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# Long Reviews

## Ann Brooks

*A Veritable Eden – The Manchester Botanic Garden, a History* (Oxford, 2011) £25.

The plant kingdom globally contains an estimated diversity of 350,000 species. In the UK we can boast only some 1500 native species, a legacy of both our status as a collection of modestly sized, temperate zone islands, and the effect of the last ice age which scoured much of the land surface of its previously established flora. A depauperate flora, combined with plant envy of the botanical riches of other countries, may be one reason why British botanic gardens have been important in cataloguing and describing the world's plant diversity, and in augmenting that flora by cramming our gardens with exotic specimens from overseas.

This long history of plant study and horticulture can be traced back to at least the mid seventeenth century, with the founding of what was to become Oxford Botanic Garden. Since that time, Britain's botanic gardens have played a significant role in the economic development of both the country and its former Empire, and continue to be important in science and education, and in the leisure and recreation of the British people.

Previous work on the history of botanic gardens in Europe has tended to concentrate on the large metropolitan botanic gardens, particularly Kew, with their star botanists and international networks of contacts and collectors\* (e.g. Brockway 1979, Endersby 2010, Ollerton et al. 2012). The smaller provincial botanic gardens, in contrast, have been rather neglected by historians, despite the fact that almost every large British city possessed one, and that they have been an important part of local leisure

\* For example Brockway, L.H., *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Garden* (Yale University Press 1979); Endersby, J., *Imperial Nature: Joseph Hooker and the Practices of Victorian Science* (University of Chicago Press 2010); Ollerton, J., Chancellor, G. and van Wyhe, J., 'John Tweedie and Charles Darwin in Buenos Aires', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 66, 2012, pp. 115–24.

and education. This is a tradition that stretches from the early nineteenth century and continues through to the more recent founding of the Eden Project and the National Botanic Garden of Wales.

The history and current utility of such spaces is, as their study reveals, a story that extends far beyond the horticultural and botanical realms, into social, political and economic history. In *A Veritable Eden* Ann Brooks introduces us to the “chequered history including national fame and financial disaster” of Manchester Botanic Garden, which existed from 1831 to 1908. This meticulously researched book explores not only the role of the Garden in local social life, but also the local political intrigues, personality clashes and mismanagement that ultimately doomed the garden. This is exemplified in the way that an un-Victorian attitude to financial prudence (commissioning ambitious building works when finances were in poor shape) collided with a very Victorian snobbery: by refusing to allow the paying general public entry to the Garden more one afternoon a week, a funding stream that may have saved the Garden was effectively curtailed. To paraphrase the author, exclusivity was more important than income.

This was not the only policy that appears inexplicable to the modern reader. Early in its history the subscribing, largely middle class membership of the Garden made it clear that pleasurable perambulations around the site were all that they were interested in, and any pretence to education went when “in 1848 science was eliminated and the horticultural garden...was dismantled”. In this regard it was undoubtedly the people of Manchester, rather than botanical science per se, who were the principle losers, as the large botanic gardens of European capital cities dominated plant exploration and plant science up to the present day. Nonetheless the policy jars with Victorian notions of self-improvement.

A Veritable Eden originated as Dr Brooks' PhD thesis and in general it is engagingly written, demonstrating the author's fascination for her subject, and well-illustrated from material from her personal collection and elsewhere. But there are some places where a firmer editorial hand would have made for a better book. It is clear that a few small sections have been replicated from the thesis out of context, for example a paragraph about the role of a "putter-out" on pp. 60–61. On p. 91, to give another example, we read that a Garden report concluded that "the Curator should be charged with 'gross ignorance and mismanagement' and that he should be replaced"; this is repeated, only three lines later, as "a charge of 'gross ignorance and mismanagement' should be brought against [the Curator]". Finally, to anyone with a botanical, as

opposed to historical, training the misspelling and misrendering of scientific names for some plants will jar, such as "Dickensonia" for Dicksonia and "Victoria Regia" for Victoria regia (itself an old synonym, the plant is now called Victoria amazonica).

Such editorial oversights detract only a little the telling of the story of Manchester Botanic Garden and could easily be rectified if the book goes to a second edition. Which I hope it does; it's a great contribution both to the local history of the city and to our understanding of the history of provincial botanic gardens.

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