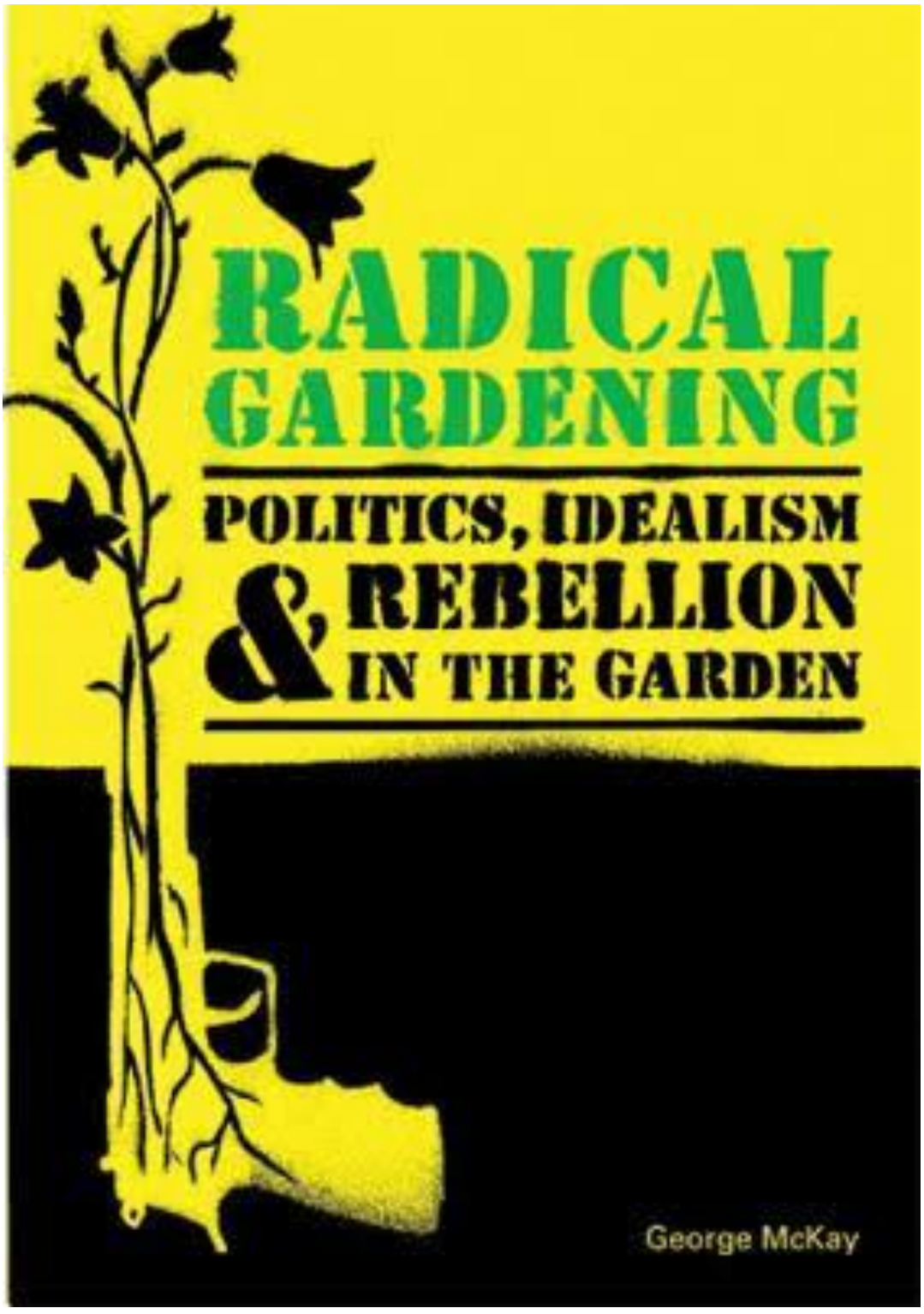
RADICAL
GARDENING
POLITICS, IDEALISM
& REBELLION
IN THE GARDEN
George McKay

Chapter 3

Third, we can understand the plot as the act of politicking, occasionally perhaps a dark conspiracy but much more often a positive, humanising gesture in a moment of change. In fact, as this book shows, gardening, gardens, flowers, planting have frequently been a terrain for ideological struggle; so the plot of *Radical Gardening* is the land itself, the history of the struggle, and the activism of the political conspiracy. May Day is a good date on which to start: it is the seasonal celebration of new growth and fertility around the rural maypole, it is the neo-pagans' Beltane, *and* it is International Workers' Day for trade unionists and industrial workers. May Day is the one day of the year when there is a coincidence of horticulture—including gardening—and radical politics, when the bucolic intermingles seasonally with the ideological. Community activist-gardener Heather C. Flores has written of being as 'radical as a radish', and goes on to define 'radical' in the context of gardening: it is 'radical only in that it comes from, and returns to, the root of the problem: namely, how to live on the earth in peace and perpetuity…. Flowers are not the only thing that bloom in the garden—people do.' For similar etymological reasons, writes Barbara Nemitz, we should recognize indeed that 'plants are radical subjects … from *radicalis*, something that is firmly rooted'.

These three versions of the plot—land, history, politics—are interwoven. The garden can become the source of political identity or power, including in cases which speak more readily to the majority of people who are not or were not as privileged. The so-called 'Votingham' housing estates of the nineteenth century, for instance, were developed to exploit the link between freehold property ownership and the franchise; it is not going too far to argue that it was the land itself, the garden of the house, that made possible parliamentary representation at that time: *no garden, no vote*. Alternatively, one might consider the contemporary notion of NIMBY as another political identity articulated specifically through land and garden: 'Not In My Back Yard' (curiously, often figured by people who do not have back yards, but extensive 360° gardens) is the voice of privileged self-interest

from people who wish to protect what they have against what they view as the onslaught of modernity, which might be in the form of a proposed adjacent new nuclear power station, a motorway, or a wind farm, say.

Though a slow culture, the garden is not fixed, and can change remarkably. I am not thinking season-by-season, though such change is traditionally the life-cycle of the garden—even if the seasons themselves are under threat by the profoundly global political issue of climate change. I am thinking in terms of its ideology. For instance Jenny Uglow has reminded us that 'many features in Victorian parks, like pavilions and pagodas, are being reborn [today] not as symbols of empire but of inclusion'. As society changes, it seems as though the garden remains the same, and yet it too alters. Does, should the (idea of the) garden speak more forcibly to us nowadays? In *Nowtopia*, Chris Carlsson writes of a politics inscribed in the very act of 'slowing down the gardener, making her pay attention to natural cycles that only make sense in the full unfolding of seasons and years. In a shared garden [especially], time opens up for conversation, debate, and a wider view than that provided by the univocal, self-referential spectacle promoted by the mass media'. Climate change, peak oil transition, community cohesion, the environment, genetic modification and food policy, diet, health and disability—the garden is the local patch which touches and is touched by all of these kinds of major global concerns, whether it wants that kind of attention or not. Peter Lamborn Wilson writes, perhaps with a note of incredulity, that '"Cultivate your own garden" sounds today like hot radical rhetoric. Growing a garden has become—at least potentially—an act of resistance. But it's not simply a gesture of refusal. It's a positive act. It's praxis'.

It is intriguing to recall that, in Thomas More's founding text of the genre, *Utopia*, while land and houses are held in common—each decade a property swap takes place, in a decennial cross between potlatch and lottery—and gardens are abundant, there remains a competitive edge between the utopians about the 'trimming, husbanding and furnishing of their gardens, every man for his own part'. It is within this dynamic between selfish and social gardener identified so presciently in More's utopian gardens that *Radical Gardening* is set. The early

chapters of this book are shaped around the public and outward-facing politics of gardens, whether in the form of the use of the garden and landscape in the construction of national identity (as during fascism), or the place of the garden in social planning, such as in the green public spaces of the city. The later chapters are more concerned with the grassroots and personal politics of the garden. This includes the development or transformation of the garden as an act of conscious, often anti-establishment, political campaigning, and critical and historical exploration of ways in which the garden and its planting have functioned as a space for the expression of identity politics. The boundary between the early and the later chapters of the book is an untidy one, since some material crosses over, or refers back. But then the fact is that I am an untidy gardener, and enjoy the bursting clump or semi-covered path, the nettle and the dying branch. Writing this book has taken me away from my own garden, to which I feel a neglectful stranger. For several seasons of a year now I have privileged ideas and histories of social movements and green spaces over my own modest terraced strip of land. Very, very soon I am returning to my own plot, but I will be accompanied by a greater understanding of the other plots I have read and written about for *Radical Gardening*, and this has shifted my mind more that I expected. Over the years I have written numerous books about contemporary radicals, social experimenters, counterculturalists, and their movements and modes of (sometimes dis-)organisation. I always come away most of all impressed and moved by the creativity and idealism of the people involved, as well as to a lesser extent soberingly aware of the limitations and potential dangers that can go with pushing for social change. Gardeners I thought would be a major challenge to my normal methodology and anticipated results! I guess that's why some years ago I started thinking about a book like this. But I am surprised once more, my own ignorance catching me out again. My hope is that you will find something new here, thought-provoking, inspiring, and that you will experience the sense of excitement I did on learning about ways the generous space of the garden can have political resonance. Do let me know, and if you've any cuttings or good seeds to share so much the better. If we are radical gardeners together is it possible that we might be able to save the world, just when it needs saving—*we* need saving—most?