

Michael Leslie

The Uneasy Paradise: Why Couldn't John Evelyn Complete the *Elysium Britannicum*?

The manuscript of the *Elysium Britannicum* is extraordinary and almost painfully expresses John Evelyn's struggles to create, correct, and reorganize what he hoped would be a masterwork on gardens and gardening. His difficulties and dissatisfactions are evident on page after page, recognizable even in facsimile but even more powerful when the original manuscript is seen.

The *Elysium Britannicum* is a fascinating phenomenon both for what Evelyn writes and for what he either doesn't write, or doesn't complete, or chooses to delete. Its unique character is very much a product of its author's confrontation with his 'moment', or rather his 'moments': first, the intellectual, political, and social circumstances in which Evelyn embarked on its creation and then the long period, effectively 50 years, in which those circumstances changed, and changed again, as he attempted to revise and complete the work. In one sense, the *Elysium Britannicum's* greatest interest lies in the fact that it is a failure, remaining unprinted until the end of the twentieth century.

Understanding the phenomenon of the *Elysium* requires us to explore a wide, varied, and interlocking range of contexts. These include:

The project's origins in particular histories of garden and plant writing; the work's uneasy status as those traditions changed and were superseded. The framing expectations for garden writing were revised or discarded.

The rapidly-changing status of the concept of the garden as a scene or a key 'place' in the life of an individual or a society.

Challenges to the stability of framing political and religious ideas and myths, which were crucial to the 'imaginary' of the author and his contemporaries.

Profound changes to concepts of knowledge and epistemology, and the physics that underlay both.

And consequent changes to attitudes to the dissemination of knowledge.

John Evelyn embarked on what he surely believed would be his magnum opus at a time when all the social, religious, and political certainties of his youth had been overturned. His attitudes and *mentalité* had been formed by those certainties; and the creation moment of the *Elysium* was one in which he was faced with the possibility that it would be necessary to sweep aside the shattered fragments and embrace ideas and attitudes

incompatible with the world he had lost. Evelyn's identity was profoundly entwined with his social status and political affiliations. The raw and unwelcome new environment of the British Civil Wars and their republican aftermath was one in which neither he nor his attitudes to knowledge were likely to flourish.

The knowledge network into which he found himself thrown by the outcome of the Civil Wars was one in which he was emphatically an outsider, uneasy and unwilling. The high ground of plant science, garden writing, and agriculture was occupied not by members of his own social group, but by a diverse cast of characters who prized 'ingenuity' often without regard to social origins or status, or with much reverence for tradition. Even after the monarchy returned in 1660, the world of knowledge in which he found himself was one that had embraced (often reluctantly and to some degree deliberately obscurely) attitudes to gardens, the physical world, and knowledge itself that he found inimical.

Evelyn wanted to be accepted into the ranks of the ingenious, even though he hankered for an earlier world that posed fewer challenges to his cherished notions of society, state, and church. His role in the deliberations and publications of the Royal Society displays the tensions: though *Sylva*, the Society's first publication, was largely coordinated by him, his own contributions looked back insistently to the classics as the source of authority, even though his fellow authors increasingly gave prominence to experiment and observation. Evelyn showed considerable interest in practically-derived knowledge, but he was always reluctant to let go of an appeal to the traditional authority of a late humanist education. It is instructive to compare Evelyn with his younger contemporary Nehemiah Grew (c. 1641–1712), whose *Anatomy of Plants* (1682) displays an utterly different attitude to plant physiology, or the botanist Stephen Hales (1677–1761) of the next generation.

Nehemiah Grew was the son of a distinguished Dissenting minister, and his religious non-conformity contrasts with Evelyn's intense commitment to the established Church of England. This contrast leads directly into Evelyn's problems with the *Elysium*. To what degree could the pursuit of knowledge be divorced from acceptance of the doctrines of Anglicanism, Christianity more widely, and the traditional values of the central Western philosophical tradition?

For Evelyn, these questions had been posed most powerfully in the period immediately before he began composing the *Elysium*. A friend of Walter Charleton (1619–1707), Evelyn more than dabbled in the ideas of Epicurus, newly fashionable in Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century. Epicureanism's bracing scepticism suited a period in which apparent certainties of politics and religion had been overturned; and Epicurean theories of the atomic nature of the physical world exercised a powerful attraction. Evelyn translated the first book of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, commenting with a carefully calculated Epicurean playfulness and no serious resistance to the atheist implications; and Evelyn

was lightly disguised by the name of Lucretius, spokesman for Epicureanism, in Charleton's *The Immortality of the Human Soul Demonstrated by the Light of Nature* (1657).

Evelyn was not alone in being attracted to the logic of Epicureanism's explanations, while also responding fearfully and defensively when the implications became unavoidable (Robert Boyle, his friend, fellow-scientist, and fellow member of the Royal Society, suffered equally from anxiety about the embrace of corpuscularianism). Evelyn's response also coloured his attitude to the dissemination of knowledge: throughout his life he resisted the broadening of the availability of knowledge to all kinds and classes of men, seeking to preserve modes of communication that restricted access to those of his own class. In this he was once more at odds with the very societies of which he was a member. The tension was one he never resolved and the *Elysium Britannicum* is its monument.

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Michael Leslie was educated at Leicester and Edinburgh Universities, and he has taught at Bedford College, University of London, Sheffield University, and Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, where he is now Professor of English and Dean of British Studies. His book, *Spenser's „Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves“: Martial and Chivalric Symbolism in „The Faerie Queene“*, was published in 1984; an edited collection, *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land* appeared in 1992; another, *Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication* was published in 1994. He was a founding assistant editor of the *Journal of Garden History* (now *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*) and co-editor of *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*. In 2003–4 he was founding section editor for the seventeenth century of the internet-based resource, Literature Compass. In 1987 he founded and was thereafter Director of the Hartlib Papers Project, to edit and publish the surviving papers of the seventeenth-century polymath Samuel Hartlib, the fruits of which were issued on two CD-Roms in September 1995 as *The Hartlib Papers: A Complete Text and Image Database of the Papers of Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600–1662)* (second, enlarged, edition, 2002; third online edition appearing shortly); and in 2010 he published editions of two plays by the forgotten seventeenth-century dramatist Richard Brome – *The Weeding of Covent Garden* and *The New Academy* – as part of an entirely web-based complete edition of Brome's works (<http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome/>). He was a Senior Fellow in Landscape Architecture at Dumbarton Oaks (Harvard University) in Washington D.C. from 1996 to 2002 (chairing the Committee of Senior Fellows in Landscape Architecture, 1998–2002). Early 2013 will see the publication of the 6-volume *Cultural History of Gardens*, of which he is co-Senior Editor, editor of the volume on the medieval period, and contributor to three volumes.