

Aurélien Wasilewski
Université de Lille

William Robinson (1838-1935): old-fashioned flowers, revolutionary outlook.

William Robinson, an Irish gardener, newspaper editor and journalist from the second half of the 19th century came to be known in the English-speaking world as the ‘Father of the English flower garden’¹. His work is still considered today as revolutionary in so far as he adamantly rejected regular patterns and artificiality, which were the norm and criteria of beauty in the High Victorian gardening style of the middle of the century. In his seminal book, *The Wild Garden*², he advocated for a natural aesthetics that is still regarded today as the root of modern-day ecological management of green spaces or Gilles Clément’s ‘garden in motion’³ concept. Robinson was nicknamed successively ‘the Wild Gardener’⁴ and even the ‘first guerrilla gardener’⁵.

However, paradoxically enough, he is very little known outside of the English-speaking world, which confines his theories to British garden history, despite the fact that he was deeply inspired by French horticultural practices, garden aesthetics and urban planning. What’s more, very few gardens are known to have been created by his own hand, which raises doubts about his influence on the gardening practices of his contemporaries. Furthermore, his own garden at Gravetye Manor contains regular flowerbeds and lawns, which apparently contradicts his own philosophy. Finally, he has been constantly blamed for having encouraged the naturalization of numerous species considered invasive today.

We might thus wonder to what extent William Robinson, who is usually presented as a ground-breaking gardener, was rather the horticultural spokesman of the social and economic aspirations that were appearing in the latter part of the 19th century. What were the aesthetic forms he created and the media he used a response to?

We’ll first focus on the way his aesthetic views could be read as a reaction to the industrial revolution. From that perspective, his stance is rather counter-revolutionary and embodies a comeback to old-fashioned forms of gardening.

However, we’ll see that this professed revival of pre-industrial aesthetics was really the materialization of the ideals of the growing middle-classes. In that sense, Robinson was the hand and voice of aspiring Victorians.

Finally, Robinson was maybe truly a revolutionary in his upheaval against the fixed hierarchy within the garden profession. He relentlessly endeavored to overthrow landscape architects to empower landscape gardeners, and made the latter rise to the status of legitimate and genuine ‘artists planters’⁶, paving the way for artists like Gertrude Jekyll or Vita Sackville-West.

¹ ALLAN, Mea, *William Robinson, 1838-1935: Father of the English Flower Garden*, London, Faber & Faber, 1982.

² ROBINSON, William, *The Wild Garden*, John Murray, London, 1870.

³ CLEMENT Gilles, *Le Jardin en mouvement*, Paris, Pandora, 1991.

⁴ BISGROVE, Richard, *William Robinson: The Wild Gardener*, London, Frances Lincoln, 2008.

⁵ GREENE Mary, ‘First guerilla gardener: William Robinson’s garden has been restored’, for *The Daily Mail*, April 1st, 2016.

⁶ ROBINSON, William, ‘The wrong route’ in *Gardening Illustrated*, Vol. XXXVIII, Dec. 1916, p. 51.

Outline

I - The Robinsonian garden as reaction to industrial revolution.

Wild Garden aesthetics: reclaiming neglected land and wilderness

Natural gardening as aesthetic expression of return to nature

Old-fashioned flowers from the olden days: the cottage garden ideal

II - The Robinsonian garden as artistic counterpart to the rise of urbanized middle-classes.

Rationalizing gardening for leisure

Democratizing nature's bounty

III – A new order for the garden profession: advent of the 'artist planter'.

Artificiality vs. naturalism

Gardening as an art

Gardeners vs. architects: advent of the gentleman gardener.