

GARDENING

ALIVE



By Maxine Kumin

TO pick and choose from the bouquet of garden books deposited on my doorstep at this time of year ("then, if ever, come perfect days") has been a mixed pleasure. Their presence heightens the discrepancy between the ideal and the real in my own unkempt landscape. But how enjoyable it is, after a day's toil in my seven raised beds, to be an armchair gardener turning these lavishly illustrated pages.

A serious, in-depth study of the foremost woman landscape architect of the first half of the 20th century, **THE GARDENS OF ELLEN BIDDLE SHIPMAN** (Sagapress/Abrams, \$39.95), by Judith B. Tankard, takes us from Shipman's early years in Cornish, N.H., as an active participant in the artists' colony that flourished there in the 1890's, to her fruitful association with the eminent architect Charles Platt, who became her mentor. Because her private papers are not available, there is much to tantalize the reader between the lines.

While close attention is paid to a broad range of her designs, which could be found from Maine to Washington State, 200 black-and-white photographs fail to do justice to the ambition of these undertakings. Only five color photos are provided, although the jacket copy promises eight.

The text is fascinating, historic and poignant; Shipman's stance on many issues is delightful, as when she contradicts, for example, what Ms. Tankard calls "the widespread opinion that any sophisticated planting in America must have been copied from England." "Planting," Shipman wrote, "however beautiful, is not a garden. A garden must be enclosed. . . . Better a tiny plot where you can be alone than a great expanse without this essential attribute." Shipman was a staunch advocate of women's rights. She came of age in an era when the professionalization of women in her chosen field was, ironically, enhanced and enabled

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by the Victorian notion that gardening was, as Leslie Rose Close writes in an introduction, "a logical extension of women's traditional domestic roles." Still, it was not an easy climb for a divorced mother. She employed only women in her practice, and when in 1946, at the age of 76, she was finally invited to become a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects, she declined on grounds that this recognition came too late in her career to be meaningful. "If one were not a white, male, Eastern college graduate," the historian Diane Kostial McGuire has written, "the atmosphere was quite chilly."

Despite my misgivings about the opulence and autocracy of **THE ROTHSCHILD GARDENS** (Abrams, \$35), by Miriam Rothschild, Kate Garton and Lionel de Rothschild, I was unable to put this book down. The breathtaking photographs by Andrew Lawson and Mr. de Rothschild enrich an already lavish feast. Consider this scene, which evoked for me the Italian Renaissance: Baron Edmond de Rothschild "liked his guests to be able to pick their fruit at dinner. Dwarf trees in pots . . . laden with ripe red and black cherries or miniature greengages . . . were offered during the dessert course."

In addition, in the days before hydraulic lifts, a team of 20 Percheron horses was used to convey full-grown trees to Ferdinand de Rothschild's Waddesdon, a garden he caused to be created on a bare hilltop of 2,700 acres in the Vale of Aylesbury. The grueling physical effort, the magnificent obsession, even the place names have a melancholic, romantic ring.

World War II spelled the end of the idyll of Ashton, the 500-acre woodland owned by Miriam Rothschild's father, Charles. Ms. Rothschild emerged a committed conservationist from the destruction and pillage by locals, the disappearance of all the rare plants and the slaughter of the swans. Now Ashton is grassland and wildflowers. The fields are mowed only once a year: "the battle with weeds, the conquest of Nature, is a thing of the past. . . . Walking through the long grass which now covers the old tennis courts disturbs flights of blue and copper butterflies."

Sara Stein would approve of Miriam Rothschild's transformation. **PLANTING NOAH'S GARDEN: Further Adventures in Back-**

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