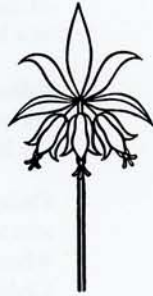


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## Some nineteenth-century English gardeners

Betty Massingham

Strength may wield the pond'rous spade,  
May turn the clod, and wheel the compost home,  
But elegance, chief grace the garden shows  
And most attractive, is the fair result  
Of thought, the creature of a polish'd mind.

William Cowper, *The task* (Book 3, 1783)

ENGLISH GARDENERS, both men and women, of the nineteenth century seem to have shown interests in many aspects of life other than gardening. Most of the women were intelligent and well ahead of the time in their thought and ideas. The men were often connected with the Church, carrying on the tradition of the English parson with green fingers.

Strangely enough, little evidence of the clerical horticulturist emerges in contemporary Victorian writing. For instance, in George Eilliot's *Scenes of clerical life*, with its finely drawn studies of parish activities, there is little mention of gardening. The Rev. Amos Barton, swamped by misfortune and the hand of destiny, had small inclination for horticultural matters, and the Rev. Maynard Gilfil, "an excellent old gentleman who smoked very long pipes and preached very short sermons," is remarkable as the hero of a moving love story whose chief interest in a garden was to walk there with his Caterina, "with a moss rose-bud in her hand"<sup>1</sup> Again, Dr. Proudie and his Barchester circle call to mind a party in a marquee on the lawn or a discussion under the elm trees of the close, rather

than any intimate interest in a garden.

In *Pride and prejudice*, Jane Austen did introduce Mr. Collins, who invited his guests "to take a stroll in the garden, which was large and well laid out, and to the cultivation of which he attended himself. To work in his garden was one of his most respectable pleasures."<sup>2</sup> Immortal for the name he has given to the bread-and-butter letter, rather than for his aptitude in the parsonage garden, Mr. Collins is nonetheless one of the few gardening clergy of literature.

Two real-life nineteenth-century clergymen who are known now for their gardening interests, as well as for their work in the Church, were Dean Reynolds Hole and the Rev. Charles Wolley Dod. They were both scholars, intelligent and educated.

Canon Hole (1819-1904), who became Dean of Rochester, is remembered especially in connection with roses and as the originator of the National Rose Show. He was an only son, and one of his first recorded recollections of childhood was connected with painting. He was presented with a sixpenny box of paints and later admonished for using them to decorate himself, his clothes and also his baby sister. This small setback seemed to discourage his artistic ideas and he turned towards archery, which became a keen interest in his life. He reported practising





Figure 1. Dean S. Reynolds Hole. Photo courtesy *Country life*.

at the targets with his father and later becoming a member of the Royal Sherwood Archers.

He also recalled an early love of wild flowers and of collecting plants for the garden. "And then the first plant which I could call my own, the salvia, which I bought for sixpence from the nurseries near to our school! I have grown and shown a multitude of specimens in the greenhouse and the stove since then; I have won prizes of gold and cups of silver, but I have never exhibited nor seen others exhibit anything half so precious as that...no colour which could compare with its splendid crimson flowers." But there was a natural lapse during his later school-days when other interests came along—"the busy occupations of our manhood, and the dazzling attractions of the world."<sup>3</sup>

The early nineteenth century in England was a time of awakening in rose-growing circles, amongst the nurserymen such as William Paul and Thomas Rivers, and also amongst the working men whose small home-built glasshouses were as precious to them as the greater works of Paxton. The first rose show at which the Dean was asked to judge was arranged by mechanics and others near Nottingham for an Easter Monday when roses in flower could only have been grown under glass. The Dean confessed that at that time he had not a single rose in his own garden.

Much of this pioneer work amongst industrial labourers was carried out at great cost to themselves. When Dean Hole enquired from one of them how he afforded the expensive new varieties, the answer came back quickly and to the point. "I'll tell you," he said, "how I managed to buy 'em—by keeping away from the beer-shops!" Another walked more than a mile to his garden, often before work, in his dinner hour, and after work in the evening. And there is the story related by the Dean of a lady visitor calling on the wife of one of these enthusiasts during a cold winter spell. She noticed that there were few blankets on the bed, and enquired if they had no more. "Yes, ma'am, we've another," replied the housewife, "but...;" and here she paused. "But what?" said her visitor. "It is not at home, ma'am; Tom has only just taken it...he took it—took it to keep the frost out of the greenhouse; and we don't want it..."<sup>4</sup>

Such devotion brought results and it is perhaps well to remember that these were some of the beginnings on which the contemporary rose shows were built up.

The Dean dates his own entry into the rose-growing ranks as 1846, when Mr.



Wood of Maresfield, Mr. Adam Paul of Cheshunt, Mr. Land of Berkhamstead, and Mr. Thomas Rivers were four of the most distinguished growers. By the time the April issue of *The florist* appeared in 1857, he had progressed enough in his rose growing to launch an appeal for help in the organisation of a national rose show. This in itself received little or no response, but individual letters written to the chief rosarians produced more successful results, and in July, 1858 the first "Grand National Rose Show" was held in London. For it, £200 had been contributed towards the expenses, which included prizes amounting to £156. St. James's Hall was engaged at a cost of 30 guineas for the day and the band of the Coldstream Guards was engaged to play. Their music was described as admirable but "too loud for indoor enjoyment."

And so the National Rose Show was on its way. In his excellent publication *A book about roses*, Dean Hole devoted four chapters to the Show's history and development and to the mechanics of exhibiting. The book is full of information on hundreds of roses, given with infectious enthusiasm. It would be difficult to select a favourite from so many, but, he wrote, "If ever, for some heinous crime, I were miserably sentenced, for the rest of my life, to possess but a single rose-tree, I should desire to be supplied, on leaving the dock, with a strong plant of Loire de Dijon."<sup>4</sup>

Roses were Dean Hole's speciality, but he had time for sidelines and made many interesting friends. He was a keen sportsman and rider to hounds, and a member of the Garrick Club, where evenings were spent in lively conversations with Dickens, Thackeray and John Leech. The latter became a dear friend and was best man at

his wedding. (One of the Dean's saddest clerical duties was when he officiated at Leech's funeral.)

Two of his closest gardening friends were William Robinson and Shirley Hibberd. (It was Dean Hole's suggestion that the new newspaper which Robinson proposed to publish should be called *The garden*.) He also knew well Edward Woodall and Gertrude Jekyll, and Canon Ellacombe visited and stayed with him at Rochester. He knew personally most of the big nurserymen and had visited their gardens both in England and in France.

In *More memories (being thoughts about England spoken in America)*, the Dean presented lectures which he was invited to give on a variety of subjects in the United States. He dedicated the book to his kind friends on "either side of the Atlantic," and there are references in the lectures to many Americans. He mentioned the fact that a window is dedicated in Westminster Abbey to James Russell Lowell; that Oliver Wendell Holmes spent two of the most memorable hours of his life in the same Abbey; that an excellent guide to English cathedrals came from the pen of the well-known American writer Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer; and he frequently referred to the admiration of the English for the American writers Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Wendell Holmes, and Brett Hart.

When Dean Hole died in 1904, he had seen much of his work prospering and knew that it would live after him. Notwithstanding all his knowledge and experience from growing thousands of roses, his chief piece of advice, which he gave repeatedly, was "Your heart must be in your enterprise."<sup>4</sup>



“Propagate, propagate, propagate”—this was the watchword of the Rev. Charles Wooley Dod (1826-1904). Apart from his concern for propagation—“Mr. Dod finds that in the second year the plants are better than in the first year, but that they degenerate in the third year, hence his advice to divide and multiply”—he was also a maker of rockeries. The article in *The gardeners chronicle* goes on: “Mr. Dod says one ought to demolish an old and construct a new rockery every year.”<sup>5</sup>

The Rev. Dod came from an old Cheshire family dating back from the time of Henry II. His father, the Rev. J. F. Hurt of Derbyshire, married Miss Mary Wolley and assumed by Royal Sign-manual the surname and arms of Wolley. The boy was educated at Eton on the Foundation and eventually became a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge. In 1850 he married Frances, granddaughter of Mr. T. C. Dod of Edge Hall, Malpas, Cheshire, and in 1868 he, like his father, took on his wife’s surname by Royal Licence. But he also retained his own name.

He was an assistant master at Eton for many years, and during that time he was ordained Deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln. It was not until after his retirement that he was able to devote his whole time and attention to the garden at Edge Hall.

William Robinson wrote a description of the Edge Hall garden under the heading “Various Flower Gardens: mainly chosen for their beauty. . .”<sup>6</sup> These included Wilton and Powis Castle, Compton Winyates and Penshurst Place, along with examples of Mr. Robinson’s favourite cottage gardens and Gilbert White’s garden at Selborne. And so Edge Hall was in good company. It was large in

comparison with, for instance, Canon Ellacombe’s garden at Bitton of under two acres or Miss Jekyll’s stretch of wooded heathland at Munstead, and there was ample room for propagating and for rebuilding rockeries.

Plants were everywhere. “They clothe the slopes, they are dotted on the lawn, they edge their way in up to the very hall door. . .” But there were also stretches of parkland, at the foot of which ran “a small brook full of trout,” and “woods which in spring are carpeted first with primroses and wood anemones, then with wild hyacinths and pink campion, whilst later there is a tall growth of *Campanula latifolia* and large breadths of *Polygonum cuspidatum*, which has been planted to supersede nettles, while overhead is abundance of hawthorn, crab and wild cherry.” Certainly this was a garden to appeal to William Robinson’s taste, in spite of so much visual activity in the shapes of the many flower beds. There was an important point which may have won Mr. Robinson’s heart: “. . . the hardy flowers of the northern world are grown in numbers for the owner’s delight and the good of his friends . . .” So much of Mr. Wolley Dod’s gardening was done for the benefit of his friends. “Make a note of what you want,” he would say to his guests as he took them round his garden. He was a ready gardening friend and adviser to anyone who was genuinely interested and wanted his help.

Miss Jekyll especially mentioned her debt to Mr. Wolley Dod in the introduction to her first book, *Wood and garden*, published in 1899. Years later, recording her gratitude to many gardening friends, she wrote that “of all these friendly gardeners, the one whom I felt to be the most valuable was Rev. C. Wolley Dod,



scholar, botanist and great English gentleman; an enthusiast for plant life; an experienced gardener; and the kindest of instructors.<sup>77</sup>

Ellen Willmott, too, was a friend who often stayed at Edge Hall and asked for advice. On one occasion there was a difference of opinion over the name of a certain narcissus, and Mr. Dod suggested a visit to the garden of his old friend Canon Ellacombe at Bitton, which included many daffodils. This introduction resulted in a lasting friendship between Miss Willmott and the Canon, he visiting her garden at Tresserve when he was on his walking tours in Switzerland and France, and she often travelling down to the West Country to see the gems of his collection at Bitton.



Figure 2. Reverend Charles Wolley Dod. Photo courtesy *Country life*.

Mr. Dod grew many narcissi and daffodils himself, and was quoted by Mr. Robinson as an authority on a certain

form of disease known as "basal rot" which affects these bulbs. He also grew quantities of fuschias, especially *Fuschia fraseri* and the hardy *Fuschia riccartoni*. It is reported that he confined himself exclusively to hardy plants. Notes made on a visit to Edge Hall garden in the month of September include mention of *Salvia patens* (perhaps one of the least hardy of the plants he grew), hybrid lobelias, *Michauxia campanuloides*, a lemon-coloured variety of the common sunflower, some of the linarias, including *Linaria reticulata*, and the handsome *Senecio pulcher*. Then there were all the plants for his rock gardens. The rocks for some of the rockeries were formed from great slabs of limestone similar to those which are found at the Great Orme's Head, North Wales.

The Rev. Dod was also a frequent contributor to gardening journals, especially *The gardener's chronicle*, and as early as January, 1879 he had an article in *The garden* entitled "A substitute for nettles." It may be assumed that this was written from experience in his own orchard. He won the Jubilee Gold Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society and after his death in 1904 it was said that "in later times horticulture has not sustained a more severe loss..." His name lives on in the Wolley Dod rose, a double form of the apple rose, with soft pink flowers and luxuriant grey-green foliage.

The name of Coutts is so much connected with the famous banking house that perhaps another connection—that of the preservation of certain open spaces in London—does not always immediately come to mind.

Born on April 26, 1814, Angela Burdett, later the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, was the daughter of Sir Francis Burdett and



Sophia, third daughter of Thomas Coutts. Her father was known as something of a firebrand in politics. He was a lively supporter of Lord Grey in bringing forward the Reform Bill of 1832 and never ceased to be progressive and sometimes violently outspoken during his 30 years in parliament as a member for Westminster. From her mother's side there came the solid, careful characteristics which had helped to build up the power of the famous bank that bore the family name. There was also considerable financial security.

Angela, the youngest of six children, was brought up on the family estates in Wiltshire and Derbyshire, and also at her father's town house in St. James's Place. It was here, as a young woman growing up, that she met many of the well-known people of the day, amongst them Wordsworth, Lawrence, the young Disraeli and the ageing Duke of Wellington. It may be to the last-named that we owe the development of her philanthropic interests, though even as a girl in her teens she showed signs of the responsibility towards her fellow-men which her father had made evident all his life.

Charming, wealthy, moving in distinguished political and social circles, and numbering among her intimate friends Sir Robert Peel, Bishop Wilberforce, Prince Louis Napoleon, Faraday and Hooker, she was said to have been asked by every eligible bachelor in England for her hand. When she attended the wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert she must have been one of the most marriageable young ladies present. But the fact is that she remained a spinster for another 40 years. Her attention was turned to philanthropic ventures, and her wide interests, her goodness and generosity were in proportion to the size of her bank balance. Her life

became filled with meetings, schemes and projects, but she also found time to keep in touch personally with the people she was trying to help, and to do practical things for them apart from signing cheques.



Figure 3. Baroness Burdett-Coutts.

She cast her net in many directions—she built churches, founded missions, adopted whole areas of slums (such as Bethnal Green), aided young boys who were destitute by placing them in the navy or the merchant service, cared for lost animals and caged birds. Then there was all her work in collaboration with Charles Dickens, whom she met at a dinner party in 1835, when he was 23 and she was 21. That was the beginning of a close relationship in which they worked together for the public welfare.

But one of the most important of Miss Burdett-Coutts' interests was in gardens and open spaces and rural activities. On July 7, 1856, the *London Times* had a leading article praising Miss Coutts for the prizes she was awarding for essays on "Common things," which included subjects like household expenses, cooking, shirt-making, and so on. Grants were given as prizes, usually distributed by



Miss Coutts herself, accompanied by an address to the children. In the same year a country schoolteacher named Susan Meadows gained one of these prizes for an essay on rural education. She concluded her essay: "Boys who live in the country may be taught to be useful even in their leisure hours, by allowing them a small portion of ground as a garden, and requiring them to weed and water it, and also to attend to the different plants growing in it; thus they will be kept from mischief, and at the same time may learn habits of usefulness and industry."<sup>8</sup>

How much this scheme may have encouraged the owners of cottage gardens it would be difficult to say. The first haphazard sowing of a packet of seeds or the watering of a clump of mignonette may well have led on to greater things in years to come. It was the cottage gardens that kept the flag of good taste flying in Victorian England, and the scheme inaugurated by Miss Coutts to encourage interest and knowledge may have been responsible for much of this enthusiasm, beginning in a small patch of ground with a packet of seeds and a watering can.

Then there was her encouragement of the intelligent care and love of house plants amongst townspeople who had no gardens, and her interest in flower shows, especially in large towns. One of the best-known of these exhibitions was that held in connection with the Lansdowne Place Ragged Schools in Tabard Street, where plants were given out in the spring to be returned in the best possible condition for competition at the end of the summer. This idea was so popular that the parents asked the committee if the competitions might be opened to them as well as to the children.

A sketch of the public life and work

of this remarkable woman was prepared by command of H.R.H. Princess Mary Adelaide, Duchess of Teck. This report gives a précis of some of Miss Coutts' activities, and mentions particularly those in connection with open spaces round London. "The preservation of commons, the provision of open spaces and parks, and, in the more densely crowded districts, of old churchyards laid out as gardens, has always had her support. She very materially assisted in the preservation of the fields and woodlands adjoining Hampstead Heath, which now affords to Londoners a recreation ground of about five hundred acres." She was not the official founder of the National Trust—Octavia Hill and Canon Rawnsley did not hold their first meeting until July, 1894, when the Baroness had just passed her 80th birthday—but she was certainly one of the forerunners in its special line of activity.

Her private life seems enigmatic. She turned away all suitors until, at the age of 66, she married William Ashmead-Bartlett, an American who worked with her for the Turkish Compassionate Fund, and who was then 28. On account of this marriage her interest in the banking house passed to her sister Clara. She died on December 30, 1906, outliving her Queen by a few years. While her body lay in state in Stratton Street, thousands of mourners filed past. She was buried in the Abbey, the only woman not of royal birth to be so honoured.

Mrs. C. W. Earle (1836-?) is probably best remembered as the author of *Potpourri from a Surrey garden*, published by Smith, Elder & Co. in 1898, followed shortly afterwards by *More pot-pourri from a Surrey garden*. Her mother and father



were devoted to each other throughout a short married life lasting only eight years. She was born Maria Theresa Villiers in 1836. Her father died of tuberculosis at Nice in October, 1843 and, though her own memories of him are few, they were kept alive and nourished into hero-worship by her mother. Later, she wrote about the atmosphere of a home with a widowed mother to whom death had brought such irreparable loss, describing it as "peculiar and unlike other homes."

The garden of Maria Theresa's childhood home in Hertfordshire was "beautiful, wild, old-fashioned..." and was surrounded by a mill-stream which she remembered and loved all her life, with hedges of China roses, sweet briar, honeysuckle and white hawthorn forming the boundary. She recalled her interest in the flowers growing in this garden—the tall, white, double rockets, the oriental poppies, the feathery spikes of *Spiraea aruncus*—but confessed to little knowledge of them.

Her education was handed over to the care of governesses. She had eight different ones before the age of 15, only one of whom she liked. In spite of this lack of continuity, she was intelligent and recalled the impressions made on her mind when, "as quite a girl," she was taken to pay her first visit to William Morris' old shop on Queen Square. "It had the effect of a sudden opening of a window in a dark room?" She immediately appreciated the light, clear colours and the simplicity of the furnishings. Throughout her life she was greatly influenced by Morris and especially by his *Lectures on art*.

Perhaps experiences with the string of governesses gave her mother the idea that foreign travel might be more rewarding, educationally, then lessons in the school-

room. She took her young children travelling abroad, often on visits to friends. One of these later visits Maria Theresa always remembered with nostalgia—a long stay in Florence when she was 20, and how she used to "dance half the night through at balls."

Captain C. W. Earle married Miss Villiers in 1864. They lived in Bryanston Square and had three sons. There they entertained a large circle of artistic and intellectual friends. At their house one could meet Burne-Jones, Morris and Rossetti. Gardening held little or no attraction for her at this period of her life. She had many other interests, and there is special mention of a visit to D. G. Rossetti's studio while he was working at the small replica of "Dante's Dream," now at Liverpool, and a recipe for varnishing plaster casts given to her by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. She was a keen amateur painter, some of her work receiving high praise from no less an art critic than Mr. Ruskin himself.

It was not until after the death of her husband, as the result of a bicycle accident, that Mrs. Earle became keenly interested in her garden. They had moved



Figure 4. Mrs. C. W. Earle. Photo courtesy *Country life*.



from London to a house called "Woodlands," in Cobham, Surrey, with what she described as "a small piece of flat ground surrounding an ordinary suburban house. Kitchen-garden, flower-garden, house and drive can scarcely cover more than two acres."<sup>9</sup> The present owners of "Woodlands" are glad to be able to keep the "whole five acres" going with the help of only one gardener. Mrs. Earle may have underestimated its extent, or perhaps some adjoining land has been added since her time. However, the important thing is that hers was a garden of reasonable size, from the point of view of expense and upkeep, and not beyond the possibilities of present-day gardening.

Like Miss Jekyll, Mrs. Earle came to gardening with a background of wide interests, and they had certain other things in common. Both talented women, educated and artistic, they delighted in foreign travel and numbered intellectuals among their friends. They tackled their difficulties—Mrs. Earle facing up to the loneliness of widowhood, Miss Jekyll the disaster of extreme myopia—with similar weapons: hard work and a complete lack of self-pity. Mrs. Earle had to learn to live alone, and to fill her days so that she did not miss too much having someone at hand "to whom one can go with those numberless little things which are often big things in life's routine, and that one hides away from those who come in from the outside world as guests, be they ever so near and dear."<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Earle's childhood had not done a great deal to equip her with gardening knowledge, but she did mention particularly that, in a strange way, memories of the Hertfordshire garden helped her years later. She became so attached to her garden that to leave it even for short

periods produced anxiety. It was only for one of her travels abroad that she could leave it willingly; a foreign journey was always one of her greatest delights. Perhaps the seeds of this love were sown by her mother on those early visits to various friends with villas in Italy, Germany and Switzerland. She would snatch at any opportunity. In 1897 she was invited to Germany for a short visit. At that time travel was not as quick or comfortable as it is now, and her friends were astonished that she would consider undertaking such a journey, when even a holiday in Torquay might have been thought too much for a period of only 10 days. It was a mark of her independence not only that she went, but that she undertook it so lightly, leaving her now-precious garden with hardly any feeling of guilt at all.

Mrs. Earle's books cover a great variety of subjects. She wrote entertainingly of Berenson's art criticisms, of dew ponds and railway travel, of wild gardening and Michaelangelo, as well as of how to grow echeverias and hepaticas, and of how to be a good daughter. In her letters to a young wife entitled *The lady's country companion*, the quality of her writing approached that of Mrs. Jane Loudon's.

A friend of mine recalls learning to ride a bicycle on Mrs. Earle's lawn, and helping her to water the agapanthus growing in tubs on the terrace. She connects her, also, with making the most delicious salads and knowing the right uses of herbs, particularly chervil and tarragon. My friend also remembers a great profusion of alpine strawberries, and especially the enjoyment of eating them. Indoors there was everywhere the lightness of white paint, and she has never since seen books look more attractive in

their different colours of binding than they did against Mrs. Earle's white-painted bookshelves. In the hall there were majolica plates and flat porcelain dishes in wire supports against the white wall.

The influence of William Morris was everywhere in this light, homely house. There was also the courage of facing loneliness—" . . . but to meet life with courage, both for oneself and others, that must be the real aim." Then Mrs. Earle added, realistically, though perhaps a little sadly: "But courage is rather strength than happiness."

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Field Cottage  
Biddenden, Kent  
England