

Same as It Ever Was

The English Pleasure Garden 1660–1860

By Sarah Jane Downing.
Shire, 2009. 64 pages.
Paperback. \$12.95.

Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen

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Review by Christine M. Mitchell.

The period in which Jane Austen lived and set her novels bears seemingly little relation to our own time. Most readers might think that the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were ages of rigidity, conformity, and prudishness. As revealed by Sarah Jane Downing, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Downing's two books on British culture, *The English Pleasure Garden 1660–1860*, and *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen*, give a glimpse into the customs, fashion, amusements, and mores of Austen's time. Using numerous reproductions of period artwork and sketches, Downing aptly illustrates the importance of both pleasure and fashion to the British garden.

In *The English Pleasure Garden*, Downing details the history and emergence of the gardens. She explains how the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 encouraged interest in amusement and luxury—distractions that had been either discouraged or banned during the Interregnum. As the Age of Enlightenment dawned, a new interest in education and philosophy also emerged.

Among the new ideas was Rousseau's concept that society corrupted the natural order and man's inherent goodness. The rise of the pleasure gardens put Rousseau's philosophy into action, providing verdant spaces where people could enjoy nature, take the air, and get some exercise. Downing's book traces the development of the New Spring Gardens (1661), the first of the genre, through their remodeling into Vauxhall Gardens

in 1728, and on to Marylebone Gardens, 1736–68, and the “divinest place under heaven,” Ranelagh Gardens, 1741. For Londoners and other upper-class citizens seeking respite from city dirt, fumes, and crime, the gardens were the answer to a prayer.

Downing's second book, *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen*, shows what the well-heeled of the time were wearing. Copious illustrations document the latest styles, once again based on Enlightenment ideals of nature, openness, and democracy, à la Rousseau. The fashions of both men and women represented a freer society. Men adopted “practical lines and practical fabrics [that] equipped the gentleman for a new era of action.” In addition, “the one freedom women did gain was release from their corsets. Because of the natural ideal of allowing the body to display its given shape, caricatures usually portray women . . . without underwear.” And the more freedom people had in their clothing, the more license they seemed to take in their actions.

One intriguing aspect of Downing's books is her confirmation that Austen's age was not always a proper and straitlaced one. Indeed, the culture bore a striking resemblance to our own time. Downing writes: “As in our own age, to be celebrated as a lady or gentleman of fashion was the social pinnacle, and one of the greatest pleasures was ‘to see and be seen’” (*Garden*). It takes no stretch of the imagination to see Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, or other celebrities strolling the gardens at Ranelagh looking for cameras.

In addition to being people-watching areas, the pleasure gardens also provided cover for illicit assignations, spots for “young gallants” to misbehave, “breaching supper boxes uninvited and insulting the ladies” (*Garden*). The intricate mazes and “darker walks of the gardens” were places where “both sexes meet, and mutually serve one another as guides to lose their way” (*Garden*).

Fashions of the time afforded equal opportunity for affectation and

misbehavior. The gentry, then as now, delighted in showing off their finery and putting on airs. Men wore tight, skin-colored britches in hopes of turning young women's heads, and young women wore sheer muslin gowns that both suggested romantic freedom and left little to the imagination. Between the loose clothing, acres of refined scenery, and human nature, the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds turned out to be a licentious and open time for the British upper classes.

As is usually the case, this time of openness, frivolity, and pleasure did not last. By the mid-1800s, the pleasure gardens were gone, fallen into disrepute, frequented no longer by the nobility, but rather by ladies of the night and “flash young men” (*Garden*). Victorian clothing was buttoned and corseted again, reflecting the belief that “women were ‘inherently sinful’” (*Fashion*).

Sarah Jane Downing has done a service to aficionados of the period, providing brief yet comprehensive booklets on British culture in Jane Austen's times. The illustrations are useful supplements to the text, which is highly readable and draws from contemporary accounts of the culture as well. Anyone interested in this era, from scholars to period-film designers, would benefit from the verisimilitude and authenticity of Downing's books. And not to be forgotten is her contribution to the idea that everything old is new again.

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