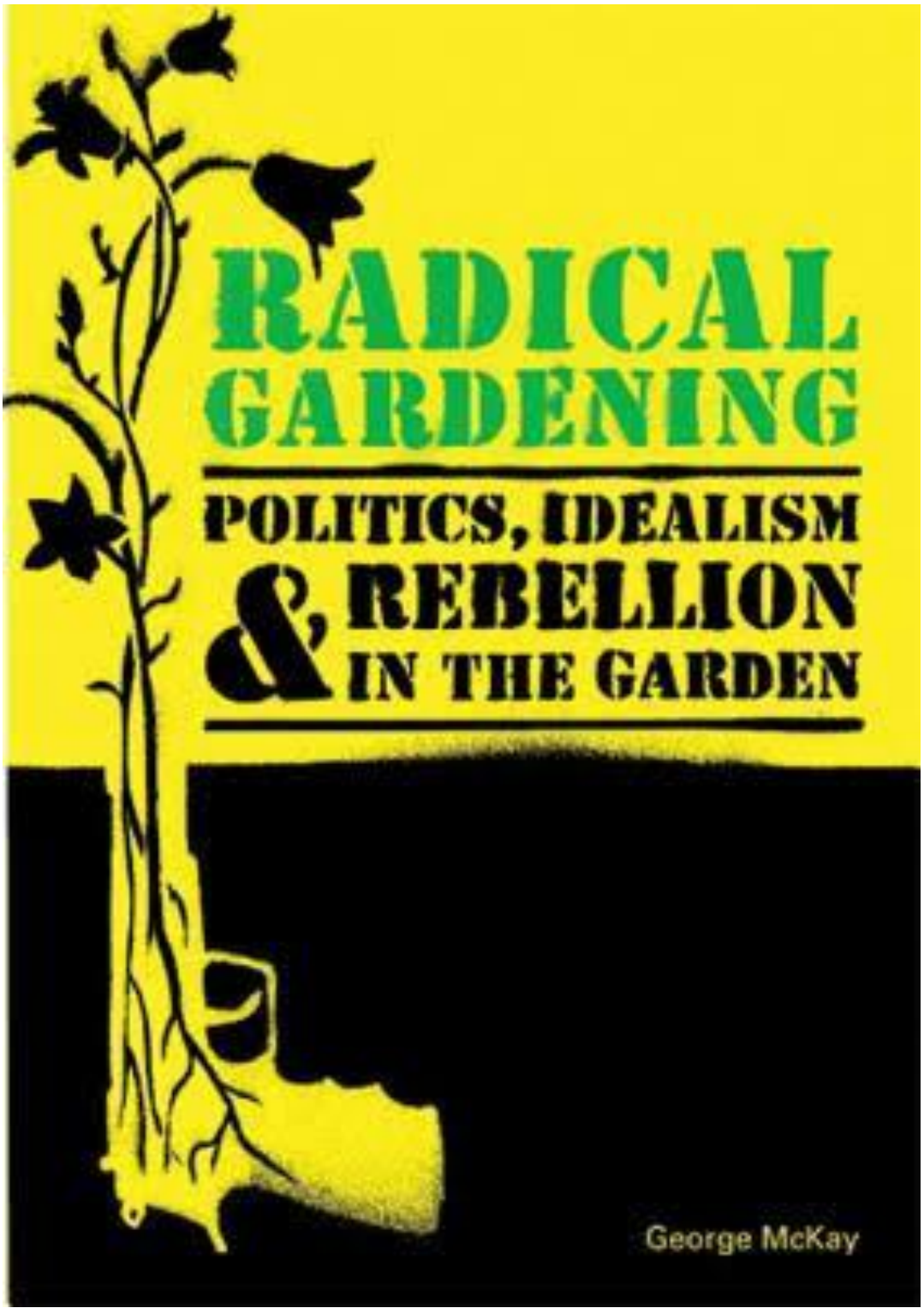
RADICAL
GARDENING
POLITICS, IDEALISM
& REBELLION
IN THE GARDEN
George McKay

Chapter 1

In the common public perception, gardening is understood as suburban, as leisure activity, as television makeover opportunity. Its originary narratives are seen as religious or spiritual (Garden of Eden), military (the clipped lawn, the ha-ha and defensive ditches), aristocratic or monarchical (the stately home, the *Royal* Horticultural Society). *Radical Gardening* travels an alternative route, through history and across landscape, reminding us of the link between propagation with propaganda, or pomegranate and hand grenade. For everyday garden life is not only patio, barbecue, white picket fence, topiary, herbaceous border.… This book weaves together garden history with the counterculture, stories of individual plants with discussion of land use and public policy, the social history of campaign groups with the pleasure and dirt of hands in the earth, alongside media, pop and art references, to present an alternative view of gardens and gardening. To do this, the book draws from different disciplines, but 'it is not in fact very difficult to be "interdisciplinary" when it comes to gardens, because there is not really a "discipline" of garden study'.

Radical Gardening is about the idea of the 'plot', and its alternate but interwoven meanings (there are three). Many of the plots we will explore are inspiring, and allow us to see how notions of utopia, of community, of activism for progressive social change, of peace, of environmentalism, of identity politics, are practically worked through in the garden, in floriculture, and through what Paul Gough has called 'planting as a form of protest'. But not all—some are sobering, or frightening, for within the territory of the politically 'radical' there have

been and continue to be social experiments and articulations that invert our positive expectations of the human exchange that occurs in the green open space of a garden. The book is modest in its ambitions: all I want to do is to convince you, dear reader-gardener, that those notions of a *horticountercultural politics* you suspected were in your earthy practice and pleasure (I agree that you probably didn't called them horticountercultural politics) have a rich and challenging tradition, a significance, as well as a trajectory of energy and import that makes them matter for our future. 'Why', asks writer-gardener Jamaica Kincaid, 'must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility with being a human being?' I follow Kincaid, and join the likes of Martin Hoyles, Paul Gough, Kenneth Helphand and others, each of whose work on gardens has helped shape my own thinking, in insisting on a view of the garden which allows us to include the opposite. Such a reading of the garden should not be a strange or forced juxtaposition of plant and ideology: think only of the English radical writer William Cobbett, who declared in 1819 that 'if I sowed, planted or dealt in seeds; whatever I did had first in view the destruction of infamous tyrants'. Or think of the etymology of the word propaganda—which today refers to the organized art of political persuasion—deriving from the Latin verb *propagare*, to propagate. Or the twentieth century revolutionary playwright Bertolt Brecht who observed, with startling accusatory power, that 'famines do not occur, they are organized by the grain trade'. Or the female Colombian activist speaking to western buyers on behalf of the 40,000 women working in the pesticidal contemporary Colombian flower industry: 'Behind every beautiful flower is a death. Flowers grow beautiful while women wither away'. Such horticultural glimpses as these show us that there is, potentially at least, a lengthy tradition of radical gardening, and this book

is meant as one contribution to maintaining and (re)constructing that tradition.