

Little Sparta: the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay

By Magnus Linklater

Along the walls inside Ian Hamilton Finlay's house at Stonypath in Lanarkshire are row upon row of books, collected and read over a lifetime. It is a difficult collection to define, because it ranges so wide. Here you will find the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a treatise on Theocritus, Sophocles' Theban plays, a history of the French Revolution, a study of German Romantic poetry, the selected writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, detailed accounts of naval warfare in the Second World War, a guide to US battleships in action. But interspersed among them are some more surprising volumes: a pictorial history of toy boats, a catalogue of scale models, an illustrated book of build-it-yourself aeroplanes.

As you walk along the shelves, slivers of paper can be seen sticking up from between the pages, marking passages that Finlay found interesting. In the margins, notes are written, and half-formed ideas are sketched out. This is an artist's library in the home of a poet, and it is the crucible in which one of Europe's most remarkable gardens was created.

Little Sparta is recognised across the world as a truly original work of art. Put at its simplest, it is a garden of great beauty created out of the most unpromising of landscapes — the bare and windswept Pentland Hills, which run south-west from Edinburgh. For thirty years Finlay and his wife Sue — he the forger of ideas, she the practical gardener — dug, drained, planted and imagined a poet's garden, a place which would not just be a well-thought-out array of flowers and trees, but would prompt and provoke thought and discussion. Its closest parallel, perhaps, is the garden created by Alexander Pope at his villa in Twickenham, which Pope described not just as a place in which to seek seclusion, but one in which to take a stand. As one of the best-informed scholars of Finlay's work, Professor Stephen Bann, points out, Pope showed how gardens could be conceived not as 'retreats' but as 'attacks' — it was a concept that Finlay adopted and repeated. His life was spent challenging authority and respectability; he hated convention; he deplored institutional ideas; and if he saw a bastion of the establishment, he would lay

siege to it.

Hence the name Little Sparta, the rugged military city state which challenged the pre-eminence of Athens; and since Edinburgh, the douce capital city of Scotland, was known as 'the Athens of the North', Finlay determined that his garden would speak of rebellion and disobedience to the accepted order of things. It is not a complete coincidence that the first work that visitors notice as they walk up the winding farm-track that leads to the garden (and Finlay insisted that this was the way it should be approached, so that its place in what he called 'the fluted landscape' could be gradually appreciated) is the Monument to the First Battle of Little Sparta. Note the 'first' — this, it implies, is not the end of the affair. The monument recalls a famous confrontation between Finlay and the then regional council of Strathclyde, which decided to designate the Temple of Apollo — a shrine within the garden — as a warehouse, and therefore liable for rates. This, Finlay decided, was an act of war, and he deployed his forces to prevent the Sheriff Officer of the day from seizing works of art when Finlay refused to pay the required rates. The official, outflanked, was forced to retreat.

The monument is a useful introduction to the succession of teasing, playful, but often dark and disturbing ideas that the visitor will go on to encounter during a tour of the six-acre garden. Divided, as it is, into as many as nine separate gardens, Little Sparta challenges those who visit it to stop and think about the proximity of classical ideas of ordered beauty to those of warfare and terrorism. Apollo, for instance, is not just the god of muses and music, he is a vengeful and violent god, whose missiles of bow and arrow Finlay converts into machine guns. A pair of sculpted pineapples on top of a gate become, on closer inspection, two hand-grenades. A gentle sail, beside a lochan, turns out to be the conning-tower of a nuclear submarine.

But lest this sound as if the garden is some kind of exercise in political rhetoric, the first thing to say is that this is a place of great and gentle beauty: a water-garden, for instance, with pools and little lochs, fed by a tumbling stream, opening up into the exquisite Temple Pool garden, at its heart. The English Parkland, with its grove of trees, beehives, meandering pathways and gently falling lawns; the Roman garden, tree-shaded, with pots of hosta plants set on an irregular grid of paving stones, and stone works on plinths, comprising a homage to the Villa d'Este, celebrating the sixteenth-century garden at Tivoli. And the Woodland Garden, heavily shaded, evokes the atmosphere of a European Forest.

The visitor will be seduced by its natural beauty well before confronting its complexity. Finlay hated having to 'explain' his garden. He wanted visitors to discover and interpret it for themselves. But he enjoyed talking to them. Over the years, lovers of Little Sparta recall meeting its creator, clad in his gumboots and breeks, happy to have a gentle chat and point people in the direction they might want to go. But thereafter it was up to them. They might puzzle over the immaculately carved quotations on benches or bridges, the word-plays on trees and outbuildings, the references to classical mythology and the French Revolution. But he preferred them to discover the meanings for themselves, to wander through the garden, finding what most pleased them, rather than having anything as pedantic as a history lesson thrust upon them.

When it came to defending his ideas, however, he was rigid. His correspondence has become almost as famous as the art he created. Some of it is vitriolic, some irascible, some elegiac, and others simply practical. Although the carving and the stonework is all the work of others — his many collaborators, who worked with him to produce some of the most celebrated of his artworks — the ideas and the process by which they were realised are entirely the creation of Finlay. He spells out in his correspondence both where the ideas come from, how they might be developed, who is best equipped to make them, and whether the final product measures up to his exacting standards. Almost as many works were scrapped or abandoned at some stage because they failed to measure up to his ideals, as were finally made. There are more than two hundred and eighty artworks contained within the garden at Little Sparta. Who knows, however, whether they may be outnumbered by others which failed to satisfy their originator.

The garden has big concepts to express. But I like to remember too his quiet humour, his love of child-like images, the boats he made and floated on the tiny Lochan Eck, the teasing word-play that caught his sense of humour. You turn into a small grove of birch trees, and there, in the middle of the circle, is a carved stone with the rubric: 'Bring back the Birch' — the vengeful cry of a punitive generation turned on its head. Here is a fluted column bearing a basket of cherries with a text beneath it called *L'Idylle des Cerises*. It celebrates an incident described by Rousseau, who came across two pretty girls picking cherries. He climbed the tree and threw the fruit down for them. Finlay takes the image and casts it in stone. Further on, there is a verse from the German poet Hölderlin, evoking the peace of the rural life:

Calmly before his cottage in the shade
The ploughman sits; smoke rises from his modest hearth.
Hospitably the evening bells are chiming
To the wanderer in the peaceful village.

But then, just as you think this is going to be a gentle stroll through the countryside, you come across something that challenges all of it. War, and particularly the Second World War, is never very far away. As Jessie Sheeler, author of one of the definitive books on Little Sparta, points out, Finlay is immediately aware of the parallel between the gentle names given to ships in the war, and the violent way they met their end. There are plaques which are elegies for corvettes, or convoy escorts, of the *Flower* class sunk in the Atlantic during the Second World War. What seems a list of plants becomes a blood-stained evocation of conflict:

A DRIFT
OF ALYSSE
ENG ALYSSUM
FLOWER CLASS CORVETTE
TORPEDOED 1942
W.ATLANTIC1942
TWO
TO
GETHER
LOOSESTRIFE
PINK
LOOSESTRIFE
6 SINGLE 20MM MOUNTS
PLUS ATWIN 20MM MOUNT
IN PLACE OF THE 2 PDR POM POM

As Ms Sheeler writes: The tiny white flowers of alyssum become the foam around the Free French Navy's *Alysse* as it sank; the aptly named loosestrife describes succinctly the unleashing of war, and the ship's quick-firing guns reflect the scattering of the flower seeds, while Pink flowers stain the churned ocean with blood.

The last plaque commemorates the sinking of the German battleship *Scharnhorst* on Boxing Day, 1943:

SCHLACTSCHIFF

Lovely lines
low in the water—
later, lower still

The alliterative lilt in the words of praise lead on to the change of rhythm and the hint of ambiguity in the last two words of the last line bringing the poem to an elegiac end.

Where did all this come from? It is almost as if Finlay, in creating the garden, feels the need to involve his audience in an exploration of ideas which lead occasionally to puzzling, challenging, even, sometimes, distressing thoughts. There is a poignancy in the way, for instance, he litters part of the Roman garden with broken stones, and the motto: 'The world has been empty since the Romans.' His fascination with the French Revolution, its heroes, its cruelty, but also the purity of its aims, inspired some of his most evocative work. As the garden gives way to the heather and open moorland of the Pentlands, we find the broken remains of eleven gigantic stone blocks. Carved into each one is a single word, the quotation from the French revolutionary Louis Antoine de Saint-Just:

THE PRESENT ORDER IS THE DISORDER OF THE FUTURE

It would perhaps be easy to leave this as Hamilton Finlay's bitter, almost anarchic view of the world, except that the last of his creations at Little Sparta is perhaps the most settled and peaceful. Towards the end of his life, he wondered what should be done with the most dilapidated building on the site, the ruined barn, which was crumbling and apparently irreparable. Various ideas were advanced: to restore it and transform it into a gallery, to leave it as a ruin, or to pull it down altogether. Finlay decided to preserve it in its present half-destroyed state, but to create within it an enclosed medieval garden, a *hortus conclusus*, reminiscent, in miniature, of those one sees within the confines of a Loire chateau, with perfectly marshaled box hedges, and laid-out beds. As Patrick Eyres, editor of the *New Arcadian Journal* describes it:

The barn's roof was removed and the walls lowered and consolidated. The westerly wall is lower to allow the evening sunlight to fill the enclosed garden, and a small wooden seat is optimistically inscribed: *The Westering Sun Will Sometimes Reach This Bench*. Defined by the interior wall, the two parts of the Hortus embrace earth and sky. One has been planted to evoke mediaeval predecessors; the other contains a circular pool, and the Latin words inscribed around the edge leave no doubt that it is intended to reflect the clouds above: Cirrus • Astrocumulus • Cirrostratus • Cirrocumulus • Stratus • Cumulonimbus • Altostratus • Nimbostratus • Cumulus • Stratocumulus.

On a fine day, one can stand by the pool, and see the clouds scudding across its surface, reflected from the sky above. Art reflecting nature, a statement of belief in beauty, the poetry of the world, captured by artifice, a perfect statement of Finlay's poetry and philosophy.

Leafing through Finlay's library one day, I came across a modest book, entitled *246 Little Clouds*, by someone called Diter Rot, and published by the Something Else Press. It is just the kind of simple book that Finlay enjoyed. Was that, perhaps, where he picked up the first idea for his cloud sculpture? It was, alas, too late to ask him. By the time the *Hortus Conclusus* was completed in 2006, he had died.

But Little Sparta remains as his legacy, maintained and conserved by the Trust which he himself set up to guarantee its future. It is a place rich in that unmistakable combination of the simple and the childlike, with the deep and the sophisticated, a range and reach of ideas and intellect which has no equal.

Small wonder that the historian Sir Roy Strong described it as 'the only really original garden made in this country since [1945]'. Or, as Tom Lubbock wrote, in his masterly obituary in the *Independent*: 'The work of Ian Hamilton Finlay is a wonder of its time, and I would think for a long time to come.'

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