

PART I

TRANSFORMING LIVES

Gardening Education, Environmental Activism, and the Professional Woman

ONE

PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN

*Frances Garnet Wolseley and the Rise of the Professional Woman
Gardener and Designer*

In 1911 Rudyard Kipling published a poem, “The Glory of the Garden,” designed to be inspirational and to instill civic virtue in the children of the Empire:

Our England is a garden that is full of stately views,
Of borders, beds, and shrubberies and lawns and avenues,
With statues on the terraces and peacocks strutting by;
But the Glory of the Garden lies in more than meets the eye.
...
And there you'll see the gardeners, the men and 'prentice boys
Told off to do as they are bid and do it without noise;
For, except when seeds are planted and we shout to scare the birds,
The Glory of the Garden it abideth not in words.¹

Kipling's Sussex neighbor and near contemporary, Frances Garnet Wolseley (1872–1936), would no doubt have approved of this message about hard work and the glory of England, although she equally would have frowned on Kipling's gendered language and a political stance that limits the participants to “men and 'prentice boys.”² For Wolseley was at the forefront of a movement to legitimize women as professional gardeners, who, after serious training at one of the many gardening schools or colleges that opened in the new century, would ideally go out into the world as professionals. Wolseley envisioned women taking up positions as head gardeners for single estates, jobbing gardeners who cultivated numerous villa gardens, market gardeners

who might live communally and grow vegetables for sale, landscape designers, or teachers of “nature study,” which had become popular in the new century.³

In this chapter, we will relate Wolsley’s contribution to the profession by focusing on her first book, *Gardening for Women* (1908), and her description of founding the Glynde College for Lady Gardeners in her books entitled *In a College Garden* (1916) and *Women and the Land* (1916), as well as *Gardens: Their Form and Design* (1919).⁴ We argue that Wolsley’s vision is paradoxically both utopian (in its goal of restoring the glory of rural England) and practical, a dual commitment that both animates and complicates Wolsley’s career. This tension is related to another paradoxical thread about nostalgia, and the desire for historical rootedness and rural ties, on the one hand, and, on the other, the innovative, forward-thinking dimensions of her work, such as the advancement of women and the interest in gardening and design as professional endeavors for the modern world. We consider Wolsley an innovative preservationist, to use David Matless’s category from *Landscape and Englishness*, because she values the modern at the same time that she admires the designs and traditions of the past.⁵

We will place Wolsley’s work in the context of changes that took place in women’s gardening at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the new century, which reflect the greater professional opportunities for women’s work in general.⁶ Later in the nineteenth century, we see an increasing interest in what Woolf termed “Professions for Women” in her essay of that name. No longer merely the woman’s domesticated landscape, the garden became a site of professional advancement and identity. Women wrote about their new opportunities as existing horticultural colleges began to accept them and others were founded specifically for them. Wolsley sees garden work as an alternative to urban drudgery, which often consisted of “a stuffy London typewriting office” and “long, dark evenings in cheap lodgings.”⁷ Furthermore, professional “lady gardeners” were important to the war effort in the First World War, when estates were encouraged to devote their pleasure grounds to useful crops and women became part of a “land army” at work for the good of Britain, a function to which Wolsley refers in her writing.⁸ After the Great War, Wolsley also saw herself in a tradition of professional garden designers and writers, as we will in *Gardens: Their Form and Design*.⁹

Wolsley’s interest in women and gardening also relates to her connection to the “back to the land” movement, not as a leader but as someone who shared in the ethos. Jan Marsh has argued that this movement was spurred by the weakening of agriculture in the 1870s and the decline in rural populations, which led many English men and women to extol a return to the land and a preservation of what they saw as the virtues of rural life. According to Marsh, the three basic elements of this movement were “the return to the land, the revival of handicrafts, and the simplification of daily life.”¹⁰ As we will see,

Wolseley's commitment to women's education was related to the fulfillment of these ideals: she believed that training women as gardeners would lead to a revitalization of the land and a return to a way of life that was guided by nature's cycles rather than the social calendar of country houses. She scorns "the week-end visitor and those who treat country life much as a plaything, to be taken up for a time and then cast aside, because the glitter and sparkle of town life seem more attractive."¹¹ Like Jekyll, Watts, and other contemporary gardeners, she also connected this agricultural and horticultural revival to the production of handicrafts: "So long as these remain village occupations, which can in many cases be pursued in the cottages without any fear of their developing into capitalist factories, the labourer and his family will benefit by them."¹² The practical implications of garden and cottage labor were always central to Wolseley's thinking.

EDUCATING THE NEW WOMAN GARDENER

Wolseley was the only child of Garnet Joseph Wolseley, the celebrated British soldier who ended his illustrious career as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, and his wife, Louisa. Frances led a peripatetic childhood as she and her mother either accompanied him to his stations in the far corners of Empire or lived in various locations in Britain. Frances's mother groomed her only child to be a typical lady of the upper classes, to which the Wolseleys aspired. From an early age, however, Frances disliked the fripperies of dress and high society, preferring the outdoor world.¹³ But as we see in a photograph taken when Wolseley was around eighteen (Fig. 1.1), she did comply (early on, at least) with her mother's sense of what a lady should look like at the end of the nineteenth century: clearly corseted, finely garbed, with her hair swept up in an elegant bun. Like other women of the time who were interested in gardening, agriculture, and land conservation, Wolseley's commitment would require a personal rebellion from many of the constrictions of her pedigree.

In her *Life and Letters*, Wolseley commented that her education was never conducive to "imagination or individuality . . . I had not energy, or courage sufficient to work my own wings, it had never dawned on me that I could ask to be educated with a view to having ultimately a profession, for instinctively I knew that my education was conducted with a view to one end – that of becoming a capable wife of a rich man."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Wolseley attributed to herself a stubbornness that eventually led her to more independent choices (she never became a wife or mother) and to a rift with her disappointed and demanding parents. She did write seven books, founded and later reinvented a school as a college, was elected to the Worshipful Company of Gardeners in 1913, and became a tireless writer for journals and newspapers on women's gardening and education. Although she hired teachers at the school and



1.1. Frances Garnet Wolseley, c. 1890. © Wolseley Collection, Brighton & Hove City Libraries

college to serve many roles, she maintained a personal interest in teaching as an instrument of social good: in 1916 during the war when soldiers were stationed in Sussex to patrol the coast, some of them started tending a garden in their camp, and Wolseley took it upon herself to visit them and provide basic lessons.¹⁵

Wolseley's background is significant. First, it reveals contradictions in her life and work. Although she did act independently in founding her school and relocating it when necessary, she remained very much a child of Empire. One of her justifications for women's horticultural schooling was that it would enable women to become useful in parts of the Empire that needed such skills.¹⁶ She evoked patriotism constantly in her writing as a major motivation for advocating gardening and agriculture. She also admired and replicated her father's military discipline, running a tight ship at her gardening establishment. Mistakes were not tolerated and there were sharp penalties for the death of a plant: "All such acts of indifference and forgetfulness, where they affect the welfare of plants, must be punished, and the only thorough way of doing so is by making each member of the community feel individually affected by the mischief that has been done."¹⁷ Uniforms and inspections were required. Both she and her one-time forewoman Miss Turner were also harsh in judging students: Agatha Wyndham – "Hysterical and generally a nuisance"; Dorothea Goldring – "Does things badly because she thinks she knows everything"; Rachel Townsend – "Left to go to a socialist holiday home as a housemaid and forfeited her certificate by doing so"; Helen Page – "Left because she was utterly unsuitable, underbred, discontented & most unpleasant."¹⁸

For Wolsley, bad behavior, ill breeding, and a slack work ethic would prevent any young woman from becoming a professional lady gardener. She decried leisured women as “anæmic parodies of the sex” as well as “the new-fangled names of nervous exhaustion, break-down, overwork (!), hysteria, decadence.”¹⁹ With her emphasis on professionalism and her disdain for theories of female weakness and nervous disorders, Wolsley exemplifies the growing interest in women as part of the labor force since the 1880s. Yet she was wary of urban life and ambivalent about suffrage. Although she never articulated her reasons, her uncertainty about the vote seems related to her paradoxical upholding of some conservative traditions at the same time that she remained a constant advocate for women’s education, women in the workforce, and equal pay for equal work.²⁰

Despite the militaristic discipline she admired, Wolsley also argues in *Gardening for Women* that “[t]rue gardening gives scope for much sympathy and feeling,”²¹ and she notes that colors must be arranged thoughtfully and flowers have personalities. On these points and in her view of gardening as art, Wolsley follows her older contemporary and friend Jekyll, who states in *Wood and Garden* that “[i]t is the size of his heart and brain and goodwill that will make [his] garden either delightful or dull, as the case may be, and either leave it at the usual monotonous dead-level or else raise it, in whatever degree may be, towards that of a work of art.”²² This argument complements Wolsley’s emphasis on gardening as an activity that involves mind and spirit and not just bodily strength. Furthermore, she sees gardening as a means to holistic health for women and a buffer against nervous illnesses. The gardening education that she devotes herself to includes gardening *as* education, gardening as a *useful* art, as she teaches the students crucial lessons about patience, discipline, and care.

In addition to the connections of work and health, Wolsley justified her position by arguing that women’s educated participation was crucial to the revitalization of rural England, a position that she shared with the “back to the land” movement and with other earlier influences. Wolsley’s affinity for rural England was not only connected to contemporary discourse about restoring the countryside, but it also grew from childhood reading and experience. Her *Life* is peppered with quotes from Wordsworth, who had decried the loss of rural life at the turn of the nineteenth century. With her mother, Frances also frequently visited the Poet Laureate to-be Alfred Austin at his country estate and later described him as “the first to inspire that love of country life, which has always been such a happy possession, in spite of my having first seen the daylight in Pimlico.”²³ As a child Wolsley took lessons in painting from Helen Allingham, whose paintings bespeak a powerful nostalgia for rural England (Fig. 3.4), as we will see in our discussion of Nesbit. In addition to teaching young Frances accuracy in drawing, Allingham also helped her become an accurate observer of the countryside and its changes – even though

Allingham's accuracy is overlaid at times with a sentimental view of cottage life. Wolseley's response to the depopulation of the countryside and the overcrowding in cities was in part to advocate return to village life, but not precisely that of moss-covered cottages and old-fashioned gardens – the values that she recognized in Allingham's aesthetics. Wolseley was too practical to adopt the pure nostalgia of Allingham's vision of country life.²⁴

Others promoted the Garden City Movement, which wanted to assure green spaces in suburban environments, and the Cottage Garden Association, which in an 1882 issue of *The Garden* had exhorted its readers to “lay aside all ideas of charity or patronage” in favor of providing humble people with land to cultivate, attached either to cottages or to common lands that could become accessible to cultivation.²⁵ According to the article, there would be political, moral, and economic advantages to this work: gardening teaches people to think for themselves, it builds character, and it provides wholesome food to eat. The ethos expressed here bears similarities to Wolseley's arguments for the value of garden work for women. But unlike her efforts, the Cottage Garden Association did not focus on the role of women and their possibilities for advancement.

Wolseley, however, grounded herself in the tradition of women gardeners and garden writers that had developed in the previous century. Earlier, Jane Loudon in the 1840s and 1850s had advocated that women could dig in the dirt as long as they did so with care, attention, and the proper tools, relying on the brawn of men when necessary. The question Loudon answered affirmatively was, Could a lady also be a gardener?²⁶ Wolseley argued that modern ladies, because of the access to education and training both within the family and in school, would make superb gardeners. Whereas Loudon explored how women could dig in the dirt, Wolseley *assumed* that they could do so: she demonstrated not only that a lady could be a gardener but that a lady could also be a professional gardener. She thus moved the conversation forward into the twentieth-century and in line with increased interest in professions for women and in various venues for women's education. The Women's Institutes, for instance, were founded across Britain in 1915 to reinvigorate rural communities and to encourage women's activity in the production of food during the War. Jane Brown notes that the institutes began in Canada and that Wolseley was “a keen advocate for the idea to be taken up here [in Britain].”²⁷ And in *Women and the Land*, Wolseley particularly saw the role for women as head gardeners and teachers, who must be trained to step in when so many men were in the trenches of war.²⁸

Women were so closely associated with gardening by the later part of the nineteenth century that writers began to argue that men could also garden without the fear of appearing effeminate. For instance, in *The Villa Gardener* for March 1877, we find a piece entitled “Horticulture as a Manly Exercise and an

Aid to Health”: “There is a tendency to look upon horticulture as an effeminate pursuit, well and proper enough for women and children, but hardly the thing for strong-minded, able-bodied men.”²⁹ By the early part of the twentieth-century Wolseley assumed that women could dig in the dirt: she advocated for women as trained professionals and leaders in the field. In a way, this association of women with gardening might have made her argument more challenging because as soon as a pursuit was feminized it could be devalued. By insisting on education and training, Wolseley assured the elevation of the field.

Sarah Bilston has stated that Wolseley actually promoted the idea of the woman gardener as a version of her traditional domestic role, more aligned with Ruskin’s Queen of the Garden than the New Woman. Bilston comes to this conclusion based on Wolseley’s comments in *Gardening for Women* that women did not want to supplant the male role in the garden and that men would always be needed for the heavy lifting.³⁰ We, however, see such remarks as more strategic than statements of faith, closer to the concession that Mary Wollstonecraft makes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that men will always be physically stronger than women; but the important thing for Wollstonecraft, as for Loudon and Wolseley, is the intellect.³¹ As we have seen in relation to Jekyll, Wolseley considers gardening a discipline, an intellectual endeavor that requires knowledge, skill, and planning. Any brute can move dirt around, but one must have intelligence to plan a garden and bring plants to fruition. When thought of in that way, Wolseley’s professional women were superior to the strong but dull under-gardener, parodied in *Gardening for Women*: “I am often questioned as to whether a lady can possibly exert authority and influence over a working man. I am certain, if she is the right kind of woman, she can. Let her, without hesitation, dismiss the first drunken under-gardener she meets with, and the others will respect her, and not try to take advantage of her because she is a woman.”³² As an author and educator, Wolseley did not adopt the modesty topos (as Jekyll had in claiming her amateur status); instead, she boldly and repeatedly critiqued the image of the male gardener lording it over any woman who dared to enter the garden.

To that end, Wolseley warned employers that they must choose a “lady” so the woman gardener could maintain her authority over men (class trumps sex here) and that this lady should have the same salary as a man would have been offered in this position.³³ Wolseley actually did advocate that women of the professional classes (ladies in her view) would succeed more readily than lower-class women in positions of gardening leadership. She was not a radical or egalitarian when it came to issues of class and wanted to make sure that the women admitted to her school would present themselves as “ladies” when they graduated. In other contexts, she outlined that lower-class “village girls” should be educated at schools in particular horticultural and agricultural tasks, but they could not be expected to lead.³⁴ Wolseley was admittedly bound by



1.2. Frances Wolseley with Leggett and Funnell, 1912. © Wolseley Collection, Brighton & Hove City Libraries

her class biases, but her advocacy of paid work for women marks an important change from the lady gardener of the nineteenth century, who, if she dug in the dirt, mostly did so only in her own garden. Wolseley particularly wanted the daughters of professionals (such as herself) to join her school. She believed that women could rise from the professional classes and become ladies by virtue of their background and their acquired education. But she did not expect ladies of the upper classes or aristocracy to join her establishment: they would not have the financial incentive.

Despite her status of being a lady according to her own standards, Wolseley relished the challenging aspects of garden work. In her last work, *Myth and Memory* (1934), her narrator claims that “[t]here must be some of the settler’s blood in my veins: I have found such happiness in laying out the two gardens that were bare fields when I visited their sights . . . I like the tussle, the struggle that a newly-made garden requires.”³⁵ Wolseley embodies that same spirit in guiding and instructing her students and employees, as evident in the photograph of her with two lime-pit workers (Fig. 1.2). No longer the young debutante in fancy dress, Wolseley is clearly a woman dressed for command and work: large felt hat, thick wool clothes, and dirty work boots. She is not directing from the sidelines but is in the midst of the workers, forming a strong presence in the foreground. The photograph also reveals that gardeners are out

in all weather, gardening being a year-round practice. As Wolseley argues in *Gardening for Women*, the “winter foundation” is essential to a healthy and productive garden.³⁶

As we have seen, Wolseley also aligned herself with noted gardeners and garden writers of her day, including William Robinson (her neighbor in Sussex), Jekyll (also a neighbor), Ellen Willmott, and Maria Theresa Earle, all of whom became patrons of her school, and she mentions them frequently in the first volume of her *Life and Letters*. She had a continuing correspondence with Jekyll following the period around 1890 when both she and Robinson had advised her parents on their gardens in Greenwich.³⁷ Wolseley may very well have been thinking of the garden writing of such luminaries when she set out to write *Gardens: Their Form and Design* (1919), especially in her introduction when she states that “[o]ur best English gardens are lovely with colour-scheme herbaceous borders filled with well-grown flowers,” a signature of the natural style.³⁸ In her earlier book *In a College Garden*, Wolseley had in fact stated that she had her students “arrange plants according to the colour-scheme suggestions that are found in Mr. W. Robinson’s ‘English Flower Garden,’” and she quotes approvingly Jekyll’s comment in *Country Life* that contact with nature opens to women “a whole new world of interest and delight.”³⁹

Perhaps Wolseley hoped to capture something of this world of delight in the decorative Prospectus for the Glynde School for Lady Gardeners, with what appear to be copies of eighteenth-century engravings on either side of the top heading (Fig. 1.3); both illustrations feature women out of doors, the first a woman and two girls who appear to be on a stroll and the other a beekeeper approaching her hive. The first illustration evokes the idea of woman as mentor and teacher of the natural world; the second, one of the active occupations open to women who choose this school. Yet the formal dresses and hats endorse the notion that no matter how practical the education, the school is looking for “Lady Gardeners,” not the daughters of weed women or common laborers. But these would not be idle ladies: the beekeeping image (which we will also see in relation to Flora Thompson) provides a common metaphor of industry in children’s didactic literature, thus speaking to the work ethic of the school.

Including these visual attractions as well as the names of well-known gardeners and writers (Willmott, Earle, and Jekyll) who endorsed her prospectus for the school was a smart move. No doubt these endorsements helped to recruit some of her best students, such as Chrystabel Procter, who went on to direct the gardens at Girton College, Cambridge.⁴⁰ Procter and the other students would find a curriculum at Wolseley’s college that included both horticultural and market gardening for vegetables and fruits, as well as the propagation and care of flowers. But the college, while training many young women (and later men) in practical gardening, was never successful in teaching