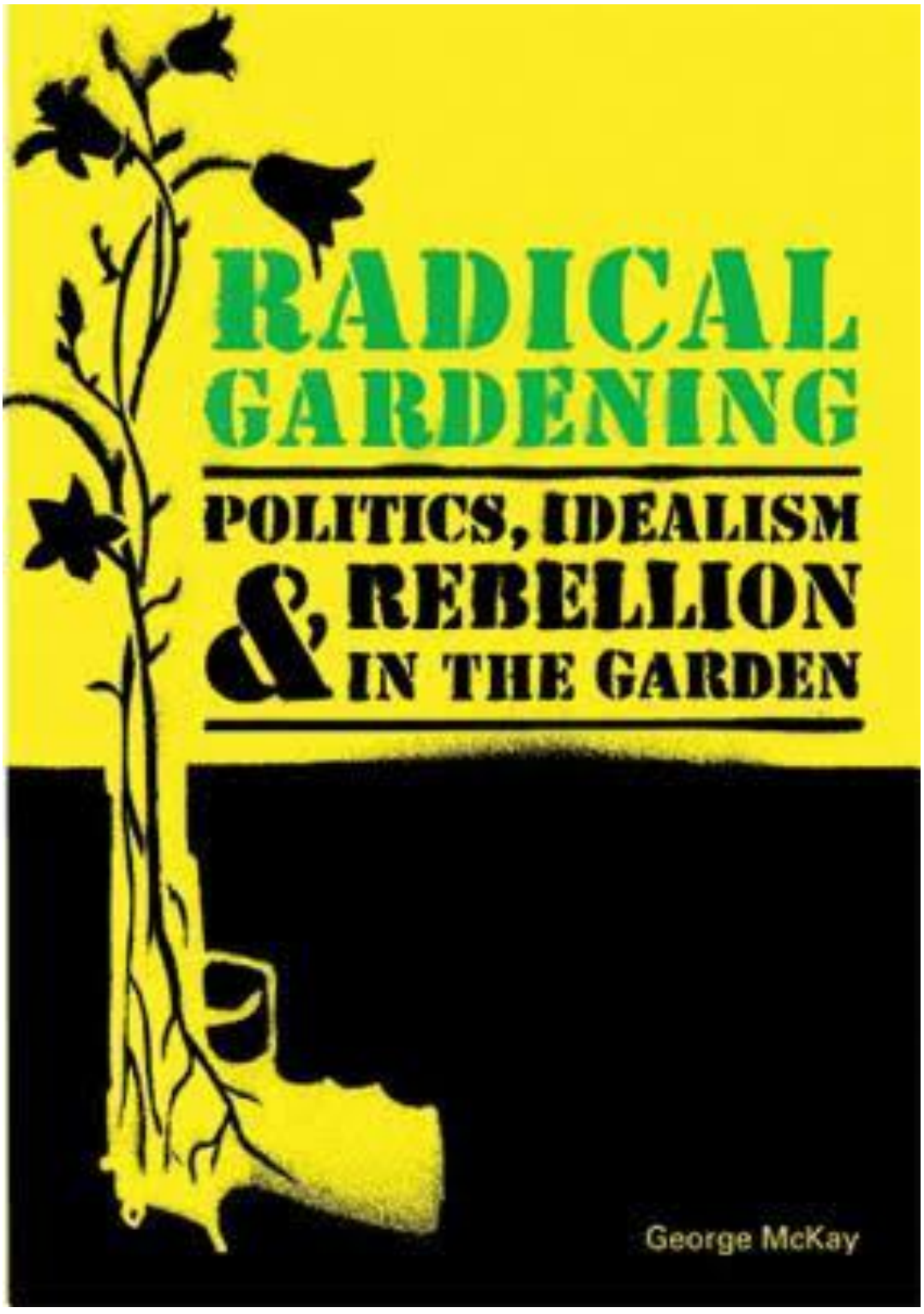
RADICAL
GARDENING
POLITICS, IDEALISM
& REBELLION
IN THE GARDEN
George McKay

Chapter 2

I stated that there are three versions, three meanings of 'plot' in *Radical Gardening*, and these are land, history, politics. First, there is the plot of the land, the garden space itself, how it is claimed, shaped, planted, and how we might understand some of the politics of flowers. As Lisa Taylor observes, in *A Taste for Gardening*,

Gardens are peculiar, hybrid spaces: part private, part public. In one sense they appear to exist as part of the private realm:… they are conceived and constructed as partially private extensions of the home dwelling. Gardens are also located close to spaces within the home which have been conceived as private, domestic, 'feminine' zones – the kitchen and the dining area for example. On the other hand, the garden is an interface between the privacy of the house and the civic property of the street. It is a space onto which others can look, examine and judge.

But there is more, both in terms of what the garden can signify and in terms of what we understand as a garden: from public parks to allotments, squatted community gardens to the 'polemic landscapes' of peace or fascist gardens, as well as the 'defiant garden', the plot is the territory under discussion, the patch of earth where it all happens. Many of the patches visited in the book are chosen because of their marginality—I am interested in the horticultural politics of the ex-centric, in the idea of *ruderal vegetation*, which refers to the kinds of plants (and, for me, planting) 'that grow in waste and particularly on disturbed sites, such as garbage dumps, vacant lots, and industrial wastelands'. Also I am

attracted to the stories of the plots that are no longer there, so marginal they have been easily erased or pushed over the edge—the demolition by the city authorities of New York's community Garden of Eden in 1986 is surely emblematic here. There is lament for such lost patches, of course, but also a recognition of the spirit of celebration, and of the fact of political counter-organisation and re-mobilisation by activists.

Second, there is the plot as narrative or story, whether historical or contemporary. The book draws on what I view as a persistent tradition of writing which sets itself against the dominant narratives of gardening, and towards a radical gardening—from Cobbett through to the publication by New York autonomists of a book like *Avant Gardening* in 1999, for instance. It is evident in small magazines and pamphlets and websites produced by enthusiasts, counterculturalists and green activists, as well as at the margins of more easily identifiable left-wing publications like the magazine of 'socialist agriculture', *The Country Standard* (edited from the British Communist Party's national office through the 1950s and 1960s). It is arguable that, in the twentieth century, the new phenomenon of the mediation of gardening unproblematically replicated a certain social relationship: radio, newspaper columns, and early television 'established the public image of the head gardener, which passed into national acceptance' in Britain, writes Jane Brown. Not only a professional expertise, but also a nostalgic nodding to an increasingly distant version of Englishness and its class distinction was being presented via the new media interest in gardening. This is not a route I follow. But, mostly the book is concerned with twentieth and twenty-first century narratives—there is I think a good deal of detailed writing already available on, for instance, the profoundly political relation between garden and empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also I wanted this book to be able

to speak to people’s contemporary situations fairly directly, and so chose more recent and current material.