

# BOOK REVIEWS: Humphry Repton: The Red Books for Brandsbury and Glemham Hall

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# BOOK REVIEWS

OUR CRITICS APPRAISE

## Humphry Repton: The Red Books for Brandsbury and Glemham Hall

Ed. STEPHEN DANIELS (*Dumbarton Oaks*, \$125)

THE first illustration in Repton's *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* shows three figures in front of a tall paling; the man is perched on a transom peering over, and one of his companions is peeping through the fence. Under this overlay is a wooded landscape, a fine example of his water-colour technique. The plate derives from Repton's commission at Brandsbury and first appeared in his 1789 Red Book.



From Repton's copperplate text we see him scoring off his client's earlier consultant: the situation had the advantage of "rich and varied views" towards Highgate to the east and Richmond to the south-west. What a pity then that the earlier designer had followed Mr Brown's plan at the neighbouring Stanmore and had erected the fence, so inappropriate to the convex landscape at Wilsden.

Repton's client at Brandsbury was Lady Salusbury, a widow; she was only his third patron and Brandsbury was the first of his Red Books. She asked Repton how her newly acquired land could be improved by planting "for it was naked and wanted shade". He did not want to spoil "the most beautiful verdure, yielding hay and pasture so valuable . . .", and had no more than 10 acres to play with.

His first solution was to open out the views, but Lady Salusbury wished for "more shade and less prospect" and Repton was encouraged to take a more horticultural approach. This was so successful that he was given a bonus of £50 and a present for his wife of a "small rouleau in red Morocco" containing "19 new guineas and one new shilling all fresh from the Mint!"



Anyone passing through modern Wilsden would find this commission difficult to recreate. In contrast, we can still see the landscape of Glemham (*illustrated below*) from the main Ipswich to Yarmouth road. The early Georgian house had been inherited by Dudley Long North in 1789; he started planning improvements immediately and commissioned Repton's designs in 1791, by which time 50 Red Books had already been produced.

Repton was concerned to ensure a cheerful prospect from the house. He proposed that the house "be washed of a stone colour"; a pediment added to each front and a gloomy lime avenue removed. In the park, Repton wanted to fill in the square ponds (at a cost of £150) and to create a serpentine lake at a lower level to give the illusion of a river. He proposed that the cornfield behind it was unsuitable and that the hill should be planted with trees. Mr North failed to heed most of these improvements; there is no sign of a lake, serpentine or otherwise, on later maps of the estate.

This admirable reprint, produced in America at the Stinehour Press, shows Repton's confidence and persuasive charm at an early stage in his career; it would have been difficult to resist the double overlay at Glemham or his sketches of a Gothic Seat and Reposoir at Brandsbury. The editor provides helpful notes and refers several times to a manuscript memoir in the British Library; it would be cheering to know if and when this is to be reprinted. JOHN SAUMAREZ SMITH

*Available in England from Heywood Hill, 10 Curzon Sreet, W1Y 7FJ. £85.*

## Louis MacNeice

JON STALLWORTHY  
(Faber and Faber, £20)

THIS distinguished biography, published more than 30 years after the poet's early death, sheds welcome light on his poetry's dark places. It tells how a young Oxford aesthete and Classical scholar developed into a tough, hard-drinking professional as his vernal lyrics gave place to the *Autumn Journal* kept during the Munich crisis, and the austere poems of the war and post-war years degenerated into the arid longer

ones of his "middle stretch". MacNeice made a notable recovery from this trough with a late harvest of sombre poems that brought his life's work full circle.

Prof. Stallworthy devotes many pages to the ephemeral radio scripts—hackwork, MacNeice called them—into which much of his mature talent ran to waste, and there are accounts of his spell with the British Council in Athens, his globe-trotting assignments for the BBC, and his exhausting poetry-reading and lecture tours in America and elsewhere.

MacNeice was a complex personality. His inner conflicts derived in part from his mixed Irish heritage—being an Ulsterman

whose roots were in Co. Sligo—but more from a rectory childhood darkened by his mother's death and by his having a mongol brother, and a father (a future bishop) with whom, as with his own two children, he was never close. In childhood began the nightmares he suffered from all his life and which feature so often in his poetry. Withdrawn and yet gregarious, with few close friends and too many saloon-bar cronies—for he sought to dissolve his traumas in alcohol—he surveyed mankind through quizzical, sardonic eyes. He was perhaps happiest when exercising his borzoi, Betsy, or watching cricket or rugby.

Conscious always of the ticking of the



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