

A History of Gardening in New Zealand. By Bee Dawson. Random House, Auckland, 2010. 304pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN 978-1- 86962-156-8.

BEE DAWSON'S *A HISTORY OF GARDENING IN NEW ZEALAND* is a straightforward, uncontroversial book and a good introduction to the subject. The essentials of her account were captured fairly well in the 1995 collection of essays *A History of the Garden in New Zealand*, edited by Matthew Bradbury, but Dawson brings the story up to date in a readable, lively style, utilizing some of the new research in a beautifully illustrated format. The narrative of the subject presented by Dawson is that pre-contact Maori were capable gardeners, they adapted quickly to new crops brought in from Europe, that colonists established fine gardens, that gardening declined towards the end of the twentieth century and that it has seemingly revived in recent times.

While this version of events has its merits, in particular that it is a good, easy-to-follow tale, it lacks any explanatory power. Indeed, there is no argument present in the book, no way of accounting for change in gardening practices over time. Nowhere does Dawson engage with the role of the garden in New Zealand society and culture, even though the book claims to be a work of social history. It clearly is not. Reinforcing this is the lack of any introduction or conclusion where any overall argument could have been proposed. As Julia Matthews's foreword makes clear, this was part of a strategy to keep the book from becoming 'a dry history full of facts and lean on entertainment' (p.9).

The emphasis on telling the story rather than explaining it would have been successful if the story itself was robust. However, in this respect two significant issues bedevil the book. The first is how easily Dawson manages to gloss over the impact of colonization on Maori gardening spaces. They are barely, if at all, mentioned after the first few chapters. There is a comment that by the late nineteenth century 'Maori gardening had moved from its traditional iwi-orientation to a focus on individual or family plots' (p.138). However, no actual reasons for this are offered: confiscations and land sale coming immediately to mind. The entire nature of Maori land-holding had suffered by this point, something carefully omitted in this sanitized version.

Furthermore, other than this brief comment, it is as if after the colonists became well established Maori no longer existed. Maori gardening, however, continued to be critically important both to Maori and to the colonial government and was a tremendous point of conflict between the two. This is one area, therefore, where an honest appraisal would have led to a more meaningful understanding of how gardening — as the utilization of natural, social and economic resources to nourish and sustain peoples — has affected New Zealand history. Gardening is not simply a benign activity. It is about access to resources, and therefore about power. There is an important history to be shared about Maori gardening during the New Zealand Wars, during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century that is entirely absent from Dawson's book.

The second significant issue is that Dawson often downplays the role of class in shaping gardens. Class is obviously an important aspect of gardening for two main reasons. First, and more obviously, relative wealth can make a considerable difference to the physical constraints or opportunities faced by gardeners. The amount of available land, access to plant materials, additional labour and tools are all of fundamental significance. Dawson does acknowledge this in places, for example noting that 'the large houses and great estates established by a handful of wealthy immigrants in Canterbury and Marlborough were far from representative of New Zealand colonial life' (pp.136–7), and that 'it is almost impossible to describe a typical Victorian garden in New Zealand'. This was because of the divergences between magnificent country estates, a 'few rows of beans at the back of a bushman's hut', remote country farm gardens, the cottage gardens of small suburban villas and the 'elaborate floral borders favoured by some wealthy townspeople', all of

which were 'equally representative of New Zealand Victorian garden style' (p.145). Such acknowledgement definitely helps to move us away from the traditional kind of garden history which is based on the history of garden fashions, and this is most refreshing. The difficulty is that while this diversity is acknowledged, it is not unpacked and its various implications are never clear.

One such implication is connected to a second issue related to class missing from Dawson's book. This is that the different economies of horticultural knowledge within which gardeners operate are generally class-dependent. Working-class gardeners tend to operate within more family-and neighbourhood-based knowledge systems, whereas those with greater wealth tend to access the most recent ideas promulgated by the media. But perhaps more noteworthy than Dawson's lack of attention to class in these respects is her lack of attention to class dynamics, and especially of the attempts by the wealthy to direct the gardening activities of workers and the various conformities and resistances that resulted. This is really the stuff of social history, surely, and again is barely mentioned. Again, the history has been sanitized.

Together the problems in this book around ethnicity and class leave unsatisfying holes in the history being presented. They also feed into a larger problem, which is to do with the role of garden history as a discipline. James Beattie, in his review of Christopher Johnstone's *The Painted Garden in New Zealand Art* (2008), refers to the 'distinct lack of methodology or acceptance of garden history in university circles'¹ which does nothing to make the garden historian's task any easier. Garden historians need to understand not only how and why gardens have changed over time, but also how this study enriches our understanding of the societies and cultures within which gardens are made and maintained. There are some outstanding examples of such work in the international literature — particularly that coming out of the Dumbarton Oaks school in Washington DC and more locally from Melbourne — and it would have been refreshing to have seen this reflected in a work on New Zealand's gardens. Beneath the wide range of approaches this literature offers is an attempt to grapple with the issue of how gardens have contributed to relative stability or change within given societies and cultures.² Unfortunately, in this instance, none of the recent thinking about the role of garden history — including the contribution it can make to environmental history³ — has been utilized, so that the end result seems oddly old-fashioned.

Having said all of that, this book does not claim to be an academic contribution to New Zealand history nor to garden studies generally. It is a popular history aimed at a wide audience, and, with its beautiful presentation, Dawson may well draw a new readership into this fascinating subject.

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1 James Beattie, 'Review: Christopher Johnstone, *The Painted Garden in New Zealand Art*', in *Environment and Nature in New Zealand*, 5, 1 (2010), p.18.

2 For example, Michel Conan, 'Methods and Perspectives for the Study of Gardens and their Reception', *Gardens and Imagination: Cultural History and Agency*, Washington, 2008, p.12

3 For example, Matt Morris, 'A History of Christchurch Home Gardening from Colonisation to the Queen's Visit: Gardening Culture in a Particular Society and Environment', PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2006.