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Review

Sarah Dewis, *The Loudons and the Gardening Press: A Victorian Cultural Industry*. Farnham: Ashgate 2014. 278 pp. ISBN: 9781409469223, €94.

Ashgate's Nineteenth Century Series is one of the most respected imprints for British Romantic and Victorian print culture, and will be known to many readers of *TS* for its regular publication of titles on periodicals. This first book by independent scholar Sarah Dewis meets the high standards of the series by delivering a contextually rich and well-researched study of authors and editors John and Jane Webb Loudon. The Loudons mainly published on gardening, and this book demonstrates that this at first glance uncontroversial subject allowed them to participate in the major social and political debates of their time, and that the understudied periodicals which they edited can function as excellent case studies to outline the major technological and commercial developments of the early-Victorian press.

In chapter 1, Dewis discusses the contents and reception of John Loudon's first major publication, *The Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1822), an idiosyncratic work that frequently abandons the strict

business of horticulture for elaborate discussions of the role of professional gardeners in society. Influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment and the political radicalism of his day, Loudon propagates there an ambitious educational curriculum for gardeners that includes scientific subjects and basic artistic skills, and devises his own pedagogical methods. The moral fortitude required by their vocation, and its recommended greater prominence in the future, would make educated gardeners perfect pioneers in the needed democratization of society. Naturally, Loudon's democratic and secularized politics, not to mention his deliberately provocative style, brought him into conflict with the Tory press. As an example of these conflicts, Dewis provides a close reading of a polemic against him by 'Christopher North' (John Wilson) of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, contextualizing the respective philosophical backgrounds of both sides of the contention. These backgrounds are abundant and will likely be appreciated by readers who feel they have not yet mastered the origins of nineteenth-century politics, but Dewis's juxtaposition of the two extreme positions, Radicalism and Toryism, tends to downplay the diversity within those

partisan camps. It would have been helpful if more time had been spent on Loudon's early reception in progressive Whig or Radical circles.

Dewis then turns to John Loudon's most famous editorial venture, the *Gardener's Magazine*. Chapter 2 situates this important publication among the leading periodicals of its own time and is once again thorough, but (as often happens in studies of the early-nineteenth-century press) occasionally overemphasizes the innovative new model of magazines as characterized by, again, *Blackwood's*. This is particularly the case for the increasing reliance in the press on semi-professional authors as opposed to amateur readers submitting copy, a popular practice in the *Gardener's*. The latter is rightly and convincingly interpreted by Dewis as a statement against elitism. However, it was not as rare at the time as is suggested, and although originally an eighteenth-century phenomenon, it continued to be important during the run of the *Gardener's* in women's magazines, where its function appears to have been similar. Especially given Loudon's explicit adherence to Enlightenment ideals and his support for women's emancipation, it would have been interesting if parallels to these had been drawn. Also, by focusing on the *Gardener's* as a vehicle for the opinions of Loudon (and occasionally of his wife), the contributions by other authors are underrepresented, which is unfortunate as this downplays the multiple authorship inherent to the magazine genre. Nevertheless, the included discussions of where this important publication fitted in the contemporaneous marketplace are

excellent, and the book is particularly strong when comparing the *Gardener's* to other horticultural publications. Readers looking for information on this niche of the periodical market will surely not find a better place to start than here. The extensive discussion in chapter 3 of illustrations in the *Gardener's* is not particularly enlightening for its visual exegeses, but it once again makes up for this by its comparisons to other publications, showing how Loudon made inventive use of images to stay ahead of his competitors.

Chapter 4 gives inspired readings of two of John Loudon's later publications, the eight-volume *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* (1838) and *The Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries and Churchyards* (1843). Here it clearly surfaces how he viewed his principles as applicable to the design and maintenance of other spaces than only gardens, and informed his theories on the organization of society at large. A particular highlight is the account of how Loudon was influenced by a combination of scientific, aesthetic, and political concerns to come up with an alternative to the older category of the picturesque, for which he coined the term 'gardenesque.' This concept was seen by some Tory critics as politically volatile for its links to a 'national discourse' (i.e. wider than what directly concerned the contained sphere of gardening), and thereby to doctrines of social reform.

Chapter 5 goes on to prove that John Loudon's reformist tendencies gave rise to a 'domestic discourse' as well. Throughout his career, Loudon advocated gardening as both a source of food attainable for rich and poor alike,

and of edifying leisure for the middle classes. He also specifically called for women to get involved, thereby effectively giving them a chance to take charge of the production of their own food and the shaping of their own living environment. In chapter 6, this gender focus becomes prominent, as Loudon's wife Jane (née Webb) takes centre stage. An author of both fiction and non-fiction of moderate success in her own right, Webb is here featured as a productive and enterprising editor of women's magazines. Her contributions to the *Gardener's Magazine* and her literary publications, most famously the satirical *The Mummy!* (1827), had covered scientific subjects that were then often seen as unsuitable for women, and she continued to include such emancipatory content in her own short-lived periodicals. As with the *Gardener's* before, the situation of these publications among its close competitors is described very well, and this adds significantly to earlier scholarly work on Jane Webb Loudon as an author and editor.

Dewis's meticulous research on several previously neglected subjects makes this book a valuable contribution to the fields of cultural history and print culture, but it would have been even better if more care had gone into the editing of the manuscript before publication. At times the generous contextualization and the overviews of the state of the art in periodical studies can be overwhelming, and more prior knowledge on the part of the reader could have been assumed. Doing away with the many subsections (several of which are less than half a page in length), as well as linking the different chapters

more clearly, could have brought more cohesion to the work as well. Be that as it may, readers interested in the ideological resonances of gardening in the nineteenth century, and in the role of women in the periodical press, cannot afford to miss this book.

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