

Horace Walpole (1717—97)

Walpole's essay on the *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* was written in the years prior to 1770, printed with his *Anecdotes of Painting in England* the following year, but not published until 1780. The *History* was issued separately in 1785. The text used below is from the second edition, issued with additions in 1782. Unlike Thomas Whately, whose *Observations* he mentions, Walpole was concerned to trace the *history* of English landscape gardening, and he figures therefore among those pioneers who tried to order the arts and establish a critical and scholarly survey of their fortunes (see Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*, Princeton, N.J. 1970). There had been other attempts to sketch garden history --- the poem of 1767 (see pp. 299 f.), George Mason's *Design in Gardening* (1768) and the first book of William Mason's *The English Garden* (1772): but Walpole's was the most influential and its control over subsequent historians continues to be enormous. He stressed the literary inspiration (notably Milton) for the landscape garden and the emphatic role of the ha-ha in releasing the garden into the fields beyond. He is, however, somewhat tendentious in his discussion of William Kent, neither allowing his predecessors among professional gardeners much credit, nor recognizing that before Kent gradual inroads were made against what he called the 'preposterous inconveniences' of older gardens, nor even guessing that the 'absurd magnificence of Italian' villas might have stimulated Kent as much as Italian paintings. This said, his estimate of Kent's art is still the best we have and is accordingly given here. Walpole's authority as a garden historian is based upon his first-hand researches, his experience of many contemporary gardens which are discussed in his *Journals of Visits to Country Seats* (see the *Publications of the Walpole Society*, vol. XVI, 1928) and in his voluminous correspondence. From this have been selected two letters to precede the passage on Kent: the first describes his own estate at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham (Plate 91), and is addressed to Sir Horace Mann in Italy; the second, to Richard Bentley, recounts a visit to Hagley: both were written in 1753. The texts are taken from the *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, edited by Wilmarth S. Lewis.

from a Letter to Sir Horace Mann (June 1753)

I COULD not rest any longer with the thought of your having no idea of a place of which you hear so much, and therefore desired Mr Bentley to draw you as much idea of it, as the post would be persuaded to carry from Twickenham to Florence. The enclosed enchanted little landscape then is Strawberry Hill; and I will try to explain so much of it to you as will help to let you know whereabouts we are, when we are talking to you, for it is uncomfortable in so intimate a correspondence as ours, not to be exactly master of every spot where one another is writing or reading or sauntering. This view of the castle is what I have just finished, and is the only side that will be at all regular. Directly before it is an open grove, through which you see a field which is bounded by a serpentine wood of all kind of trees and flowering shrubs and flowers. The lawn before the house is situated on the top of a small hill, from whence to the left you see the town and church of Twickenham encircling a turn of the river, that looks exactly like a seaport in miniature. The opposite shore is a most delicious meadow, bounded by Richmond Hill which loses itself in the noble woods of the park to the end of the prospect on the right, where is another turn of the river and the suburbs of Kingston as luckily placed as Twickenham is on the left; and a natural terrace on the brow of my hill, with meadows of my own down to the river, commands both extremities. Is not this a tolerable prospect? You must figure that all this is perpetually enlivened by a navigation of boats and barges, and by a road below my terrace, with coaches, post-chaises, wagons and horsemen constantly in motion, and the fields speckled with cows, horses and sheep.

from a Letter to Richard Bentley (September 1753)

. . . As I got into Worcestershire, I opened upon a landscape of country which I prefer even to Kent, which I had reckoned the most beautiful county in England: but this, with all the richness of Kent, is bounded with mountains. Sir George Lyttelton's house is immeasurably bad and old: one room at the top of the house, which was reckoned a *conceit* in those days, projects a vast way into the air ... You might draw,

but I can't describe the enchanting scenes of the park: it is a hill of three miles, but broke into all manner of beauty; such lawns, such wood, rills, cascades, and a thickness of verdure quite to the summit of the hill, and commanding such a vale of towns and meadows, and woods extending quite to the Black Mountains in Wales, that I quite forgot my favourite Thames! --- Indeed, I prefer nothing to Hagley but Mount Edgcombe. There is extreme taste in the park: the seats are not the best, but there is not one absurdity. There is a ruined castle, built by Miller, that would get him his freedom even of Strawberry: it has the true rust of the Barons' Wars. Then there is a scene of a small lake with cascades falling down such a Parnassus ! with a circular temple on the distant eminence; and there is such a fairy dale, with more cascades gushing out of rocks! and there is a hermitage, so exactly like those in Sadeler's prints, on the brow of a shady mountain, stealing peeps into the glorious world below! and there is such a pretty well under a wood, like the Samaritan woman's in a picture of Nicolò Poussin ! and there is such a wood without the park, enjoying such a prospect! and there is such a mountain on t'other side of the park commanding all prospects, that I wore out my eyes with gazing, my feet with climbing, and my tongue and my vocabulary with commending!

from *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1771/1780)

I call a sunk fence the leading step, for these reasons. No sooner was this simple enchantment made, than levelling, mowing and rolling, followed. The contiguous ground of the park without the sunk fence was to be harmonized with the lawn within; and the garden in its turn was to be set free from its prim regularity, that it might assort with the wilder country without. The sunk fence ascertained the specific garden, but that it might not draw too obvious a line of distinction between the neat and the rude, the contiguous out-lying parts came to be included in a kind of general design: and when nature was taken into the plan, under improvements, every step that was made, pointed out new beauties and inspired new ideas. At that moment appeared Kent, painter enough to taste the charms of landscape, bold and opinionative enough to dare and to dictate, and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden. He felt the delicious contrast of hill and valley changing imperceptibly into each other, tasted the beauty of the gentle swell, or concave scoop, and remarked how loose groves crowned an easy eminence with happy ornament, and while they called in the distant view between their graceful stems, removed and extended the perspective delusive comparison.

Thus the pencil of his imagination bestowed all the arts of landscape on the scenes he handled. The great principles on which he worked were perspective, and light and shade. Groupes of trees broke too uniform or too extensive a lawn; evergreens and woods were opposed to the glare of the champain, and where the view was less fortunate, or so much exposed as to be beheld at once, he blotted out some parts by thick shades, to divide it into variety, or to make the richest scene more enchanting by reserving it to a farther advance of the spectator's step. Thus selecting favourite objects, and veiling deformities by screens of plantation, sometimes allowing the rudest waste to add its foil to the richest theatre, he realised the compositions of the greatest masters in painting. Where objects were wanting to animate his horizon, his taste as an architect could bestow immediate termination. His buildings, his seats, his temples, were more the works of his pencil than of his compasses. We owe the restoration of Greece and the diffusion of architecture to his skill in landscape.

But of all the beauties he added to the face of this beautiful country, none surpassed his management of water. Adieu to canals, circular basins, and cascades tumbling down marble steps, that last absurd magnificence of Italian and French villas. The forced elevation of cataracts was no more. The gentle stream was taught to serpentine seemingly at its pleasure, and where discontinued by different levels, its course appeared to be concealed by thickets properly interspersed, and glittered again at a distance where it might be supposed naturally to arrive. Its borders were smoothed, but preserved their waving irregularity. A few trees scattered here and there on its edges sprinkled the tame bank that accompanied its meanders, and when it disappeared among the hills, shades descending

from the heights leaned towards its progress, and framed the distant point of light under which it was lost, as it turned aside to either hand of the blue horizon.

Thus dealing in none but the colours of nature, and catching its most favourable features, men saw a new creation opening before their eyes. The living landscape was chastened or polished, not transformed. Freedom was given to the forms of trees; they extended their branches unrestricted, and where any eminent oak, or master beech had escaped maiming and survived the forest, bush and bramble was removed, and all its honours were restored to distinguish and shade the plain. Where the united plumage of an ancient wood extended wide its undulating canopy, and stood venerable in its darkness, Kent thinned the foremost ranks, and left but so many detached and scattered trees, as softened the approach of gloom and blended a chequered light with the thus lengthened shadows of the remaining columns.

Succeeding artists have added new master-strokes to these touches; perhaps improved or brought to perfection some that I have named. The introduction of foreign trees and plants, which we owe principally to Archibald duke of Argyle, contributed essentially to the richness of colouring so peculiar to our modern landscape. The mixture of various greens, the contrast of forms between our forest-trees and the northern and West-Indian firs and pines are improvements more recent than Kent, or but little known to him. The weeping-willow and every florid shrub, each tree of delicate or bold leaf are new tints in the composition of our gardens. The last century was certainly acquainted with many of those rare plants we now admire. The Weymouth pine has long been naturalized here; the patriarch plant still exists at Longleat. The light and graceful acacia was known as early; witness those ancient stems in the court of Bedford-house in Bloomsbury-square; and in the bishop of London's garden at Fulham are many exotics of very ancient date. I doubt therefore whether the difficulty of preserving them in a clime so foreign to their nature did not convince our ancestors of their inutility in general; unless the shapeliness of the lime and horse-chesnut, which accorded so well with established regularity, and which thence and from their novelty grew in fashion, did not occasion the neglect of the more curious plants.

But just as the encomiums are that I have bestowed on Kent's discoveries, he was neither without assistance or faults. Mr. Pope undoubtedly contributed form his taste. The design of the prince of Wales's garden at Carlton-house was evidently borrowed from the poet's at Twickenham. There was a little of affected modesty in the latter, when he said, of all his works he was most proud of his garden. And yet it was a singular effort of art and taste to impress so much variety and scenery on a spot of five acres. The passing through the gloom from the grotto to the opening day, the retiring and again assembling shades, the dusky groves, the larger lawn, and the solemnity of the termination at the cypresses that lead up to his mother's tomb, are managed with exquisite judgement; and though lord Peterborough assisted him

To form his quincunx and to rank his vines,

those were not the most pleasing ingredients of his little perspective.

I do not know whether the disposition of the garden at Rousham, laid out for general Dormer, and in my opinion the most engaging of all Kent's works, was not planned on the model of Mr. Pope's, at least in the opening and retiring shades of Venus's vale. The whole is as elegant and antique as if the emperor Julian had selected the most pleasing solitude about Daphne to enjoy a philosophic retirement.

That Kent's ideas were but rarely great, was in some measure owing to the novelty of his art. It would have been difficult to have transported the style of gardening at once from a few acres to tumbling of forests: and though new fashions like new religions, (which are new fashions) often lead men to the most opposite excesses, it could not be the case in gardening, where the experiments would have been so expensive. Yet it is true too that the features in Kent's landscapes were seldom majestic. His clumps were puny, he aimed at immediate effect, and planted not for futurity. One sees no large woods sketched out by his direction. Nor are we yet entirely risen above a too great frequency of small clumps, especially in the elbows of serpentine rivers. How common to see three or four beeches, then as many larches, a third knot of cypresses, and a revolution of all three! Kent's last designs were in a higher style, as his ideas opened on success. The north terras at Claremont was much superior to the rest of the garden.

A return of some particular thoughts was common to him with other painters, and made his *hand* known. A small lake edged by a winding bank with scattered trees that led to a seat at the head of the pond, was common to Claremont, Esher and others of his designs. At Esher,

Where Kent and Nature vied for Pelham's love,

the prospects more than aided the painter's genius --- they marked out the points where his art was necessary or not; but thence left his judgement in possession of all its glory.

Having routed *professed* art, for the modern gardener exerts his talents to conceal his art, Kent, like other reformers, knew not how to stop at the just limits. He had followed nature, and imitated her so happily, that he began to think all her works were equally proper for imitation. In Kensington-garden he planted dead trees, to give a greater air of truth to the scene --- but he was soon laughed out of this excess. His ruling principle was, that *nature abhors a strait line* --- His mimics, for every genius has his apes, seemed to think that she could love nothing but what was crooked. Yet so many men of taste of all ranks devoted themselves to the new improvements, that it is surprising how much beauty has been struck out, with how few absurdities. Still in some lights the reformation seems to me to have been pushed too far. Though an avenue crossing a park or separating a lawn, and intercepting views from the seat to which it leads, are capital faults, yet a great avenue cut through woods, perhaps before entering a park, has a noble air, and

Like footmen running before coaches
To tell the inn what Lord approaches,

announces the habitation of some man of distinction. In other places the total banishment of all particular neatness immediately about a house, which is frequently left gazing by itself in the middle of a park, is a defect. Sheltered and even close walks in so very uncertain a climate as ours, are comforts ill exchanged for the few picturesque days that we enjoy: and whenever a family can purloin a warm and even something of an old fashioned garden from the landscape designed for them by the undertaker in fashion, without interfering with the picture, they will find satisfactions on those days that do not invite strangers to come and see their improvements.