and reported ruefully that the general public did not understand the point of her work:

Unable to comprehend why, say, Basilisk's four-volume work on Humphrey [*sic*] Repton which sells for £650 and was often on display, was that price, they resented the book, pulled at the overlays which Repton invented to give his clients a before and after view of their estate, took the bloom off the pages and generally tried to reduce its Rolls Royce production to comprehensible Mini status.²¹

Thereafter, some additional Red Book facsimiles appeared in less sumptuous formats (Blaise Castle, Brandsbury and Glemham Hall, Panshanger and Tewin Water). In 2007, a study of the Red Books from the artistic point of view finally appeared: André Rogger's *Landscapes of Taste*.²²

REPTON IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

References to Repton in the early Victorian gardening magazines were generally approving. James Main, debating the question whether the architect or the landscape

gardener should be given priority in designing an estate, used the relations between John Nash and Repton as his example, and concluded that ‘it is much easier to build a house to suit the scenery of an estate, than to mould the natural features of the latter to those of the former’.²³ When it was acknowledged that Repton had made an error, as in planting the double row of trees at Nuneham Courtenay too close together, readers were still urged to go and see it to learn.²⁴ Edward Kemp, in the most successful design manual of the High Victorian period (three editions), gently contradicted Repton’s recommendations about tree planting to accompany particular architectural style, that round-headed trees harmonized best with Gothic, and fastigate with Grecian:

Without contradicting the soundness of the rule, which appears quite unexceptionable, it may be doubted whether, in the case of Grecian and Italian structures, at least, the appropriateness of the Fir and Cypress tribe is not the result of association; as the Cedar of Lebanon, the branches of which are purely horizontal, is the most magnificent of all accompaniments for any variety of Grecian architecture, but is not at all suited for either of the forms of Gothic.²⁵

In other words, Repton’s rule is unexceptionable, but here follow the exceptions. Was this reverence or timidity?

In mid-century, the *Gardeners’ Chronicle* enlisted under Repton’s banner. John Lindley, its editor, is best known as a botanist, but used his weekly leaders to comment on any horticultural matters he chose and campaigned for improvements in public landscape design. In 1847 and 1848, he published a series of leaders on the theory of landscape, in one of which he gave a summary of Repton’s principles for the design of approach roads, and then mocked Richard Payne Knight for his treatment of roads:

These simple principles are laid down with clear, sound sense. But REPTON was not a man to stop at general principles; he goes on to describe specific requisites. [...] On the whole the Taste which dictated them seems unimpeachable. An outcry, however, was raised against them. REPTON was vehemently assailed by PAYNE KNIGHT – whose main idea was that Landscape Gardening is really Picture Gardening, and who aimed at the reputation of practically realising a picture in the grounds with which he might have to do. The writer determined to give a practical example in his own demesne. One beauty created by him was an unmeaningly serpentine-road through the centre of the park – as REPTON says – ‘very like a sheep-walk.’ Another portion of it was led through a deep chasm between two banks – to make it look picturesque – or lest it be discovered. But the crowning beauty is still to be told. These winding roads varied the whole surface of the park: they serpentine around and about, reminding the beholder irresistibly of the spectre in ALONZO and IMOGENE:

‘The worms they crept in, and the worms they crept out,
And sported his eyes and his temples about.’

But at last eight or ten of these sinuosities met at one point (‘like the streets at the Seven Dials’, as REPTON irreverently puts it); and nothing was left for it, but within 200 yards of the hall-door to fix a direction-post, as being actually necessary to point out the way to the house.

‘And this,’ exclaims REPTON, ‘is an example of *Practical Taste!*’ If he could return to life – if he could see only some of the fruits of Landscape Gardening Taste in our day – how would he lift up his hands, in astonishment, or disgust!²⁶

And on the subject of entrance lodges, Lindley quoted Repton with approval:

REPTON says honestly: ‘I am not ashamed to confess that I have often experienced more difficulty in determining the form and size of a Park entrance than in arranging

the several apartments of a large mansion: indeed, there is no subject on which I have so seldom satisfied my own judgment as in that of an entrance to a Park.' How very few designers of Lodges have been as modest as REPTON! How numerous are they who have committed the errors which he feared, but from which he really kept himself free!²⁷

A few years later, Lindley invoked Repton in an attack on the landscaping, then in progress, of Victoria Park:

That is Victoria Park, that is what the country has paid 44,000*l.* for; that is what the inventive genius of the agents of the Woods and Forests has last offered to the public, as a sample of English landscape gardening. Ye shades of BROWN, of GILPIN, of REPTON, arise and denounce the perpetrators of this national offence!²⁸

Lindley was probably the last person of his generation to hold a favourable opinion of Brown, and all his invocations of Repton are based on his earlier works. But Repton's position in the world of nineteenth-century gardening was primarily derived from his *Fragments*, from gardens such as Endsleigh, Ashridge and the proposals for Brighton Pavilion, all of which emphasized geometrical designs, flowerbeds as principal objects in the view and stylistic variety. The motto affixed to the Brighton Pavilion plans – 'Gardens are works of art rather than of nature' – became the basic principle of Victorian gardening, enforced by the propaganda of Loudon. And Repton's discussion, in his *Inquiry into the Changes of Taste*, of the history of British garden design in terms of a succession of national styles, led to M'Intosh's presentation of Italian, French and Dutch styles as models for the gardener to adopt, with the English landscape style allowed on the understanding that it was just as artificial as the others.²⁹

In the second half of the century, Repton continued to be referred to admiringly, but with fewer citations of his principles; the world was moving on, and different issues coming to the fore. In America, he was praised by designers from Andrew Jackson Downing to Samuel Parsons and, in 1907, the American landscape architect Nolen produced his edition of Repton, comprising *Sketches and Hints* and *Observations*. One is never sure how much American designers understood the basic assumptions of landscape theory in England. Nolen said that 'it is to the period of Repton and the work of Repton himself that we must look for the sound and rational development of the so-called landscape school of England', which could mean that the earlier landscape garden, as exemplified by Brown, was not yet sound and rational, but Repton made it so.³⁰ Elsewhere, Nolen's formulations were more problematic: 'Repton's knowledge of nature and command of the processes of art were not superficial. Nature he knew at first hand. He was himself a nature-lover. Before becoming a landscape gardener, he was a "country gentleman".'³¹ What does it mean to know 'Nature' at first hand? Is this the same 'Nature' that Victorian gardeners thought Art was meant to triumph over?

In 1891, John D. Sedding's posthumously published book *Garden-craft Old and New* continued to affirm the importance of Repton as a model and inspiration. Sedding, a practising architect, named him, along with Francis Bacon, William Temple, John Evelyn, and William Gilpin, as one of the 'garden-masters', and while acknowledging that Repton had praised Brown, said that 'It did not take the wiser spirits long to realise that Nature left alone was more natural. And this same Repton, who began by praising "the great leader Brown," has to confess again and again that, so far as results go, he is mistaken.'³² Sedding continued:

[Repton] was a genius in his way – a born gardener, able and thoughtful in his treatments, and distinguished among his fellows by a broad and comprehensive grasp of the whole character and surroundings of a site. [...] The sterling quality of his writings did much to

clear the air of the vapourings of the critics who had gone before him, and his practice, founded as it was upon sound principles, redeemed the absurdities of the earlier phase of his school.

He quoted Repton's principles in detail, and concluded: 'The best advice one can give to a young gardener is – *know your Repton*.'³³

Sedding blithely swept the Picturesque Controversy into a corner, claiming Repton as the Picturesque School's main exponent; but then the word 'picturesque' had over the course of a century changed its meaning, in part because the standards of painting had moved on since the time of Price and Knight. 'Picturesque', by the late nineteenth century, stood for irregularity, density of vegetation and an expanded range of colour values.³⁴ At any rate, it was an accepted maxim by the end of the century that there was no inherent relation between landscape painting and landscape design. Marie Luise Gothein, in her pioneering history of gardening, described Repton as:

the first man to free himself from the exaggerated idea of a similarity between painting and landscape gardening. He laid his finger on the difference between them, caused by the constant alteration in the spectator's point of view, and by the changes of light in a garden.³⁵

And as we enter the twentieth century, the place of Repton at the head of the current gardening tradition was still obvious to many. Viscountess Wolsley could hope that her school at Glynde would be:

a centre of learning [...] whence it is to be hoped there will emerge English Du Cerceaus and Le Notres having much of the well-balanced judgment of our Repton. Then each piece of ground, whether it be large or small, will possess its own true individuality.³⁶

As late as 1938, Tunnard could say that Repton was 'still the idol of landscape architects'.³⁷ After all, E. Prentice Mawson, in his foreword to the first issue of *Landscape and Garden*, had named Repton, Kemp and Loudon as the 'masters of landscape architecture'.³⁸

One caveat, however. The names of Reginald Blomfield and Sedding are usually coupled as initiators of the 'formal garden' school of thought in the 1890s, but on the question of Repton they were opposed. Blomfield, whose *The Formal Garden in England* (1892) airily refused to notice the existence of geometric design in the gardens of the Victorian period and acted as though 'the landscape gardener' had had an unbroken dominance from Kent to his own time, dismissed Repton along with Brown, who 'between them irrevocably destroyed some of the finest gardens in England'.³⁹ Adherents of Blomfield's persuasion followed him in this, with varying degrees of blame for Repton. H. Inigo Triggs quoted Repton to the effect that 'no trace now remains' of the earlier Italian style, and obviously regarded him as contributing to that loss, but acknowledged that 'fortunately the wholesale destruction of old gardens was checked, for Repton had not sufficient influence to suggest the sweeping alterations that Brown had made'.⁴⁰ Eleanor Sinclair Rohde, similarly, said that Repton's Red Books 'show with painful clearness [...] the gardens he swept away in order to create "landscape scenery"'.⁴¹

REPTON AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY LANDSCAPE REVIVAL

In retrospect, it seems as though the primary difficulty facing historians assessing Repton's legacy was learning how to spell his name. Blomfield, Triggs, Rohde, Richardson Wright, Agar, Geoffrey Jellicoe, Ralph Dutton, Julia Berrall, Derek Clifford and George Tobey all spelled Humphry with an additional 'e'. Nor was spelling their only deficiency.

Tobey – admittedly an American writer – not only misspelled his name but conferred a knighthood on him: ‘Sir Humphrey Repton’.⁴² Wright produced one of the most delicious statements in all garden history when he informed us that ‘It was said of Humphrey Repton that he leapt the hedge and made all England a garden’.⁴³ Wrong spelling, wrong piece of gymnastic equipment, wrong range of reference, wrong resulting action – it would be difficult to do better than that; but he tried hard, asserting that Repton was largely responsible for the idea that gardens should imitate paintings.⁴⁴

The major trend in garden history in the second quarter of the century was the gradual return to academic, and then to practical, favour of the English landscape garden of the eighteenth century. Attitudes toward Brown began to shift in the interwar years, and Stroud's biography in 1950 marked his decisive rehabilitation.⁴⁵ Repton could obviously be treated as having continued Brown's tradition, as Blomfield *et al.* had done; all that was needed was to reverse their valuation. But one can sense an uneasiness among the incipient proponents of the landscape revival in dealing with Repton because of his change of style and his status as a figurehead of Victorian gardening. Christopher Hussey, in his account of *The Picturesque* (1927), provided the lengthiest and most detailed consideration of Repton up to that time, and gave cautious praise to some of his parks; but his premise was that it was Price's ‘sane advocacy’ that led to the (desirable) return to formality in gardening, whereas Repton's ventures in formality were on a wrong track, ‘perpetually making what was artificial appear natural and *vice versa*’.⁴⁶ It was Repton's stylistic choices, in particular his emphasis on Indian architecture, that Hussey condemned:

Much of Nash's work is a crib, and not always a very good one, of Repton's ideas. Its oriental character is in a large degree ascribable to Repton, who was convinced that the ‘revolution in taste’ that he felt to be imminent, would introduce Indian architecture, as the Renaissance had introduced Italian, to England. Actually, in the battle of the styles, Gothic outstripped not only the Indian, but the Swiss, Italian, and Egyptian modes. Otherwise Repton might have become an Indian Pugin.⁴⁷

The next major study of the Picturesque, thirty years later, was a more scholarly work, by Walter J. Hippie. While Hussey, as the architectural editor of *Country Life*, had been concerned not only with theories but also with the practical results in the landscape, Hippie, a professor at the University of Florida, concentrated on theories alone, and took a rather different view of Repton:

The two amateurs – Knight most notably – really worked out aesthetic systems; Knight carried analysis as deep as aesthetics requires, and Price, though less analytical, still gives much more of a psychology and a theoretical aesthetics than does Repton. Neither Price nor Knight, moreover, was given to making out lists of rules; they preferred to bridge the gap from theory to actual making by a cultivated taste, a taste formed (so far as things visual are concerned) on the higher painters. But Repton, without any propensity for philosophizing, and with a great concern for directing the creative work of others, can not leave so much to the variability of taste – especially since he wished to weaken the influence of painting on landscape gardening, and thus removed one of the important controls on idiosyncrasy. He therefore prescribes taste in directions more concrete than those to which Price and Knight care to bind themselves.⁴⁸

Since Repton is essentially an unsystematic writer, it is difficult to reduce to order the many principles that he enunciates. Clifford would have seconded Hippie's complaint: ‘Repton himself would have argued that his unifying principle was fitness for purpose, but that in itself does not unify where purposes are diffuse or lacking’.⁴⁹ A similar accusation had already been levelled at the end of the 1930s by Tunnard:

Repton, though deploring the practice of picturesque methods in gardens, was yet content to crown his hillocks with temples and scoop out Claudian amphitheatres in the approved picturesque style. It is perhaps unfortunate that he was committed to vague theories of utility and natural beauty, while possessing enough artistic talent to have achieved much more had he been unfettered by them.⁵⁰

Dutton, in his history of *The English Garden* (1937), pointed to Repton's late designs for Ashridge, with its 'no less than fifteen different kinds of gardens' (a figure which Wright inflated to a hundred and fifty, incidentally, with his usual accuracy, naming the estate Ashbridge), as showing 'an almost alarming fertility of invention' in its multiple gardens, and laid the blame here for what followed in the mid-nineteenth century:

The main features of the lay-out were designed on dignified eighteenth-century lines well suited to the proportions of the house, and still form an impressive setting, but the galaxy of small gardens and concealed points of interest heralded the first step towards the ill-planned confusion of Victorian Gardens.⁵¹

It is unfortunate that Repton's discussion of Ashridge in his *Fragments* was so sketchy. It was not until 1982 that a proper horticultural analysis of his proposal for the rosary was undertaken, with the conclusion that it could not have been planted as shown in his illustration because the climbing roses necessary for the effect were not available: 'Repton was unaware of what roses were and were not available to the designer; the rose garden was purely notional at that time.'⁵²

Meanwhile, Repton was beginning to receive respectable academic attention. The first detailed study of a Repton commission (Welbeck Abbey) was published in *Country Life* in 1933 by John Steegman, while he was assistant keeper at the National Portrait Gallery.⁵³ Three years later it was the turn of Agar, one of the first female landscape architects, whose *Garden Design* went through two editions before the First World War, and who was to be Brenda Colvin's mentor; she published a series of five articles about Repton, three of them focusing on individual commissions, in *Landscape and Garden*. Agar was one of those at whom Tunnard sneered, for whom Repton was an idol; she said of his observations on the making of flower gardens that they 'might have been written in any present-day book on garden design, but at first they were revolutionary'. Three of her articles were studies of specific sites: High Legh Hall, Cobham Hall and Corsham Court. Incidentally, she said that 'Repton broadened his ideas and broke away from Brown's formalities' – a use of the word that might seem puzzling today, but since she had just referred to Brown's tree clumps and belts, she plainly meant 'schematic' rather than 'geometric'.⁵⁴

In the post-war years the reputation of the landscape garden reached its height, and Repton was now regularly grouped with Brown as a hero of that movement. What is more interesting is the continued unease historians expressed in looking at his later style, and the desire to absolve him of the blame their predecessors had laid on him. Let us look at a garden historian and a practising landscape architect. First, the historian: Clifford, whose *A History of Garden Design* (1962) was greeted as a standard work. He treated Repton with some degree of condescension: 'not by nature an innovator', 'a sensitive, conscientious and on the whole mild-tempered man who only lacked genius'. Nor did his opponents in the Picturesque debate come across any better: 'between the picturesque of Price and the too clever eclecticism of Repton the pure vision was lost' – the pure vision being that of Brown.⁵⁵ In its place came 'the manner of garden design originating with [Repton which] governed the practice for the next eighty or ninety years without serious challenge, and, though dying, is still far from dead':⁵⁶

True to the essential nature of the age, Repton and his successors wanted to have their cake and eat it; they wanted a bit of everything [...] of prospect *and* seclusion, of geometry *and* nature, of avenues *and* belts, of streams *and* canals, of Burke *and* of Price, of Brown *and* of Le Notre. [...] The shapers of the gardens of the future were no longer the poets and the philosophers and the architects, as they had been for two centuries, but were quite simply the gardeners. To them an eclectic example was heaven-sent and it is therefore to Humphrey Repton as the theorist of eclecticism that nearly all nineteenth-century gardening is related.⁵⁷

The 'essential nature of the age' – not something attributable to the wills of particular individuals. This is the sort of thing that gives *Zeitgeist* theories a bad name. It is therefore not Repton himself who was responsible, but the spirit of the age; Repton just happened to be propounding the wrong theories at the wrong time.

A similar evasion of attributed responsibility can be found in Sylvia Crowe. Repton's change of style, she hinted, was forced on him by his clients:

He was a less drastic man than Brown and was prepared to compromise with the convenience of his clients and permit them to retain the house terraces which Brown had banished in favour of a sweep of grass up to the house walls.

(She did not mention such things as his restoration of a vanished terrace at Beaudesert.) Instead of Repton the corrupter of tradition, we have an embattled Repton trying to save the landscape garden from threatening forces:

Repton was its last great exponent [the landscape garden] and in his later years he was already trying to find a compromise with the forces which were eventually to destroy it. One of these was the desire for more flowers and more variety, and his solution for this was to conceal a series of gardens, for different kinds of flowers, within the belts of trees and shrubberies which gave the form to his main design. But at Nuneham Park, Oxfordshire, the poet Mason took the bolder but less successful step of including beds of flowers in the main body of his landscape garden, a forerunner of the decadent form of landscape garden which was to bedevil parks and gardens for the next century.⁵⁸

This argument required Crowe not to notice such schemes as Endsleigh, where the flower garden was immediately visible from the windows; but the attribution of the reintroduction of the parterre to Mason was an attempt to deflect the main blame for Victorianism from Repton. She gave a series of reasons why the flower garden should not have developed as it did:

The reasons why the landscape garden could not digest beds of bright flowers are not hard to find. First, if the garden was an idealization of a natural landscape, flowers could only be introduced on a pattern recognized by nature. [...] Secondly, the soft tone of the English landscape was one of the bases of the landscape garden and to disrupt the tone scale with violent colour is to destroy the picture. Thirdly, the floor of the landscape park is formed by the unbroken carpet of softly-textured sward and to cut this with beds is to check the smooth flow of the design.

Let us look at these reasons for a moment. The first can be dismissed as bogus, for reasons set out by Loudon and M'Intosh over a century earlier: 'The pretended adherence to nature [...] is wholly a style of conventional artifice [...] strictly artificial.'⁵⁹ The second is an argument that surfaced in the late nineteenth century, during the first reaction against High Victorian bedding, and was not to be found in the writings of Repton's own time. The third is germane to the revived twentieth-century landscape garden, when the advice was offered 'to turf over beds in lawns completely and lose them in a bold, exhilarating sweep of grass'.⁶⁰

But the wheel of historical revivalism continued to turn, and the post-Repton age was to be offered academic reassessment and eventually acceptance. In 1960, Miles Hadfield treated Repton dispassionately in his history of gardening, merely remarking that his influence was 'great and lasting' because of Loudon's promotion of his theories.⁶¹ And in 1962, Stroud published her biography of Repton. She treated Repton as 'the third and last of the outstanding figures in the English landscape garden movement', but instead of condemning the eclecticism of his later years, she commented: 'Repton's particular genius became evident and achieved the most agreeable results, for his eclectic taste led him to seek the best features of earlier periods in gardening history and link them with the ideals of his own time.'⁶² She downplayed the Picturesque quarrel, treating it largely in personal terms, and concluding that Repton 'could afford not to be greatly worried by its repercussions, because the success of his practice was now firmly established'.⁶³

A little while longer, and voices more sympathetic to the Victorians were beginning to be heard. Julia Berrall, in her history of gardening (1966), dealt with Repton's diversity of gardens within the same landscape setting in broadly sympathetic terms:

Repton's flower gardens were specialized ones. He was horticulturist enough to realize the importance of proper environments for plants, and introduced stones for rock plants and bog earth for American wildings. He also liked the idea of separate gardens for specialized effects; at Woburn, for instance, he planned a rose garden, an American garden, a Chinese garden, and a secluded private garden. Flowers, which for a century had for the most part been relegated to the distant walled kitchen garden, were now allowed to put in an appearance. Once more the pendulum of fashion was ready to swing back.⁶⁴

And, in 1978, the year before the Victoria and Albert Museum's garden exhibition, which omitted Brown and lauded the formal garden, F. R. Cowell praised Repton's stance in the Picturesque quarrel and his subsequent practice:

The controversy also marks a turning point in gardening and cultural history. After Repton's considerable modifications of the ideas of Brown and 'the Brownists', no single 'school' or fashion of garden design became generally predominant. [...] Thereafter variety became the rule. Repton led the way, so encouraging others to try to devise yet more different garden designs.⁶⁵

Thus, we enter the era in which Repton is seen in positive terms as the initiator of the Victorian stylistic ferment. The swings of the pendulum are becoming faster and jerkier, and despite the efforts of the formal revivalists of the 1970s, the landscape garden is once again an object of appreciation and admiring study. 2016 was the year of Brown, 2018 that of Repton. But during the last fifty years the academic study of Repton, and the availability of concrete information about him, have progressed. In 1968, the Royal Horticultural Society's Lindley Library acquired the Red Book for Waresley Park, and publicized the fact in its journal, with an article whose authors visited the estate to compare its current condition with Repton's proposals.⁶⁶ In 1984, a team led by George Carter held an exhibition and conference about Repton at the University of East Anglia, which had the effect of flushing previously untraced Red Books out of their boxes and basements.⁶⁷ And since then we have had more Red Books published in facsimile, detailed county-by-county accounts of Repton's commissions, and a study of the Red Books as works of art.⁶⁸ All the controversies seem to have faded into the distance.

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