



RADICAL GARDENING

**POLITICS, IDEALISM
& REBELLION
IN THE GARDEN**

George McKay

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The 'Plot' of *Radical Gardening*

Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks.

Ian Hamilton Finlay

Social historians hardly ever mention gardens or gardening, and garden historians have little to say generally about politics.

Martin Hoyles, *The Story of Gardening*

In the common perception, gardening is understood as suburban, as leisure activity, as television makeover opportunity. The narratives of its origin are seen as religious or spiritual (Garden of Eden), military (the clipped lawn, the ha-ha and defensive ditches), aristocratic or monarchical (the stately home, the *Royal Horticultural Society*). *Radical Gardening* travels an alternative route, through history and across landscape, reminding us of the link between propagation with propaganda, or pomegranate and hand grenade. For everyday garden life is not only patio, barbecue, white picket fence, topiary, herbaceous border... This book weaves together garden history with the counterculture, stories of individual plants with discussion of land use and public policy, the social history of campaign groups with the pleasure and dirt of hands in the earth, alongside media, pop and art references, to present an alternative view of gardens and gardening. To do this, the book draws from different disciplines, but 'it is not in fact very difficult to be "interdisciplinary" when it comes to gardens, because there is not really a "discipline" of garden study'.¹

Radical Gardening is about the idea of the 'plot', and its alternate but interwoven meanings (there are three). Many of the plots we will explore are inspiring, and allow us to see how notions of utopia, of community, of activism for progressive social change, of peace, of environmentalism, of identity politics, are practically worked through in the garden, in floriculture, and through what Paul Gough has called 'planting as a form of protest'. But not all – some are sobering, or frightening, for within the territory of the politically 'radical' there have been and continue to be social experiments and articulations that invert our positive expectations of the human exchange that occurs in the green open space of a garden. The book is modest in its ambitions: all I want to do is to convince you, dear reader-gardener, that those notions of a *horti-countercultural politics* you suspected were in your earthy practice and pleasure

(I agree that you probably didn't call them horticultural politics) have a rich and challenging tradition, a significance, as well as a trajectory of energy and import that makes them matter for our future. 'Why', asks writer-gardener Jamaica Kincaid, 'must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility with being a human being?' I follow Kincaid, and join the likes of Martin Hoyles, Paul Gough, Kenneth Helphand and others, each of whose work on gardens has helped shape my own thinking, in insisting on a view of the garden which allows us to include the opposite.² Such a reading of the garden should not be a strange or forced juxtaposition of plant and ideology: think only of the English radical writer William Cobbett, who declared in 1819 that 'if I sowed, planted or dealt in seeds; whatever I did had first in view the destruction of infamous tyrants'. Or think of the source of the word propaganda – which today refers to the organized art of political persuasion – deriving from the Latin verb *propagare*, to propagate. Or the twentieth century revolutionary playwright Bertolt Brecht who observed, with startling accusatory power, that 'famines do not occur, they are organized by the grain trade'. Or the female Colombian activist speaking to western buyers on behalf of the 40,000 women working in the pesticidal contemporary Colombian flower industry: 'Behind every beautiful flower is a death. Flowers grow beautiful while women wither away'.³ Such horticultural glimpses as these show us that there is, potentially at least, a lengthy tradition of radical gardening, and this book is meant as one contribution to maintaining or (re) constructing that tradition.

I stated that there are three versions, three meanings of 'plot' in *Radical Gardening*, and these are land, history and politics. Firstly, there is the plot of the land, the garden space itself, how it is claimed, shaped, planted, and how we might understand some of the politics of flowers. As Lisa Taylor observes, in *A Taste for Gardening*,

Gardens are peculiar, hybrid spaces: part private, part public. In one sense they appear to exist as part of the private realm:... they are conceived and constructed as partially private extensions of the home dwelling. Gardens are also located close to spaces within the home which have been conceived as private, domestic, 'feminine' zones – the kitchen and the dining area for example. On the other hand, the garden is an interface between the privacy of the house and the civic property of the street. It is a space onto which others can look, examine and judge.

But there is more, both in terms of what the garden can signify and in terms of what we understand as a garden: from public parks to allotments, squatted community gardens to the 'polemic landscapes' of peace or fascist gardens, as well as the 'defiant garden', the plot is the territory under discussion, the patch of earth where it all happens. Many of the patches visited in the book are chosen because of their marginality – I am interested in the horticultural politics of the ex-centric, in the idea of *ruderal vegetation*, which refers to the kinds of plants (and, for me, planting) 'that grow in waste and particularly on disturbed sites, such as garbage dumps, vacant lots, and industrial wastelands'.⁴ Also I am attracted to the stories of the plots that are no longer there, so marginal that they have been easily erased or pushed over the edge – the demolition by the city authorities of New York's community Garden of Eden in 1986 is surely emblematic here. There is lament for such lost patches, of course, but also a recognition of the spirit of celebration, and of the fact of political counter-organisation and re-mobilisation by activists.

Secondly, there is the plot as narrative or story, whether historical or contemporary. The book draws on what I view as a persistent tradition of writing which sets itself against the dominant narratives of gardening, and towards a radical gardening – from Cobbett through to the publication by New York autonomists of a book like *Avant Gardening* in 1999, for instance. It is evident in small magazines, pamphlets and websites produced by enthusiasts, counterculturalists and green activists, as well as at the margins of more easily identifiable left-wing publications like the magazine of 'socialist agriculture', *The Country Standard* (edited from the British Communist Party's national office through the 1950s and 1960s). It is arguable that, in the twentieth century, the new phenomenon of the mediation of gardening unproblematically replicated a certain social relationship: radio, newspaper columns, and early television 'established the public image of the head gardener, which passed into national acceptance' in Britain, writes Jane Brown. Not only a professional expertise, but also a nostalgic nodding to an increasingly distant

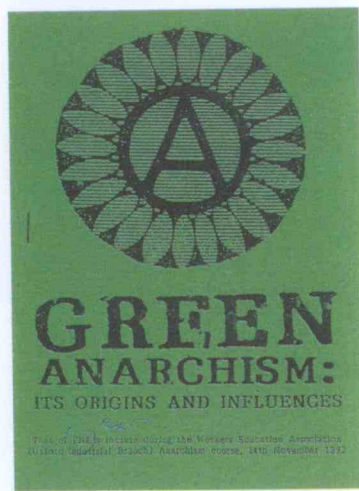


Figure 1. The hortocounter-culture through its radical pamphlets: *Green Anarchist* (slogan: 'For the Destruction of Civilisation!')

version of Englishness and its class distinction was being presented via the new media interest in gardening. This is not a route I follow. But, mostly the book is concerned with twentieth and twenty-first century narratives – there is I think, a good deal of detailed writing already available on, for instance, the profoundly political relationship between garden and empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also I wanted this book to be able to speak to people's contemporary situations fairly directly, and so chose more recent and current material.

Thirdly, we can understand the plot as the act of politicking, occasionally perhaps a dark conspiracy but much more often a positive, humanising gesture in a moment of change. In fact, as this book shows, gardening, gardens, flowers, planting have frequently been a terrain for ideological struggle; so the plot of *Radical Gardening* is the land itself, the history of the struggle, and the activism of the political conspiracy. May Day is a good date on which to start: it is the seasonal celebration of new growth and fertility around the rural maypole, it is the neo-pagans' Beltane, and it is International Workers' Day for trade unionists and industrial workers. May Day is the one day of the year when there is a coincidence of horticulture – including gardening – and radical politics, when the bucolic intermingles seasonally with the ideological. Community activist-gardener Heather C. Flores has written of being as 'radical as a radish', and goes on to define 'radical' in the context of gardening: it is 'radical only in that it comes from, and returns to, the root of the problem: namely, how to live on the earth in peace and perpetuity.... Flowers are not the only thing that blooms in the garden – people do.' For similar etymological reasons, writes Barbara Nemitz, we should recognize indeed that 'plants are radical subjects ... from *radicalis*, something that is firmly rooted'.⁵

These three versions of the plot – land, history, politics – are interwoven. The garden can become the source of political identity or power, including in cases which speak more readily to the majority of people who are not or were not as privileged. The so-called 'Votingham' housing estates of the nineteenth century, for instance, were developed to exploit the link between freehold property ownership and the franchise; it is not going too far to argue that it was the land itself, the garden of the house, that made parliamentary representation possible at that time: *no garden, no vote*. Alternatively, one might consider the contemporary notion of NIMBY as another political identity articulated specifically through land and garden: 'Not In My Back Yard' (curiously, often figured by people who do not have back yards, but extensive 360° gardens) is the voice of privileged self-interest from people who wish to protect what they

have against what they view as the onslaught of modernity, which might be in the form of a proposed adjacent new nuclear power station, a motorway, or a wind farm, say.

Though a slow culture, the garden is not fixed, and can change remarkably. I am not thinking season-by-season, though such change is traditionally the life-cycle of the garden – even if the seasons themselves are under threat by the profoundly global political issue of climate change. I am thinking in terms of its ideology. For instance Jenny Uglow has reminded us that ‘many features in Victorian parks, like pavilions and pagodas, are being reborn [today] not as symbols of empire but of inclusion’. As society changes, it seems as though the garden remains the same, and yet it too alters. Does, should, the (idea of the) garden speak more forcibly to us nowadays? In *Nowtopia*, Chris Carlsson writes of a politics inscribed in the very act of ‘slowing down the gardener, making her pay attention to natural cycles that only make sense in the full unfolding of seasons and years. In a shared garden [especially], time opens up for conversation, debate, and a wider view than that provided by the univocal, self-referential spectacle promoted by the mass media’. Climate change, peak oil transition, community cohesion, the environment, genetic modification and food policy, diet, health and disability – the garden is the local patch which touches and is touched by all of these kinds of major global concerns, whether it wants that kind of attention or not. Peter Lamborn Wilson writes, perhaps with a note of incredulity, that “‘Cultivate your own garden” sounds today like hot radical rhetoric. Growing a garden has become – at least potentially – an act of resistance. But it’s not simply a gesture of refusal. It’s a positive act. It’s praxis’.⁶

It is intriguing to recall that, in Thomas More’s founding text of the genre, *Utopia*, while land and houses are held in common – each decade a property swap takes place, in a decennial cross between potlatch and lottery – and gardens are abundant, there remains a competitive edge between the utopians about the ‘trimming, husbanding and furnishing of their gardens, every man for his own part’.⁷ It is within this dynamic between selfish and social gardener identified so presciently in More’s utopian gardens that *Radical Gardening* is set. The early chapters of this book are shaped around the public and outward-facing politics of gardens, whether in the form of the use of the garden and landscape in the construction of national identity (as during fascism), or the place of the garden in social planning, such as in the green public spaces of the city. The later chapters are more concerned with the grassroots

and personal politics of the garden. This includes the development or transformation of the garden as an act of conscious, often anti-establishment, political campaigning, and critical and historical exploration of ways in which the garden and its planting have functioned as a space for the expression of identity politics. The boundary between the early and the later chapters of the book is an untidy one, since some material crosses over, or refers back. But then the fact is that I am an untidy gardener, and enjoy the bursting clump or semi-covered path, the nettle and the dying branch. Writing this book has taken me away from my own garden, to which I feel a neglectful stranger. For several seasons of a year now I have privileged ideas and histories of social movements and green spaces over my own modest terraced strip of land.

Very, very soon I am returning to my own plot, but I will be accompanied by a greater understanding of the other plots I have read and written about for *Radical Gardening*, and this has shifted my mind more than I expected. Over the years I have written numerous books about contemporary radicals, social experimenters, counterculturalists, and their movements and modes of (sometimes dis-)organisation. I always come away most of all impressed and moved by the creativity and idealism of the people involved, as well as to a lesser extent soberingly aware of the limitations and potential dangers that can go with pushing for social change. Gardeners I thought would be a major challenge to my normal methodology and anticipated results! I guess that’s why some years ago I started thinking about a book like this. But I am surprised once more, my own ignorance catching me out again. My hope is that you will find something new here, thought-provoking, inspiring, and that you will experience the sense of excitement I did on learning about ways the generous space of the garden can have political resonance. Do let me know, and if you’ve any cuttings or good seeds to share so much the better. If we are radical gardeners together is it possible that we might be able to save the world, just when it needs saving – *we* need saving – most?

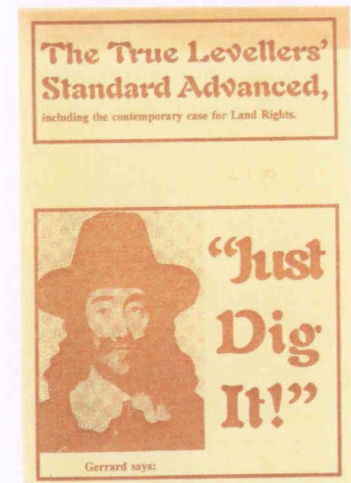


Figure 2. The horticultural culture through its radical pamphlets: ‘Just dig it!’ introduces the writings of the seventeenth century Diggers to twentieth century youth

CHAPTER 3

Peace in the Garden

War is the natural occupation of man ... war – and gardening.

Winston Churchill to Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

The hour was early; the morning still, warm, and beautiful. Shimmering leaves, reflecting sunlight from a cloudless sky, made a pleasant contrast with shadows in my garden as I gazed absently through wide-flung doors opening to the south.... Suddenly, a strong flash of light startled me – and then another. So well does one recall little things that I remember vividly how a stone lantern in the garden became brilliantly lit and I debated whether this light was caused by a magnesium flare or sparks from a passing tram.

Garden shadows disappeared. The view where a moment before all had been so bright and sunny was now dark and hazy.

Michihiko Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary*

There are sustained connections between *peace* and gardening – because of the future-oriented nature of the gardener's timescale, the nurturing of life involved, the growing of food, both the impermanence *and* the cyclic nature (therefore return) of the activity, the slow stubborn embrace of the countermodern in the face of mass destructive technology. Social crisis and upheaval can have what might appear to be unexpected effects on gardening. For instance, both the seventeenth century Commonwealth and World War Two saw an expansion in the planting of fruit trees, 'in the former as a political project to create another Eden and in the latter as an economic defence against Hitler's blockade', explains Martin Hoyles. Major wars can have a profound impact on gardening practice, mobilising and transforming land use. In this chapter we are going to consider the place of the garden as a culture of peace, which means also thinking initially of the more powerful history of the gardened landscape in the practice of war – celebration, memorialisation, contemplation – and some of the ways in which the language of flowers is used to express a critique of militarism. Our other focus

is the place of protest, the activism of social movements, within political campaigns against military and nuclear adventure. Simply put, the garden has played a quite remarkable role in this area, from the war memorial to the peace garden, as a key form of 'polemic landscape'.¹

According to Paul Gough, 'Peace is most often represented aesthetically and polemically as transient, dialectic and fluid. It is rarely state-sponsored and eschews the plinth and the plaza'. One key way of manifesting peace has been in the garden, and a war memorial/peace garden dialogue is itself part of what Gough elsewhere terms 'the complex fetishism of remembrance which is best served by transient natural forms rather than fixed architectural emblems':

an understanding of the symbolic and metaphorical role of plants, trees and shrubs in a commemorative space is crucial in extending and opening out the process of remembrance. Plant life has a natural cycle of growth, fertility, decay and death which is assiduously avoided in the conventional iconography of martial memory. Plant life rarely has the permanence suggested by hewn rock and cast metals. Nor do trees and shrubs (however well tended) offer the illusion of permanence.²

To set the context for the modest movement in which flowers and gardens talk of the politics of peace, we need to see a little of the dominant alternative, the historic weight of military and war memorial tradition which is being planted against in the gestures and spaces we go to focus on. There is



Figure 26. Two 'khaki chums' in the Royal British Legion-sponsored garden at Chelsea Flower Show, 2008, marking the ninetieth anniversary of the end of World War One

a legitimacy in Vita Sackville-West's lines, from her 1946 long poem *The Garden*, written at Sissinghurst while she watched bombers and fighter planes working the skies overhead, and changing the landscape with their explosive deliveries, leaving 'craters in the simple fields of Kent'. *The Garden* was Sackville-West's response to the social horrors of World War Two, as well as

to what she viewed as the modernist excess of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. (Though I do view Eliot as the vastly superior poet, he is undoubtedly the inferior gardener; what gardener sympathises with the idea that 'April is the cruellest month?') We will follow Sackville-West in these lines: 'Yet shall the garden with the state of war/Aptly contrast'.

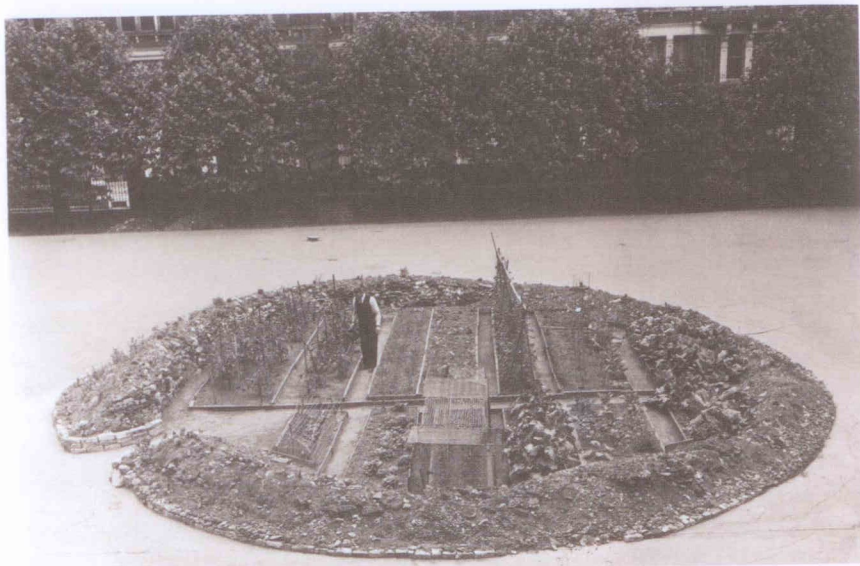


Figure 27. A gardener waters the plants in his unusual vegetable garden planted in a bomb crater near Westminster Cathedral in 1942.

The Military Garden

So many garden terms come from the arts of warfare – cordon, earthing-up, trench, bastion, the batter of a hedge, palisade, zig-zag, covered way, enceinte. The delight of a garden swing was adapted from a military means of getting a man into an otherwise unattainable position; the ha-ha ... has a military pedigree.

Jane Brown, *The Pursuit of Paradise*

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England, the newfangled fortifications of wartime began to be seen in a different landscape context. Star forts, 'great earthworks of jutting ravelins and sloping banks or

glacis,... caught hold of the imagination; they were transformed directly into gardens.... The "military garden" was an appropriate focus for an age when street talk was dominated by war news from Europe'.³ Garden designs at Windsor, Stowe (where land work to transform the gardens was carried out by soldiers), Castle Howard, Blenheim Palace (built in honour of the victory at the Battle of Blenheim in 1704), and elsewhere, displayed the militarist imperative of the culture of the period. Andrew Marvell's poem 'Upon Appleton House' describes Lord-General Fairfax's retirement to his fort-garden there:

... when retired here to Peace,
His warlike Studies could not cease;
But laid these Gardens out in sport
In the just Figure of a Fort;
And with five Bastions it did fence....

Below Windsor Castle the construction of the 'Mastrike' Garden depicted the Battle of Maastricht, at which re-enactments of the siege were performed at night with mini-armies led by the actual generals, reliving their glory. Later, the southern end of Windsor Great Park would be landscaped by the Duke of Cumberland's men, seeking new employment after fighting at Culloden. James Turner explains that

the combination of war and gardens would not necessarily have seemed incongruous. The Europe of the Thirty Years' War must have contained many gardens and walks erected, of necessity, on fortifications. The interrelation of the military and the horticultural is reflected also in contemporary descriptions and designs: John Evelyn in Antwerp praises 'those delicious shades and walkes of stately Trees, which render the incomparably fortified Workes of the Towne one of the Sweetest places in Europ'; Joseph Fürtembach tries to encompass luxuriously varied paradise gardens within the five points of a bastion; Henry Hawkins endows his garden of the Virgin with alarming topiary soldiers.

Brown argues that the military garden has been overlooked by garden historians in Britain: 'Present-day garden historians,... eager to discern the

birth of Britain's great moment, the English landscape style,... have discounted the power of the popular notion of a garden style that embodied soldierly heroism and all the charms of toy soldiers and brightly painted toy forts'. The military garden is a privileged practice in which is displayed and performed masculine dominion – over subjugated people and subjugated land alike. It is a victorious celebration of control, in which earth and turf are reshaped in massive tribute. The landscape style was about power and ownership too, but not quite so brazenly as the military garden it could sweep away. Where might the military garden have survived? According to Brown, in the mid-twentieth century at least, the Royal Horticultural Society provided a home for many senior servicemen, its upper ranks sprinkled with Field-Marshal, Colonel, Brigadier, Major-General (whose duties included awarding 'medals and rosettes' at flower shows). Currently, she suggests, tongue only slightly in cheek,

it is in the small gardens of Britain that traditional military neatness has been retained.... In the immaculate trenching, ridging and earthing-up of potatoes or celery, in the line of guardsmen-red salvias marching beside a path, in the tiny but precise forty-five degree angles and ditches where the well-kept lawn edges meet the weedless soil.⁴

'In a sense', writes Kenneth Helphand in his book *Defiant Gardens*, 'the battlefield ... is the antithesis of the garden.... If the agricultural landscape is often viewed as an idealized landscape, a garden, in battle it becomes an *antigarden*'. There is a certain irony in this context that, in terms of rural land-use 'the military deployment of countryside spaces' for training has been a significant feature through and beyond the twentieth century, to the extent that 'the military [have assumed] the unlikely mantle of contemporary conservatism as they have warded off housing, road and leisure developments in "their" land'. There are also other modern versions of the military garden. Public land as space of military memorialisation is commonly associated with the park or garden, which includes

the *Heldenhaine* or Heroes' Groves in Germany, the French *Jardins Funèbres*, the *Parco della Rimembranza* in Italy, and the military cemeteries built by the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission.

[G.L.] Mosse articulates the subtle iconographic and arboreal differences between the several landscapes of remembrance. He distinguishes the pantheistic symbolism of the Heroes' Grove (where Mother Nature is coterminous with the Fatherland) from the democratic layout of cemeteries designed for the dead of the British Empire. Here, order, tidiness and rationality are combined with indigenous planting schemes to evoke an archetypal English country churchyard.

Brown traces the work of early twentieth century garden designers on military memorialisation sites, as 'the war cemeteries became the modern apotheosis of the secret garden'. For her, the cemetery designs of Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll are 'Arts and Crafts gardens, outdoor rooms of green walls, with their vistas ordered and closed by the most sublime stone works.... They are echoed in war memorial gardens up and down the land, even all over the world'.⁵ While Mosse accentuates the differences in national landscapes of remembrance, Brown finds the continuities as the British garden design style of World War One memorial sites was adopted in an international convention of war memorialisation through garden and plant.

There have been trends for the machinery of war to be employed as garden display, not as a mode of artistic critical subversion of the kind Ian Hamilton Finlay might have been employing in recent years in both his art and his famous garden at Little Sparta in the Scottish borders, but in a way which sought to celebrate or memorialise military victory. The template was set early on: in the new public parks



Figure 28. Cannon pointing out to sea on an English seaside green: a military garden in Southwold, Suffolk?

of the Victorian period, 'the most common emblem celebrating Britain's imperial role was the cannon from the Crimean War (1853–57). Between 1857 and the early 1860s many parks acquired two cannons and displayed them with pride'. During World War One, one garden writer noted, 'Many public authorities vied with each other in an endeavour to secure captured weapons

and disused tanks from the War Office to set up in their parks'. Thus public gardens could embrace and naturalise the war machine, becoming in effect new versions of military gardens. (This is not a dead practice: on many occasions I have walked with family and friends along the blue chicory-splashed cliffs of the Suffolk seaside town Southwold, from one of its famous greens to another, pausing while our children clambered over the various cannon pointing out to sea in memory of distant battles against foreign enemies.) More soberly and less triumphantly – because in remembrance of the civilian rather than military dead maybe? Early gardening radio broadcaster C.H. Middleton suggested another contribution to wartime garden design: the use of rubble from bombed buildings to make rock gardens in public parks, as a 'permanent memorial to those who suffered during the air raids'.⁶ With an idea like this from Middleton, we begin to move from the military garden to a floriculture and a garden space which are overtly concerned with the issue of peace and, more radically, with the political movement against war and the militarisation of society.

That eccentric Scottish gardener-artist-possibly-political-figure Ian Hamilton Finlay fits somewhere here, but if I am honest I am not entirely certain where. Do Finlay's many works wherein the pastoral landscape of the garden or arcadia is subverted by the shock appearance of the apparatus of war and destruction belong in the military garden or the peace garden? Are they aestheticised celebrations or provocations? Does Finlay refuse definition and interpretation? Or does he just lose sight of the target? At Stonypath in Lanarkshire from 1966 on, heroically and antagonistically renamed Little Sparta in the 1980s as part of his local petty struggle with Strathclyde Regional Council about the payment of business rates on the property, the landscape features a variety of garden sculptures which are metaphors or statements of military culture and examples of garden design: a stone bird-table is topped with a platform made in the shape of an aircraft carrier ('Aircraft Carrier Bird-Table', 1972); a smooth black slate edifice next to some water, entitled 'Nuclear Sail' (1974), is a tombstone-like piece which also evokes the nuclear submarine conning tower familiar in some Scottish lochs. His paper works also draw on the rustic sublime. A series of Finlay's prints entitled *The Wartime Garden* (1977) shows simply-drawn monochrome outline images of military equipment, with a short, often single word, accompanying subverting text: the glass frame of a warplane pilot's cockpit is entitled

'Greenhouse'; a tank camouflaged (or overgrown) with shrubbery is 'Grove'.⁷ The ambivalence is deliberate and consistent: after all, in his life he accepted awards from the Communist Party of France and from Queen Elizabeth II. In Prudence Carlson's view, Little Sparta, via the modern sculpture garden tradition, revisits

the Neoclassical tradition of the garden as a place provocative of poetic, philosophic and even political thought. At every turn along Little Sparta's paths or in its glades, language – here plaintively, there aggressively – ambushes the visitor. Plaques, benches, headstones, obelisks, planters, bridges and tree-column bases all carry words or other signage; and this language, in relation to the objects upon which it is inscribed and the landscape within which it is sited, functions metaphorically to conjure up an ideal and radical space.... Little Sparta has been made rife with images not only of invincible Antique gods but also of deadly modern warships, our nearest symbols of sublimity and terror.... Meaning ... is more obvious as such in Finlay's paper works than in his three-dimensional pieces.

But others find the power of his garden and wider artistic work unsatisfying, unconvincing, particularly in the relationship between irony and ideology. For Drew Milne, discussing what he terms 'Finlay's neoclassical rearmament programme',

Finlay's work rarely offers any indication of how his aesthetic representation of revolution might institute new social struggles, and when such indications are offered the joke makes a mockery of the historical crises of alienated experience. One of Finlay's 'Unconnected Sentences on Gardening' states that: 'Garden centres must become the Jacobin Clubs of the new Revolution'. Here, the irony of the aphorism dramatises the collapse of aesthetic or political agency, but at the cost of belittling the historical needs expressed both in garden centres and in the revolutionary conception of nature developed by Jacobin ideology, notably in Saint-Just's *De la nature*.

For Tim Richardson, in his later years 'Finlay appears to have lost all sense of irony in his rage at the authorities. I am not being so crass as to accuse Finlay

of being “a fascist”, but I do think there are political and moral complications in his work – just as there were in, say, the poetry of Ezra Pound, an artist who produced much to admire’ – and who was of course interned in Italy by the American forces following World War Two for supporting the Fascist cause. Mark Scroggins tells us that Finlay ‘lays himself open to misreading’, and the most striking instance of such an artistic strategy is found in his, well, Nazi-influenced garden work. Scroggins tells the story of Finlay’s ‘fascination with the iconography and architecture of Nazi Germany’:

In the 1970s, Finlay carried out a correspondence with Albert Speer, Hitler’s foremost architect, imprisoned since the Nuremberg Trials. The result of that was Finlay’s 1979 series of watercolours, *A Walled Garden*, based on the garden that Speer cultivated within the walls of Spandau Prison in Berlin. Finlay’s 1982 project, ‘The Third Reich Revisited’, is based on the grandiose neo-classical construction projects that the Nazi architects were never able to bring to completion and acts as ironic commentary upon the pallid public art and architecture that post-war European democracies have produced. As Finlay comments, ‘It was – is – an attempt to raise (in a necessarily round-about way) the questions which our culture does not want to put in idea-form’.... Finlay’s 1987 work *Ossso*, which raised a firestorm of protest when it was first exhibited in Paris, interpolates the Runic lightning bolts of the Nazi SS into the Italian word ‘bone’, emphasizing how the horror of the Third Reich has, in our century, insinuated itself into the most fundamental of natural substances. Nature has lost its innocence; we can no longer confront any element of our phenomenological world without acknowledging that the irrationality of Nazism has always already been there.⁸

I am left wondering whether what Finlay is really doing at Little Sparta is interrogating the limits of how the culture of a garden – of all things! – is able or is unable to signify politically. But he does so in a profoundly political and creative way which combines practice (paper, stone, plant) and discourse (text, signage) in the space of the garden, *and* has an insistent focus on the destructive apparatus of war.

A Tale of Two Poppies. And a Rose

The poppies and wild flowers that are as friendly to an unexploded shell as they are to the leg of a garden seat in Surrey.... It is all a sense of wonderment, how can such things be.

Edwin Lutyens, France, 1917

The floral tribute extends the imagery of commemoration, acting as an initial marker to more formal and solid modes of memory. Cut flowers, wreaths and paper poppies allow anyone to participate in the public process of grieving.... Our appreciation of the symbolic value of flowers is very sophisticated. It spans a spectrum of symbolism from the rose (the classical icon of nurtured grief) to its opposite – the poppy, symbol of unpredictable growth, ephemerality and the sleep of reason. On distant battlefields the symbolic value of certain flowers has become part of a complex process of nationalism and emotional jurisdiction.

Paul Gough⁹

So even flowers talk of war and peace. Not living, planted ones. Not even necessarily dead or dying cut ones, which might be more appallingly apt. Unreal flowers, made in factories, by the million, of coloured paper, plastic and metal. The artificial red poppy was adopted as a symbol of memorialising the military dead in the wake of World War One, inspired by the cornfield poppies growing across European battlefields – or, rather, inspired originally by a poetic description of these flowers. Canadian doctor John McRae’s 1915 poem ‘In Flanders’ Fields’ led to the use of the poppy as a symbol of remembrance and quickly fund-raising first in the United States, for US veterans – the early petals made of red silk – later on a larger scale for the reconstruction of France, and then in Britain. McRae’s poem, its words voiced by the collective fatalities of the Belgian theatre, seems to combine current battlefield with a preview of the ordered war cemetery to come.

In Flanders’ fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky