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Charles-François Mathis and Émile-Anne Pépy, *Greening the City: Nature in French Towns since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*. Translated by Moya Jones. Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2020. 332 pp. ISBN 978-1-912186-13-6.

Review by Caroline Ford, University of California, Los Angeles.

First published in France in 2017, this book explores the place of nature in French urban life from the seventeenth century to the present.<sup>[1]</sup> The authors take as their starting point the vegetal manifestations of nature in cities, excluding mineral elements, earth, air, water and animals. They explore how nature was integrated into the urban landscape, as well as how towns and cities were continually transformed in the process. After defining the changing urban boundaries over several centuries, the authors proceed to ask questions about nature *in* the town in order to ask questions about the nature *of* the town over several centuries.

The book is divided into eight chapters, which are organized thematically, rather than chronologically. The first chapter examines why the vegetal world was brought to the town in the first place from the seventeenth century onwards, with the appearance of gardens and promenades. The first experiments in vegetal urbanism really date from the eighteenth century however, and they came to reflect the prosperity of a metropolis over time. The authors cite the city of Nancy where the Carrière and Place d'Alliance were planted with trees for aesthetic purposes, and this model was duplicated in the Atlantic port town of Bordeaux. Concerns about health were also central to the eighteenth-century discourse surrounding promenades and gardens. In a pre-Pasteurian world, air was viewed as the principal cause of disease. Urban growth and the consequent pollution and the spread of vile air emanating from humans and animals led the medical profession to question the relationship between vegetation and the free circulation of air. The vegetal was seen as a “therapy for the sick city in the industrial age” (p. 27). Later in the nineteenth century, open green spaces were promoted as venues for the cultivation of the body through sport. One prominent example was the creation of the Parc Pommery in Reims to provide a park for the workers of the Pommery champagne house in 1910, and to respond to calls for areas in which to engage in sports. These initiatives were followed by the introduction of the garden city in the early twentieth century, which first got its start in England and where it was promoted by Ebenezer Howard, then popularized in France by Georges Benoît-Levy. While the authors mention the architect Le Corbusier when discussing proposals to introduce green space in the construction of affordable, low-cost housing in France's cities, it is surprising that they do not say more about some of the far more influential architects of *habitations à bon marché* in Paris before and after the First World War. For example, Henri Sauvage's stepped-back, terraced buildings in the rue Vavin and rue des Amiraux embodied a

whole new conception of green space in the Paris apartment house, as did Henry Provensal's winning designs of low-cost housing for the Fondation Rothschild. The expansion of green spaces in cities and towns and across France continued in the twentieth century, leading Mathis and Pépy to conclude that the "vegetal has increasingly imposed itself at the heart of thinking about urban planning...and ecological balance" (p. 53).

Chapter two focuses on the "green-fingered individuals"—the private individuals, professionals, and public authorities—who brought nature to the city in its many forms. The seventeenth century was in many ways the "century of gardens," when plants came to be rooted in urban spaces, where they would continue to prosper in the following centuries. City residents began to plant flowers in pots on windows, balconies, and terraces. Guides to gardening and horticulture proliferated, as well as regulations that forbade the hanging of pots or flower boxes that gave onto public thoroughfares. In the course of time, professional gardeners and urban landscapers appeared on the scene. While the work of the royal gardener André Le Nôtre is well known, many lesser known figures emerged. Once new green spaces were created in the form of gardens and promenades, they also required an army of caretakers, and the upkeep of public spaces fell onto municipal authorities.

Chapter three focuses on the constraints faced by those who set out to introduce nature into towns and cities, which first and foremost required freeing up valuable land. In addition, the financial challenges associated with such enterprises were many, and there were conflicts and disagreements about the aesthetics of green spaces. The building of France's colonial empire had a direct impact on the greening of towns and cities, and on the plants that were chosen for gardens and parks. The fashion for the exotic was reflected in the proliferation of *jardins d'acclimatation*. Eucalyptuses were first planted in France in Toulon in 1802. Mimosas were introduced to the south of France in the Second Empire and palm trees profoundly altered the landscape of Provence, as evidenced in the Promenade des Palmiers in Hyères. While the authors pay considerable attention to the exchange of plants between metropolitan and colonial France in chapter eight in their discussion of the rise of botanic gardens, this reader wondered what impact ideas about vegetal life in the city had on French colonial cities and colonial urban planning, a subject which has been explored by Gwendolyn Wright and Paul Rabinow.<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, both the architects Le Corbusier and Henri Prost directed their attention to the question of urban planning in Algiers.

Chapters four and five explore the ways in which parks, gardens, and promenades were integrated into the social life of cities and towns in France. The Bois de Boulogne in Paris was a site of sociability and relaxation, and a place to see and be seen. Flower festivals became a form of popular entertainment. Pleasure gardens offered elites refreshment and entertainment. The authors do take into account resistance to the cult of nature. The poet Charles Baudelaire is a case in point. When asked to contribute to a volume of essays on Fontainebleau in the 1850s, he wrote, "But you know well that I am incapable of being moved by plants, and that my soul rebels against this singular new Religion."<sup>[3]</sup> Resistance came also from the nuisances caused by the new vegetation. The issue of allergies first emerged as a concern in France in the nineteenth century. In his 1904 *Promenades, parcs, jardins paysagers*, Ernest Guinier, Inspector of Water and Forests, warned of the excessive planting of sycamores in France's towns, and more particularly Paris, because they were a source of hay fever. Green spaces were also vandalized, especially during the seismic political upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the French Revolution, a number of rare species of trees were cut down and used as firewood. During

the 1848 revolution in Paris 4, 103 trees were felled for the purpose of building barricades. The trees of the Tuileries were also destroyed during the Paris Commune. However, new greening initiatives would appear, such as the fascinating phenomenon of “guerrilla gardening,” whose origins can be traced to the 1970s in New York when Liz Christy, an artist, established a community garden. She helped to start a worldwide “green guerilla” movement to claim abandoned, unused urban spaces. There are now guerilla gardening groups in Paris, Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Blois, and Clermont-Ferrand.

Chapter seven focuses on the “economics of the vegetal,” examining the purchase and sale of vegetal products and chapter eight examines the development and popularization of plant sciences in France. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the phenomenon of the “educational walk,” most especially for children. The *Voyage au jardin des plantes* was the kind of work produced for children in this period, in which the young reader is acquainted with the collections of the Museum of Natural History in Paris.[4] Commercial enterprises, such as the Deyrolle shop (which is still in business today) opened in Paris in 1831. It sold tools, insects, plant specimens and the necessary apparatus to for natural history collections.

As a review of the book’s chapters suggest, the book contains a wealth of fascinating information and a cogent analysis of the greening of French cities over several centuries. The White Horse Press must be commended for reproducing so many wonderful, accompanying images, as publishers frequently balk at such a prospect. Many of the images are in color, and they add to the text in very important ways. A number of them—postcards, prints and photographs—come from the authors’ own very impressive personal collection. In addition, the book includes an excellent index and a comprehensive bibliography, which reflects the rich fund of documentary sources on which the authors base their analysis. The inclusion of links to current French scientific, institutional and association/professional websites is particularly useful. In short, this handsome volume, authored by two erudite and talented historians, will interest the general reader as well as historians and students of environmental history, landscape history, architectural history and modern European urban history more generally. It demonstrates that Baudelaire’s “Parisian Dream,” with which the authors begin the book, a “town without plants, where the trees are replaced by columns, gigantic and eternally silent, sparkling with precious stones,” did not fortunately win out in France (p. 1).

## NOTES

[1] *La ville végétale: Une histoire de la nature en milieu urbain (France XVIIe-XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2017).

[2] Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[3] Quoted in Caroline Ford, *Natural Interest: The Contest over Environment in Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 100.

[4] L.F. Jauffret, *Voyage au jardin des plantes*, (Paris: Ch. Houel, Year 5 of the Republic); <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6469350j.texteImage>, consulted 29 March 2021.

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