

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06617-4 - The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture
of the Late Humphry Repton, Esq.: Being His Entire Works on these Subjects

Edited by J. C. Loudon

Excerpt

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

OF

THE LATE HUMPHRY REPTON, ESQ.

*(Written expressly for Loudon's Edition of
Repton's Landscape Gardening.)*

THE following records of some of the principal events in the life of the late Humphry Repton are gleaned from a collection of MSS. in his own handwriting, containing interesting details of his public and private life; and it is somewhat difficult to select, from materials so varied, such as may best convey to the reader a general idea of the history and character of the author of the works contained in this volume.

The papers alluded to were left as a valued memorial for his children; it may be imagined, therefore, that they contain details of a private nature, which would be found devoid of interest to the world. Mr. Repton, indeed, possessed a mind as keenly alive to the ludicrous, as it was open to all that was excellent, in the variety of characters with whom his extensive professional connexions brought him acquainted; and he did not fail to observe and note down many curious circumstances, and traits of character, in themselves highly amusing, but, for obvious reasons, unfit subjects for publication. We may remark, however, that not one taint of satire or ill-nature ever sullied the wit which flowed spontaneously from a mind sportive sometimes even to exuberance. After all such curtailments have been made, however, there still remains so much that might be considered curious or interesting to the general reader, that it is difficult to limit

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this Sketch within the bounds necessary for the present publication.

To those who have had an opportunity of personal acquaintance with the subject of these Memoirs, it cannot but be interesting to trace the early history and gradual progress of one whose genius and varied accomplishments eventually enabled him to rise to the highest eminence in his profession; or, perhaps, it would be speaking more correctly to say, that his talents enabled him to exalt into an honourable profession, that pursuit which, before his time, had been looked upon but as an occupation for the gardener or nurseryman.

The term "Landscape Gardener" was first adopted by Mr. Repton: and Mr. Uvedale Price, in his well-known "*Essay on the Picturesque*," accuses him of "assuming a title of no small pretensions." His reply to this shews that he was fully aware of the difficulties that were to be conquered, when he first "determined to make that pursuit his profession which had hitherto been only his amusement." He remarks:—"It is the misfortune of every liberal art, to find amongst its professors some men of uncouth manners; and, since my profession has more frequently been practised by mere day-labourers, and persons of no education, it is the more difficult to give it that rank in the polite arts which I conceive it ought to hold. But I am more particularly called upon to support its respectability, since you attack the very existence of that profession, at the head of which both you and Mr. Knight have the goodness to say I am deservedly placed."

That Mr. Repton succeeded in this, his laudable ambition, can be denied by none who remember him in the days of his celebrity, when he was looked up to, by the highest ranks of society, as the acknowledged arbiter of taste, from whose fiat there was no appeal. The name of "Landscape Gardener" may now, indeed, be considered as "one of no small pretensions," since it is expected that he who so calls himself, should be a person not only gifted by Nature with the love of all that is beautiful, but that culture and education should have refined his taste, and improved his powers of judgment; while a knowledge of the habits of polished life, to be acquired only by an admittance into the best society, must have taught him how to combine those thousand little nameless circumstances

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which render the mansions and surrounding pleasure-grounds of our "Homes of England" the admiration of all who can appreciate that truly English word "comfortable."

Unfortunately, the monumental works of the landscape gardener are not like those of the architect, which live to future ages, and become a lasting record of the taste and genius of their contriver. Time makes unrelenting havoc with designs which, during the first ten or twenty years, may have afforded unmixed satisfaction. Young trees will outgrow their situations, while old ones will be uprooted by age or accident; flower-gardens which owed their charm to the light but fragile trellis ornament, or the constant culture of their elegant parterres, will fall into decay, or be neglected by their owners; while the facility with which any alterations may be made, aiding the love of change which is natural to most minds, in the course of years leaves no trace of that master-hand which had first laid the foundation of future improvement.* It is, therefore, by Mr. Repton's printed works alone that his well-earned fame can be properly appreciated; and, in the republication of those works, their present Editor is conferring a benefit on the public, by bringing them forward in a form which will render them more accessible to the general reader.

Humphry Repton was born at Bury St. Edmund's, May 2nd, 1752. His father was Mr. John Repton, who, for many years, held the honourable and lucrative situation of Collector of Excise. From many trifling anecdotes recorded by his son (who never mentions him but in a tone of deep reverence, blended with warm affection), we gather that he was a man of high religious principles, and great benevolence of heart; with manners peculiarly dignified, and possessing a firmness of mind, which frequently led him to suppress any outward demonstration of the best feelings of his nature. During his residence in Bury, he married Martha, daughter of Mr. John Fitch, of Moor Hall, in the county of Suffolk, a descendant of Sir Thomas Fitch, who was created a Knight-

* On visiting places which were known to be more particularly formed by Mr. Repton's taste, the writer of this Sketch has questioned the presiding gardener, but has generally been answered—"It was *all my master's laying out.*"

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Banneret on the field of Agincourt. She was a woman of singular personal beauty, and sweetness of disposition, and was in possession of a small landed property at Stoke, near Clare. This happy union was blessed with three children; the eldest, a girl, named Dorothy (who was married to Mr. John Adey, a much-esteemed solicitor, at Aylsham, in Norfolk); the second, Humphry, the subject of these Memoirs; and the third, John, who rented and passed the greater part of his life at Oxnead Hall, in the same county.

At a very early age, Humphry was sent to the Grammar-school at Bury: he says, "I was too young to recollect much of those *happy days*, as they are always deemed by men, but of which children think differently, since the fear of the rod and the ferula, with the labour of the lesson and the task, are not less evils, while they last, than the fears of riper age, or the anxieties of manhood; perhaps the true difference between the life of a child and that of a man should be estimated by his power of enjoying pleasures, rather than in his experience of evils. The character of the future man may be traced in the boy; he may become a great man, or a rich man; but whether a happy man or not, will much depend upon the degree of natural cheerfulness with which Heaven has originally endowed him; since it is hardly in the power of Fate to confer much happiness on the man of gloomy disposition, nor lasting misery on one of cheerful temperament. The former will sigh upon a throne, while the latter may smile in a dungeon. Through the darkening medium of care, we see imaginary ills in the future, and even the brightness of the past is clouded: but care seldom clouds the views of childhood; which, forgetful of the past, and regardless of the future, enjoys the present moment; and much of the secret of happiness through life lies in the modification of this short sentence." From this school he was removed to the Grammar-school at Norwich, in which city his parents then resided;—and thus seven years passed in laying the foundation of classical knowledge; and he was rapidly rising to a high station amongst his schoolfellows, when, as he expresses it, "My father thought proper to put the stopper in my vial of classic literature; having determined to make me a rich, rather than a learned man. Perhaps wisely considering, that

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if Solomon himself had not been the richest, the world would scarcely give him credit for having been the wisest man." Large fortunes were at that time made by the exportation of the Norwich manufactures; and his father imagined, that, by sending him abroad, and directing his education in a new channel, he might, in time, rival those fortunate men who die possessed of £100,000. In the summer of 1764, therefore, his father and sister accompanied him from Harwich to Helvoetsluys, that the foundation of his future greatness might be laid by his learning Dutch in a school in Holland. This formed a new epoch in his early life, and he dwells upon its details with a minuteness and feeling which must be interesting to all who can enter into the situation of a boy about to be left in a foreign country, without the power of expressing himself in its language; and who was, for the first time, to be entirely separated from the dearest objects of his love. The customs of a Dutch school, so unlike all he had ever met with in England, are also naturally portrayed; but it would extend our present Sketch too much were we to make extracts. The description of the scenery bordering the canals, as viewed from a trekschuit, or canal boat, we give, as having reference to the subject of the present volume.

"At that time it was the pride of every possessor of a few acres, or even square yards, of ground, to display his riches and his taste to the view of passengers who have scarcely any other mode of travelling except in a trekschuit. This display was different in different places; sometimes it consisted of a parterre hanging to the water, in which the design traced on the ground was like a pattern for working muslin on embroidery. The outline might, perhaps, be marked with an edging of box, and, in some few instances, small grass-plots were introduced; but, generally, the effect of these gardens (as they were called) was produced without any vegetation; yet, by a contrast of colours, and a variety of forms, the eye of the stranger was amused, while that of taste might smile at the absurdity. Instead of filling these beds with earth, or mould, in which plants might grow, one part was filled with red brick-dust, another with charcoal, a third with yellow sand, a fourth with chalk, a fifth with broken china, others with green glass, others with spars and ores, and, in short, with materials of

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every colour or kind that might imitate the gardens of precious stones, described in fairy tales, or the Arabian Nights. Such fanciful ground-plans were surrounded by clipped hedges, intermixed with statues and vases of lead, painted in gaudy colours, and often richly gilt;—but sometimes they were flat boards, on which were painted men and women, to imitate the action and colours of nature. In other gardens, a taste less extravagant prevailed. The lofty trees, though always planted in rows, and always cut to preserve the exact limit of their shade, were accompanied by ornaments of sculpture in marble; and the vases were enriched with real flowers, instead of gilded pine-apples. In many places only partial views of the gardens were opened to the canal;—but these were always studied in their effect to the passengers, by a long perspective, not like that of an avenue, which is the same from one end to the other; but frequently, by arches, or other contrivances, the eye was led across many different compartments of an extensive garden, and the view was generally terminated by a scene painted at the back of some seat, which gave imaginary extent beyond the real boundary. The whole interior of these gardens was as formal and fantastic as these occasional vistas. Nature was never consulted, they were works of art; and the lofty clipped hedges, and close overarching trees, were as carefully kept by the shears, as the walks were by the scythes and rollers. All was neatness; the effect of incessant labour. A Dutch merchant's accounts and his garden were kept with the same degree of accuracy and attention. I have been more particular with this description, because it so strongly confirms the opinion I have conceived, that no degree of care or forethought in the father can avail the son in the future pursuits of his life. How few have reached to any great eminence in the profession to which, by the fond parent, they were originally designed! Could it be expected that the future landscape gardener of England should have studied in the parterres and clipped vistas of a Dutchman?"

The school in which he was placed by his father, was situated in the small village of Workum, and here he passed what would have been called a miserable twelvemonth, by any one of less buoyant spirits than his own; but he was one of

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those enviable beings who are so well described by Wordsworth, as peculiarly—

“ Blest with a kindly faculty to blunt
The edge of adverse circumstance, and turn
Into their contraries, the petty plagues
And hind’rances with which they stand beset.”

And his cheerful endurance was rewarded by a fortunate occurrence about this time, which made an entire change in his situation during the remainder of his stay in Holland.

With Mr. Zachary Hope, of Rotterdam, had been placed a sum sufficient to defray his school expenses; and a half-yearly payment had regularly been remitted by him to Workum, with some general inquiry as to the health and progress of the little Englishman. For this civility it was deemed necessary that the young gentleman should call and express his thanks. To most boys of thirteen this would have been an awful undertaking, but he possessed a naturally frank and open disposition, which, combined with the advantage of a strikingly handsome person, seldom failed to prepossess strangers in his favour. Perhaps these advantages were aided by the interesting situation of a boy thus thrown upon the kindness of strangers. From whatever cause it arose, however, this call of civility ended in an invitation to remain two days: and, during that short time, he became so great a favourite, that it was declared “ impossible to part with young Repton:” and thus, for five months, he was domesticated in Mr. Hope’s family, a sharer in all the advantages of education with his only son, enjoying every pleasure and luxury which wealth could procure, and honoured by the friendship of other branches of that numerous and respectable name, which, both at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, had established a kind of rank which vied with the proudest families of other countries. With these kind friends he visited the celebrated watering-place of Spa; and here he again enjoyed the benefit to be derived from an introduction into the best society both of Englishmen and foreigners. By the latter, “ *le petit Anglais*” was now especially noticed with kindly interest. Whether all these circumstances tended to forward his father’s views in sending him to study Dutch, in order to make him a rich man, may be somewhat doubted; but it may be imagined that they im-

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proved the natural quickness of his intellect, gave a polish to his manners (not likely to have been acquired under the tuition of his good old schoolmaster, Mynheer Algidius Zimmerman), and expanded his mind by so early an intercourse with the world. These were advantages of inestimable value in his future career, which have always been acknowledged by himself with gratitude, when he recalled the happy days passed with his early friend, Mr. Zachary Hope.

But our limits will not permit us to dwell longer on this early period of Mr. Repton's life. Two years were spent in a school at Rotterdam (as he was removed from that at Workum, at Mr. Hope's suggestion), from whence he was enabled to pass much of his time with the same invaluable friends. On his return to Norwich, now a youth nearly sixteen years of age, a considerable premium was advanced, that he might, during the next seven years, become initiated in all the mysteries of trade; and when we consider how utterly useless was all such knowledge to him in after life, it is somewhat amusing to find him learnedly descanting upon the nature of calimancoes, Mecklenburgs, worsted satins, and other articles which fashion has now discarded from the list of modern dress and furniture. The records of this part of his life, however, lead us to infer, that the exercise of his talents for poetry, music, and drawing, occupied more of his time than was quite consistent with the views of his affectionate, though, in this instance, not very discriminating, parent. A taste for the latter of these accomplishments seems to have been more especially a part of his nature; and he enumerates it amongst his many sources of gratitude to Heaven, that he was blessed "with a poet's feelings and a painter's eye;" for he says, "it was to my early facility, and love of the art of drawing, that I am indebted, not only for success in my profession, but for more than half the enjoyments of my life. When I look back to the many hundred evenings passed in the circle of my own family—drawing and representing to others what I saw in my own imagination, I may reckon this art among the most delightful of my joys."

It is not surprising that a young man, possessing such attractions of mind and person, should become a distinguished

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favourite with the fair belles of a provincial city. He was an undoubted acquisition at a ball; and, in a private concert, his fine voice and sweet-toned flute were not to be dispensed with. He honestly confesses—"In these days of my puppy-age, every article of my dress was most assiduously studied; and while I can now smile with contempt on the singular hat, or odd-shaped pantaloons of some dandy of the present day, I recall to mind the white coat, lined with blue satin, and trimmed with silver fringe, in which I was supposed to captivate all hearts on one memorable occasion."

These feelings of youthful vanity, however, became sobered down by an ardent and lasting attachment to a young lady of the name of Clarke; and, after a union of forty years, he was able, with truth, to say, "I fixed my hopes where *I have never been disappointed.*" As his father very prudently objected to his marrying before he was twenty-one, this engagement of three years was not fulfilled till the 3rd of May (just three days after his coming of age). In consequence of this event, his father supplied him with a capital sufficient to commence business as a general merchant; and he turned his whole attention to the occupation thus marked out for him. For the first few years he seems to have been tolerably successful; but the casualties of ships lost at sea, and failures in speculations, the details of which it would be tedious to relate, together with the death of both his beloved parents, within a year of each other, made him still more disgusted with a pursuit so little in accordance with his natural taste and inclination, and by which he foresaw his income was likely to be diminished, rather than increased. He therefore determined to retire into the country, and went to reside at Sustead, a most sequestered spot, not many miles distant from Aylsham (where his sister resided in the house which had been left to them by their father). Here passed five years of uninterrupted domestic happiness. The improvement of his garden, as may be expected, was his favourite occupation; the beauties of Nature were his delight; and the investigation of her wonders his amusement. Not an insect or flower passed unnoticed by his inquiring mind; and in these pursuits he was encouraged by the frequent visits of his friend and schoolfellow, Mr. (afterwards Sir) James

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Edward Smith, who, when in after-life he became President of the Linnæan Society, thus writes to him:—"Not all the black devils, nor even *blue* ones, which last, thank God, are known to me *nomine tantum*, can restrain me from thanking you for the last paragraph in your letter, which recalls youth and Sustead, and my first botanizing days, when I hoarded up a hazel-twig gathered in your grounds. There I first began to emerge from the still pool of life, where fate had dropped me. I hope to remind you of some things you may have forgotten, if we meet in town this spring."

An extract from one of the numerous letters Mr. Repton wrote at this time, will best convey an idea of his pursuits, and the perfect happiness of his mind:—

" To EDWARD CHAMBERLAYNE, Esq.,
" Treasury.

" Dear Sir,—While I thank you for the present of lamb, let me beg you not to send costly presents in return for mine, which cost nothing but the 'sweat of my brow,'—amply repaid by health, spirits, and exercise. You must remember that I have no other way of shewing you I am alive and happy, than by sending you some part of that abundance with which Providence blesses my farm-yard, or my gun. I don't wonder you should be at a loss to find Sustead in your map! It is so small a parish, that I am obliged to enact the various parts of churchwarden, overseer, surveyor of the highways, and esquire of the parish. Let me add, landlord of the inn, by receiving you in the only one there is in the place;—for there is not even an alehouse to disturb my peace. I am impatient to shew you the alterations in my house and lands. The wet hazy meadows, which were deemed incorrigible, have been drained, and transformed to flowery meads. Your gun must, for a time, have rest; but, at this delightful season, you, like me, can want no other inducement to enjoy the air, than what Nature so bountifully provides for her admirers in every hedge and field. Come and see how happy we are! If there be any cause for discontent, it arises from my considering that I have not yet deserved to be so happy. I am taking that at the beginning of life, which all look forward to at its close, as the reward of industry. I am, however, not idle. I read much, having the use of my