



The English Garden: Meditation and Memorial

David R. Coffin

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More so than other Europeans, the English have turned to their gardens or wooded "wildernesses" for contemplative consolation. To explore the meditative aspect of English garden-making, David Coffin combines selected poetry, diary extracts, letters, and more formal writing from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries with charming illustrations and his own perceptive commentary. The English saw the impermanence of life in "weather-beaten heads" of flowers that "not seun dayes before had flourished in their full prime," and their gardens were often decorated with sundials and ruins. Addressing both admirers of the English garden and students of English cultural history, Coffin shows that the English emphasis on transience was a key to their gardening and their literary style.

To nonconformists seeking a relationship with the deity, for instance, the English garden was a confessional. For a time the concept of the medieval hermit living in solitude in the wilds of nature also became popular, but this notion lost its religious motivation, and garden hermitages were then used as sites for entertainments of various kinds. The ancient idea of burial in a garden or park was more successfully restored, however, and pyramids, obelisks, and triumphal columns commemorated the rulers, heroes, and friends of those who suffered, or enjoyed, the "English malady" of melancholy.

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