

*The English Garden and National Identity: The Competing Styles of Garden Design, 1870-1914* by Anne Helmreich. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. xviii, 282 pp. + 8 colour plates, 111 b/w illus. ISBN 0-521-59293-3. \$80.00.

Defining national identity as a set of shared cultural practices, Anne Helmreich argues that “the garden had particular resonance as a means of imagining nation-ness. An enclosed space devoted to cultivation and display of plants, the garden mirrored the notion of nationhood as a bounded territory designated for a particular set of peoples.” During the thirty-five years covered by her study, this symbolic potential connected public discourse about gardens with larger debates about the future of England and its role as an imperial power, and informed a heated controversy about the true English garden style.

Helmreich begins by reviewing the origins of the myth of an English garden, suggesting it was the nineteenth-century ambivalence toward change that turned the garden into an image of immutable national values. As in similar studies, the need to summarize socio-economic and intellectual trends in short space can result in oversimplification, and Helmreich’s representative writers may not always typify the general thinking of the era. Ruskin, whom she frequently cites, is a case in point. Thus, Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* (1846) is a questionable guide to “understanding nineteenth-century art practices” – although it is an excellent guide to understanding Ruskin’s influence on William Robinson. Moreover, there are times when she wanders a bit from her central argument, as when she offers an extended quotation from Andrew Mearns describing the housing conditions of London’s poor.

Fortunately, her direction becomes clear when she turns her attention to gardens themselves. There were, she explains, four basic styles of garden design practised in the late nineteenth century: the wild garden, the cottage garden, the formal garden, and “a fusion of formal and natural styles.” Each proposed itself as quintessentially English and claimed roots both in history and in regional practice. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address the first three of these styles. Chapter 5 takes up the debate between them; and the final chapters consider the successful fusion of styles in the work of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens, who emerge as the two heroes of Helmreich’s study.

The wild garden, as championed by William Robinson in *The Wild Garden* (1870) and the journal he founded and edited, *The Garden* (1871-1927), offered a reform of gardening principles based on the imitation of natural settings. Helmreich links Robinson to William Morris’s condemnation of bedded out garden designs (which Morris associated with mass production) and preference for traditional, hardy flowers (over imported exotics), as well as to the very different logic of Darwinian biology, which also rejected a notion of