



Books

Roses and Rose Gardens by Claire Masset
National Trust. 176 pages. £14.99.
ISBN 978-1-911358-68-8.
Rose by Catherine Horwood
Reaktion. 238 pages. £16.00.
ISBN 978-1-78914-013-2.

Claire Masset packs a lot into her small book: practical advice on rose growing as well as descriptions of rose gardens and individual roses. The 'how to' sections include planting, dealing with pests and diseases, choosing roses for particular sites, such as walls, and mixing roses with other plants. The gardens she describes are all in England but are not all owned by the National Trust, in spite of the heritage organisation being her book's publisher. Privately-owned properties such as Hever, Borde Hill, Broughton Castle and Kiftsgate all find their place, as does Coughton Court – though, when describing the new rose garden there, I wish she didn't repeat the calumny that Eleanor of Aquitaine poisoned her husband's mistress, Fair Rosamund.

NT gardens include Sissinghurst and Mottisfont, both famed for their roses, such as 'Sissinghurst Castle' (*above*), and also the less well-known Bateman's, home to Rudyard Kipling, where the author spent the money that came with his Nobel Prize for Literature on a rose garden and lily pond, designing and planting them himself.

The National Trust is often accused of having a deadening hand on all it touches, but there is much here that is quirky and personal: the author's childhood memories, for instance, and her non-banal choice of quotes as chapter headings. My only caveat – there is too much pink!

Where Masset's chapter on the rose's history is intentionally slight, Catherine Horwood devotes her whole book to how the flower evolved, starting with fossilized roses millions of years old and ending with modern DNA research. She looks, of course, at botany but also at philosophy, literature and symbolism, painting, the perfume industry – even the White House Rose Garden.

Like all the best books, her treatment of the great sweep of rose-related history leads the reader to make unexpected comparisons, for instance, between the numerous varieties of rose mentioned in Wang Xiangjin's *Cyclopaedia of Flowers* published in 1621 and Nicholas Culpeper's *Complete Herbal*, published in 1653; or between the Roman custom of strewing rose petals on the ground at religious festivals and Muslims' reluctance to step on rose petals fallen in a garden because they represent the beads of the prophet's sweat.

Horwood's choice of illustration is as wide-ranging as her content – for instance a postcard (*right*) from the early 1900s showing a scene from the musical adaptation of Tennyson's mid-19th century poem 'Maud'.

Rose is the latest in a series of excellent plant biographies published by Reaktion. Others include a delightful volume on *Snowdrops* by Gail Harland, *Pine* by Laura Mason, *Oak* by Peter Young and the thought-provoking *Weeds* by Nina Edwards. A full list is on Reaktion's website.

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