

THE EARTH MOVED FOR HIM

The Omnipotent Magician: Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, 1716-1783

By Jane Brown (Chatto and Windus 384pp £20)

'Capability' Brown, the most famous of all eighteenth-century landscape designers - and the father of the landscape garden - never wrote a manual or recorded his musings for posterity. In fact, were it not for an illuminating conversation with Hannah More in 1782, the year before he died, critics might have got away with the accusation that he possessed nothing but a good eye for effect.



The Grecian Valley, Stowe, c 1750

Fortunately for Brown's reputation, More recorded the encounter. The two were at Hampton Court Palace when Brown directed her attention to the landscape:

'Now there', said he, pointing his finger, 'I make a comma, and there', pointing to another spot, 'where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; at another part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.'

Thus Brown revealed that his 'natural' designs were the epitome of the expert grammarian's art.

Another common misperception about Brown was that he emerged fully formed in the mid-eighteenth century, his ideas entirely sui generis and at odds with every other landscape architect in the country. Rather more prosaically, Brown actually served a long apprenticeship under William Kent at Stowe. It was Kent who trained and schooled him in the new style of picturesque gardens that were beginning to replace the formal parterres, avenues, allées and walled gardens of the Baroque era.

Kent and his predecessor Charles Bridgeman were responsible for Stowe's famous lake and the picturesque garden tour replete with Palladian bridge, Elysian Fields, and Temple of Ancient Virtues. In accordance with their vision, particularly Kent's, the gardens at Stowe became park-like places for walking and discovering rather than simply looking. Brown, who became head gardener in 1741, was so well versed in Kent's style that his major contribution to Stowe - the Grecian Valley - moves effortlessly out from the Elysian Fields without any stark interruption or change of mood, belying the massive quantities of earth that were shifted to create it.

Even as late as 1751, three years after Kent's death when Brown had already struck out on his own, he was still labouring under the shadow of his mentor. The diarist Horace Walpole visited Warwick Castle, where Brown had accepted a commission from Lord Brooke, and noted somewhat dismissively that 'it is well laid out by one Brown who has set up on a few ideas of Kent and Mr Southcote'. Two years later, however, Brown had become so successful that he was able to keep an account at Drummonds Bank.

Part of the secret to Brown's success can be divined from his nickname. It was allegedly given to him because of the way he would march all over a property before informing the owners whether it possessed the right capabilities for his attentions. When Brown assessed a landscape he was looking for water as much as he was looking for contours, views and woodland. His patrons were enamoured with the new poetical depictions of nature as gentle and pastoral. In David Hume's words, 'the eye is pleased with the prospect of cornfields and loaded vineyards, horses grazing and flocks pasturing; but flies the view of briars and brambles, affording shelter to wolves and serpents'.

The 'prospects' provided by Brown included serpentine lakes, gently undulating lawns, strategically planted clumps of trees that led the eye to rolling views, and simple canvasses of 'natural' colours. At Blenheim Palace, which is considered to be Brown's magnum opus, he erased Henry Wise's scheme and constructed a dam to hold back the River Glyme. This created a 45 hectare lake that was ornamented by Vanbrugh's Grand Bridge as well as a series of cascades that allowed the river to flow in and out. Altering the topography required such extensive engineering work that Brown joked that 'the Thames would never forgive him for what he had done at Blenheim'. The exact number of landscapes that were on the receiving end of Brown's transforming zeal will never be known, but it was at least 170 and perhaps as many as 200. The number is astonishing when one considers the huge expense of his projects. One estate required the planting of over 100,000 trees. At Petworth, Brown erased George London's rectilinear garden, transported 64,000 tons of soil, dammed the stream, and created one of his signature lakes. Despite the turmoil and upset that his projects caused to owners while their parks were ripped apart, he was never short of work. When a potential client asked him to redesign her Irish estate, Brown replied that it would be impossible: 'I haven't finished with England yet.'

Brown worked on the Blenheim project for ten years and was paid a total of £21,500 for his work - about £1.5 million today. During this time he was also accepting commissions from numerous other patrons, and accepted the position of master gardener at Hampton Court in 1764. It is estimated that throughout the 1760s and 1770s Brown enjoyed an average annual turnover of £15,000. His genius would never have been revealed were it not for the vast wealth that was pouring into the country during the mid-eighteenth century. The money had to be spent somehow and 'improving' the landscape was a recognised symbol of progress and

prosperity. As expensive as Brown's designs were, they did not outstrip his clients' ability to pay for them: of the peers who signed a protest in 1778 against prolonging the American War, ten of them had annual incomes of over £200,000 (Mr Darcy's £10,000 a year suddenly looks rather middle class).

Brown died in 1783 of a stroke, while going to visit his daughter. Almost immediately, his critics started a campaign of vilification that Humphry Repton, Brown's intellectual successor, did his best to counter. Brown was lambasted for being a destroyer of ancient gardens, of not being 'natural' enough, or for being too tame according to the new taste for the Romantic Gothic. His reputation fell further with the Victorians and their predilection for manicured rockeries and shrubberies. It was not until Dorothy Stroud 'rediscovered' Capability Brown in 1950 that his work became popular again. Jane Brown has written extensively on gardens, including Sissinghurst and the garden at Buckingham Palace. Although undeniably knowledgeable, her feel for landscape history outstrips her skills as a biographer. The Omnipotent Magician is well-meaning but Dorothy Stroud still reigns supreme.