Lancelot “Capability” Brown and the Gardens at Stowe
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< https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capability_Brown >

Introduction

At the dawn of the 18th century, coinciding almost exactly with the birth of Lancelot "Capability " Brown (1716-1783,) Britain was poised to dominate global commerce and to build the "empire on which the sun never set." Old empires, such as the Mughals, and the Chinese, fell prey to European expansionists, but especially to the British. The British expelled their French rivals from both North America and India at the Peace of Paris in 1763. Georgian monarchs and prime ministers established and sustained domestic peace, stable political institutions, and financial solvency. The English Civil War ended in 1688, with the last Jacobite Uprising defeated in 1746. While warfare ravaged the continent, it did not directly affect Britain after the defeat of the last Stuart pretender, the "bonny prince," at the Battle of Cullodon. The Whig-Tory two-party system of the "squirearchy" preserved the Parliamentary system, though it could scarcely be called democratic by 21st century standards. Nevertheless, responsible members of Parliament funded the debts incurred by the long, war-plagued 17th century and the financial crisis of the "South Sea Bubble"; Parliament bailed out the faltering Bank of England. The 18th century witnessed an astonishing period of British agricultural, industrial, and scientific innovation, which enabled London to challenge Paris as the new hub of Europe. British entrepreneurs, across a broad spectrum of areas, led the way in agricultural experimentation that made the nation essentially self-sufficient in food production. Through both private and public funding, roads, bridges, and canals criss-cossed the home islands bringing products from where they were produced to where they were in demand. These advances in infrastructure—though Ireland did not benefit—served to unite England, Scotland, Wales more effectively. Innovations in the textile industry increased production and spurred the Industrial Revolution. Although Britain lost its American colonies at the end of the 18th century, its influence in India, the Caribbean, and China expanded dramatically. British prosperity made the gardening revolution possible.

In the 18th century, landed aristocratic and gentry elites in England began to re-imagine and re-purpose their country estates. They hired architects, such as Robert Adam, to make their homes more practical, comfortable, and luxurious, as well as to impress their friends or to make a political statement. They looked with fresh eyes at their kitchen gardens, which produced herbs for cooking and medicines, perhaps augmented by flower beds for cutting blossoms to decorate internal living spaces. The formal gardens of the 17th century—venues for grand spectacles and "landscapes of power"—gave way to new esthetics and definitions of beauty (Bennet 46). Garden art and garden visiting became pastimes for fashionable men and women of the leisure classes. Like their American counterparts, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, enthusiastic landowners took a long view of their renovations: they studied the climate and soil conditions of their acres; they searched at home and abroad for both appropriate and exotic plants; they hired experts to guide them in creating a vision of, as Addison put it in 1712, a place "…to fill the Mind with Calmness and Tranquility, and to lay all its turbulent Passions at Rest" (Thomas 14). Many opened their estates to visitors who could tour the grounds. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett re-encountered Mr. Darcy on such a visit to Pemberley. One of the most consequential landscape architects of this period was Lancelot "Capability" Brown. He earned his nickname by assuring his clients that their gardens were "capable" of improvement ("Capability Brown").

Lancelot "Capability" Brown was born in Kirkeharle, Northumberland in 1716, where his father was the Estate Agent for Sir William Loraine of Kirkeharle Hall ("Capability Brown"). He began his own gardening career there as a humble apprentice to Sir William's kitchen garden manager, William Kent, and worked under Kent's tutelage. He learned his craft at the feet of a master, as Kent was "one of the founders of the new English style of landscape garden" (Rutherford 32). In 1739, Brown journeyed South from Kirkeharle; 1742 found him at Stowe where he secured the appointment of Head Gardener from Richard Temple, 1st Viscount Cobham. Here Brown experimented with and developed the signature innovations that would earn him the title, "the Shakespeare of gardening" (Rutherford 7).

Stowe

Stowe encompassed 250 acres of gardens or potential gardens, which Brown proved fully "capable" of improving. At Stowe he began his life-long effort to impose his will on landscape (Thomas 266) and to create a "virtual reality" rather than a real one (Tatter). He experimented with ways to enhance nature's inherent beauty with exaggerated perspectives, artfully placed stands of trees, and ha-ha optical illusions. Wandering paths seemed to go nowhere but led the stroller to unexpected views or vistas ("The gardens at Stowe"). Lord Cobham instructed Brown to craft the gardens and landscape to illustrate his own Whiggish political inclinations. By "Whiggish," Lord Cobham meant a natural and irregular design rather than the regimented, formal look that Cobham defined as "Tory." He also instructed Brown to incorporate hidden meanings and allusions in the meandering paths of "Virtue," Vice," and "Liberty" ("The gardens at Stowe"). Brown created the "natural" look artificially:

> His workmen moved huge amounts of earth and diverted streams or rivers to create the natural effect that he wanted. He drained land for grazing and planted woods for timber, so that the estate was attractive as well as productive (Alcorn).

Brown's landscapes, at Stowe and elsewhere, were characterized by sweeping vistas, naturalistic parklands, and idealized recreations of nature. Signature Brown "touches" included "natural curves" created artificially; smooth, undulating grass leading to the manor house; the addition of clumps of trees and serpentine lakes made from damming local streams or rivers ("Capability Brown"). A "typical" Brown garden looked "completely natural," but was, in fact, completely "man-made" (Alcorn). Reflecting the influence of Pope and the era's fascination with antiquity, Brown "tossed in" classical "allusions" and "artifacts" wherever possible (Thomas 65). With Lord Cobham's encouragement and financial support, Brown designed the Grecian Valley at Stowe, "…which contained a grass amphitheatre surrounded by a terrace, a lake, a triumphal arch, and of course a Grecian temple" (Tatter). Fulfilling Addison's dictum, Brown's creation at Stowe provided "a fascinating combination of appeals to the head and the heart, the eye and the intellect" (Tatter).

In the Grecian Valley, Brown implemented a vision for a Stowe acreage that was essentially undeveloped farmland. He launched the herculean task of its transformation with an excavation "intended to produce a river valley" (Tatter). His workers removed tons of soil from one site to make room for the amphitheatre mentioned above, as well as for a Grecian temple and a Corinthian arch. He transplanted dozens of elm trees and lime trees from other parts of the estate for his primeval forest. Brown also scattered statues of shepherds, shepherdesses, and fauns throughout the valley. It took years for Brown's ideas to materialize fully; Lord Cobham died, and Brown had moved on by the time a local observer, Thomas Whately, described the Grecian Valley in the 1770s:

> . . . lovely woods and groves hang all the way on the declivities; and the open space is broken by detatched [sic] trees, which near the park are cautiously and sparingly introduced, lest the breadth should be contracted by them; but as the valley sinks, they advance more boldly down the sides, stretch across or along the bottom, and cluster at times into groups or forms, which multiply the varieties of the larger plantations; these are sometimes close coverts, and sometimes open groves; the trees rise in one upon high stems, and feather down to the bottom in another; and between them are short openings into the park or the gardens (Tatter).

Contemporary admirers, like Whately, called the Grecian Valley a masterful creation of "an idealized natural landscape after the manner of landscape painters" (Tatter).

Critique

In the course of a long and lucrative career, Lancelot "Capability" Brown exercised an enormous influence on landscape architecture, designing more than 170 parks and gardens surrounding England's great houses ("Capability Brown"). His style defined a "'gardenless' form of landscape gardening, which swept away" the remnants of and admiration for the formal gardens of the past (Alcorn). In direct contrast to the rigid, geometrical, gardens of the 17th century, Brown combined and juxtaposed grassland, parkland, trees, and water features. His palette featured shades of green rather than vibrant colors. Those who admired Brown's work noted that he "improved nature" ("Capability Brown"). Alexander Pope's "Windsor Forest" was a paean to Brown's gardens as "glorious" in their "harmonious confusion" (Tatter.)

> Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,
> Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,
> Not Chaos-like together crush'd and bruis'd,
> But as the World, harmoniously confus'd:
> Where Order in Variety we see,
> And where, tho' all things differ, all agree (11-16)
> (quoted in Tatter).

Critics of Brown commented that he altered nature in the creation of "nature." They mocked Brown for the artificiality of his "improvements" on nature. By the 19th century, tastes and fashions changed: Addison's search for "Calmness" and "Tranquility," and Brown's evocation of them, were eclipsed by the Romantics. They preferred landscapes that evoked the "dramatic conflict and awesome power of wild nature" ("Capability Brown"). To a certain extent, though not entirely, Brown went out of style.

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