



Ubiquity Brown?

By John Dixon Hunt

At the end of the celebrations for ‘Capability’ Brown’s tercentenary, there is still more to be said about the great designer.

After the recent ICOMOS Conference on ‘Capability’ Brown a contributor to its talks and discussions wrote to me that “we didn’t talk enough about Brown”. It was, to a large extent, a fair comment, though the focus of the conference, held in Bath last September, was, as its sub-title proclaimed, ‘Perception and Response in a Global Context’. That seemed to mean tracking Brown’s work and/or reputation in foreign lands as much as in England, except that ‘global context’, especially in the framework of ICOMOS (whose acronym, after all, stands for The International Council on Monuments and Sites), suggested an enquiry into how Brown might contribute to a global understanding of landscape.

But Brown still needs to be talked about. “Brown is everywhere,” wrote James Joyce in ‘The Dead’, a story in

Dubliners: he was not talking about ‘Capability’, but a gossipy, social man at Dublin soirées. Yet after a year of celebrating Lancelot Brown, he is indeed still everywhere in books and conferences. An agenda for talking about him might take up the following items:

‘Brown’ is in fact many things. He is (i) specifically Lancelot Brown, a designer identified in drawings and documents that confirm his work on a given site (a qualification comes later). He is also (ii) a reputation – somebody known about, gossiped about, acquired by the cultural osmosis by which word gets around; and so ‘Brown’ tends sometimes to mean that such and such a work looks like his, but cannot yet be confirmed. This extends (iii) into

Above: ‘Capability’ Brown’s largest lake, at Blenheim, in Oxfordshire.

any work that is – these are the cant phrases – ‘natural’, ‘informal’, and (at a pinch) ‘Brownian’; it also includes the idea that his landscapes, of course, express Englishness.

‘Natural’ is too easy a term to apply to 18th-century landscaping – for what are the sources of that important notion? Where did Brown acquire his instinct for nature? What was he looking at? What was he (if he was) reading in the literature of his time? In a letter to the Rev. Thomas Dyer in 1775 he casually appealed to “the sister-arts of Poet and Painter”. Was that just a modish, cultural gesture – suitable for another clergyman who, like the Rev. William Gilpin, was concerned with the picturesque?

Two issues with the ‘natural’ are that – as many modern commentators notice – Brown’s sites, such as Petworth, have ‘matured’. This is of course not surprising. But the effect of that ‘maturation’ is that we do not see these sites as they once were; his nature has grown, perhaps beyond our understanding of how he saw it. Modern reformulations or conservations of Brown’s sites try to conceive and replicate their original forms, yet, even with careful documents amassed to sustain them, our eyes and minds, however well trained, ‘see’ differently today than Brown’s clients did in the 18th century.

And, secondly, Brown did not work alone on his sites; he employed site supervisors who shared but also augmented his ideas. This important topic has been taken up by David Brown and Tom Williamson in their *Lancelot Brown and the Capability Men* (Reaktion Books, 2016). Those ‘men’, however well-groomed and trained to produce Brown’s plans, also had a hand in establishing the forms of his landscaping. Each brought his own sense of the natural, based on local expertise and knowledge of a specific terrain.

Brown’s great skill – which Horace Walpole applauded and Williams Chambers denied – was that he “invented nature”. He did not provide a facsimile or a representation of nature, but a version of it. Nature was epitomised, purified, refined. That is what is signalled by the French phrase *la belle nature*. This is precisely what a visiting German recognised when, at Blenheim, Prince Hermann Pückler Muskau saw that Brown’s “imitation of nature is so deceptive that, unless you were told, you would hardly suppose that art had any role in it.”

In the 18th century, ‘imitation’ was a key aesthetic term, the full force of which escapes us today, as it was beginning

to do even for the Prince, who went to Blenheim in 1827.

An imitation of nature by a landscaper meant fully understanding the scope of nature on a specific site. That was Brown’s particular success, which he told the Rev. Dyer meant “a perfect knowledge of the country”. And in 18th-century terms ‘country’ meant both the country of England (a patriotic claim), and its various counties where he worked (a recognition of England’s very different topographies).

‘Informal’ (as I argued myself at the conference) is the wrong word for Brown, as he was essentially a formalist – relishing and celebrating the very forms of the landscape, its waters, slopes, trees, prospects and buildings. (He was, after all, an architect). And that is how he seems to have acquired his skill with nature – he looked to its forms, its shapes and its appearance at different times of day or season. That direct knowledge informed his skill at making imitations of nature, and it surely changed in different locations of his English work.

Many of the conference talks focused on ‘Brownian’ work abroad. (He himself apologised for not going to take up work in Ireland because he “hadn’t yet finished England”!) So, in much of the non-English landscapes, what we saw were not actual Brown designs but ‘Brownian’ displays, in the United States, Ireland, Germany, Hungary, France, even India,

where there were often examples of *la belle nature* that did not reflect Brown’s.

A very interesting design (that I did not know) was Brown’s acceptance to send a plan of a site in the Low Countries, that suggests how much his skill did depend upon what he knew at first hand. Asked in 1782 to suggest a reworking of the landscape of Schoonenberg at Laeken near Brussels, and supplied with some details on the lie of the land, he sent a plan (held in the Austrian National Library) that is reproduced on page 92 of the *Garden History* publication of the conference papers.

(With one exception, all the ICOMOS conference talks were published in a supplement to *Garden History*, vol 44*, and were available at the conference. I noticed many following the printed version as they listened to the talk being delivered! More images were displayed on the screen than found place in the published texts, and this was often valuable.)

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The Schoonenberg plan reveals a truly Brown instinct for the forms of water, lawns and trees. But it was not implemented according to the plan, which suggests that either he could not envisage fully what the site's capabilities offered, or that his proposal lacked sufficient attention to the site, or that 'men' there took it over.

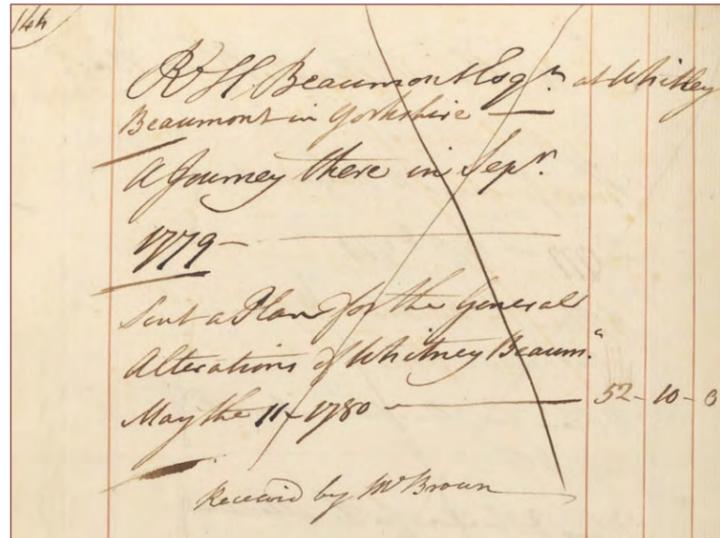
One Brownian discussion I truly missed at the conference was a careful examination of his plans. As he told Dyer, his designs were based on both a knowledge of the territory and "a good plan". His 'handwriting', his ductus, his graphic vocabulary and syntax are worth studying, and a good eye for those graphic techniques is fundamental to understanding what he was attempting. And importantly, it helps us to understand how his design ideas developed.

Plans are also the essential place to start to understand him properly, because if his landscapes have (necessarily) matured, we are not best placed to write about them as they exist today.

Intentionality in a designer also shows most clearly in his own drawings. Yet those intentions were not always appreciated by his contemporaries; nor are they always what today we attend to. Nor is that reception necessarily 'wrong' for our own proper and interesting attention to how we see them today. Actually, we need to understand exactly what receptions were in different times and places.

Reception of both Brown and 'Brownian' work, for example, played an important role in France. Monique Mosser's talk on Brown's reputation there (entitled "Brown Invisible in France?") was, for unexplained reasons, unfortunately not printed in the *Garden History*

Below: Brown's plan, drawn by his assistant John Spyers, for the cottage at Boarn Hill in Hampshire, which belonged to his banker, Robert Drummond. The cottage is now encapsulated in the present Cadland House. This is Brown's smallest surviving pleasure ground, now restored to the original c.1775 plan, and the only one on the coast. (Courtesy of the Cadland Trustees and Bridgeman Images.)



Above: A page of Brown's account book showing payment for his alterations to Whitney Beaumont in Yorkshire. Brown's accounts are in the Royal Horticultural Society's Lindley Library.

supplement; but its detailed information suggested the variety of receptions in France.

Essentially, France played with rumours: remarks that might be or might not be construed as references to Brown, appeals to a generalised 'nature' that seemed to reflect his 'style', but also with explicit mentions of his work in French translations of Walpole's *Essay On Modern Gardening*, and Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening*, translated by Latapie in 1771. Brown's work also appeared anonymously in Cahiers 2 and 4 of George-Louis Le Rouge's *Les jardins anglo-chinois*.

Finally, the afterlife of Brown must concern how today we write him into a history of English landscape design. That topic was raised, but left otherwise untouched. In what way he fits into a history of English landscaping is problematic and largely ignored. His designs constituted a unique culmination of thinking about the land – after Bridgeman and Kent and before Repton, who succeeded him and hoped to take on his mantle, but gradually found by necessity new clients and new possibilities for design.

We need to understand more where he came from, for Brown was not always seen clearly by his contemporaries. The history of landscaping after his death for at least a century was not dedicated to fulfilling his vision of the style he so much perfected. The Abbé Delille said it was "severe", and that "severity" or its almost neo-classical clarity made him a hard act to follow. We still need to understand why that was the case. ❀

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