

Ut Christiani ita ut Romani sitis.—Dict. S. Patricii.

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MARY'S GARDENS

by

ROBERT OSTERMANN
Rockville, Donovan's Road
Cork, Ireland


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PPRIMULA veris . . . Campanula rotundifolia . . .
Verbascum thapsus . . . Armeria maritima. . . . Only
those few of us who are botanists will be able to identify
behind the technical nomenclature the flowers known to the
majority by less formidable titles: Cowslip, Bluebell,
Mullein, Thrift. But the number will be even less of them
who can penetrate into the lost world concealed by the
popular names: they are so long with us we imagine they
are part of a permanent tradition.

Now we can only have an idea of what we lost, when
Christian unity was destroyed, through knowing how spon-
taneous and common was formerly the expression of it in
men's affairs. It is always in the trivial, the common-place,
that our habits and convictions can best be measured, and
the flowers named above were once called Our Lady's Keys,
Our Lady's Thimble, Mary's Candle, Our Lady's Cushion.
Suddenly, like a dream ending, we begin to appreciate how
terrible, how unbridged, is the distance separating us from
medieval piety. We are complex and muddled, uncertain
of our postulates or allegiance. It takes an entirely different
view of things to see in the shape of a leaf a mirror wherein
Our Lady may have gazed.

Some such thoughts probably crossed the minds of two
Americans, John Stokes and Edward McTague, when, a
few years back, they heard the story of a most unique garden
in a place called Woods Hole, Massachusetts. A certain
Mrs. Lillie, of Chicago, had been responsible for planting
there some fifty varieties of plants whose original pre-
Reformation names recalled Our Lady; and it seemed from
her preliminary investigations that there were many more
flowers and plants with titles once designating aspects of
Mary's life and beauty. Examining some marigolds (Mary



Golds) in the garden of his old friend and teacher Edward McTague, John Stokes mentioned this story to him. They were charmed by the lovely custom which looked so rich in reverence and devotion. Soon the obvious suggestion was made. Would not others like to know of it? Was there not contained in it another gentle lever for prying open human hearts?

Out of that speculation has emerged a most unusual work, attractively titled 'Mary's Gardens'; a work designed to restore Our Lady's reign over yet another neglected area of human activity.

The Americans' idea was simple (in its genesis)—to make accessible to amateur gardeners, and in many cases simply to make amateur gardeners where before were none, seeds for planting a Mary Garden; to increase the consciousness of Our Lady as a constant companion; to revitalize leisure hours now becoming increasingly devoted to flying from reality. In short, believing the ways of love are innumerable, they wished to open up another avenue of approach to Christ. The idea is charming and fanciful. Is there anything solid in it? Does it give the mind a hold on deep truths?

Its creators are convinced it does; and they strongly emphasize one cardinal feature of their programme. The ultimate objective is not merely to call public notice to the Lady-names of flowers. That is but the opening wedge, one means, according to Mr. Stokes, 'of restoring the prayerful, religious sense and true dignity to gardening,' in its turn one means to fill the whole of life with its vast abandoned content of religious meaning. It has, too, an additional local value in the United States, where people are sunk in the insecurity of modern agricultural production and distribution, so mechanized and centralized that it has divided an entire nation from the sources of its life; as if that society were determined to reverse the divine condemnation setting man down to eat the fruits of the earth only with 'labour and toil.'

One should pause before carelessly estimating what benefits might spring from reinstituting in family life even

this small and intimate kind of manual labour. We are not too far in our own country from the state of mind which sees perfection in the machine, in industry, in a regimented system of commerce.

From Mary's Gardens we can learn many lessons. Again hear Mr. Stokes, from his article in the American Jesuit weekly journal, *America* :

There is much more to the religious tradition in gardening than the existence of symbolical names for flowers. In the garden we participate in the fundamental relationship between God, man and nature, as set forth in God's command to Adam to 'subdue the earth.' We deal with essences, the seeds; and with substances, the grown plants. We see the effects of original sin in the disease and death which enter our gardens each season. We also witness the promise of our resurrection the following Spring: ' . . . but if (the grain of wheat) dies it brings forth much fruit.' And we learn again to trust in God's Providence: 'consider the lilies. . . .'

Rich material for meditation is here in abundance, its roots deep in a tough, true philosophical and theological soil. And for those who find no reward in technical speculation there are other glories: planting, nourishing, tending, the mind raised towards God with the growth of the living things beneath one's hands. One need not necessarily advert, intellectually, to principles in order to be fed by truthful actions and deeds.

In fact in this work is a profusion of motives and returns. A constant fidelity in little things¹ will lead to great fidelity in important things. The habits we form, which move, guide, protect us, are best supported on simple, familiar acts. Contemporary existence, its strong sap withdrawn by the stimulation of artificial life in cinema, magazines and books, is quite without real colour and imagination. Sick organisms return to health in progressive stages. Recourse to home gardening, strengthened by values peculiar to this kind is one way to awaken atrophied faculties and forces, introducing into souls suppleness, change and variety, teaching the laws of growth. We plant the seed. God gives the increase.²

¹ Luke xix, 12-27; Matthew xxv. 14-30.

² 1 Cor. iii, 6.

And one may discern a still deeper inspiration in Mary's Gardens, suggested by the founders in their use of the term 'steward' to describe the gardener; and in the detailed and accurate instructions provided for whoever plans a Mary Garden. They thereby emphasize a Christian truth difficult for the Christian to understand and live.

Co-operation is necessary between man and God, not to help out God, but because that is the law of His own creation. Mary's Gardens supplies an indisputable message, with its abundant evidence of the 'steward's' importance, that Providence does not displace human effort. Doubtless God knows we want the tea placed before us on the table. We cannot have it unless we ourselves raise the cup. And we cannot raise the cup without wanting it.

Thomas Stokes (b. *circa* 1438), 'Gentleman of St. Sepulcher's Parish,' is the last of the pre-Reformation Stokes ancestors to die a Catholic. His grandson, George Stokes, appropriated a monastery farmhouse called 'Friar's Grange,' in the county of Essex about thirty miles north-east of London; in the parish of Aythorpe-Roding near Great Dunmow. The house is to-day still standing. A nephew of this man was on the jury which condemned Thomas More, and another uncle of this nephew was one of the judges, so that the family had made itself at home in the new order of things.

From that time separation from the old faith was rapid. Thomas Stokes (b. 1640) was one of the first Stokes Quakers; he settled in America in 1677. Seven generations later we see the trend reversing; both in his conversion and as co-founder of Mary's Gardens John Stokes has, in his person, abolished the unhappy mischief of five hundred years. United with Edward McTague, whose ancestry is Irish, he and his partner incorporate the best of modern Western civilization: America, Ireland, Britain. The English loved Our Lady and so gave flowers their Lady-names; the Irish persevered; and it is from America we expect new energy to come.

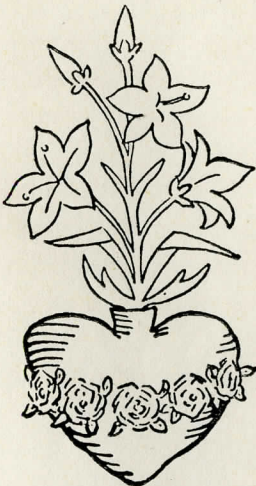
In 1951 a ten-variety 'Our Lady's Garden' was made

available to the public. This year these men are able to offer twelve and twenty-five variety 'Gardens,' and some 750 were received by clergy, religious, schools, societies, housewives, children, etc. The magnitude of their efforts is hidden by the statistics: exhaustive historical research into old names, investigations with trained horticulturalists to determine cultural characteristics and availability of seeds, the procuring of seeds from Europe and America; they designed and constructed their own filling and sealing equipment for packaging. All mailing and correspondence is handled by them alone.

John Stokes and Edward McTague are not in the seed business, nor are they dominated by the idea of big sales. These men are selling *work* . . . for a lifetime, they hope. The person who can plant a garden of Our Lady's flowers without his reflection turning occasionally in her direction will be rare. And Mary is, as always, the high swift glorious road to Christ. This points to another fact: the garden they wish to nourish is within. Mary's Gardens is an appeal to the heart.

'This is thy stewardship,' concludes an early sixteenth-century English gardening pamphlet, 'whatsoever thou be. And if thou carelessly omit to do thy office thou makest a hard account for thyself, which God forbid if it be His good pleasure . . . therefore love God above all things, and thy neighbour as thyself.'

ROBERT OSTERMANN.



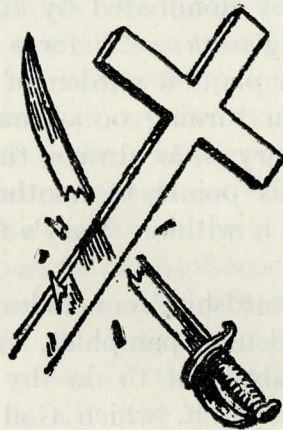
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