

CHAPTER THREE

EXALT THE BRAVE AND IDOLIZE SUCCESS

'CAPABILITY' BROWN

THOMAS GRAY

'CAPABILITY' BROWN

Lord Cobham had been one of Marlborough's generals in the French wars. After Cobham clashed with the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, he retired to his estates and concentrated on gardening. First, he used the landscape artist William Kent, but then he turned to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown to develop Stowe. The poet Alexander Pope described Stowe as 'near an approach to Elysium as English soil and climate will permit'. This is what Thomas Hinde wrote about Brown in his book, *Capability Brown, the story of a Master Gardener*:

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's work was the triumphant climax of a revolution which transformed the art of gardening in the eighteenth century and gave the world the term *le jardin anglais*.

Almost a hundred years before Brown was born, the first stirrings of this revolution can be found in Francis Bacon's essay on gardening (1625) in which he asked for wild places in a garden; but during the rest of the century gardens became increasingly formal. English gardeners copied

French, in particular André le Nôtre, creator of Versailles, and exiled Royalists who returned to England after the restoration of 1660 were keen to imitate him.

The engravings of Kip and Knyff give the impression of the result. They show great house after great house surrounded by canals, fountains, topiary, avenues of clipped trees and extensive beds of flowers, shrubs, and gravels. In 1688, when William III became king, some gardens were modified to imitate those of the Netherlands (more complex topiary, lead statues, trees in tubs, box hedges and flowering bulbs), but the general effect remained rigidly formal. In these years it seemed that the art of gardening had reached an ultimate and definable perfection.

But from the early 1700s poets and critics like Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison began to deplore both the formality and the uniformity of such gardens. A garden, they argued, should not be imposed indiscriminately on a piece of land but should consult the genius of the place. 1719 is often said to mark the first translation of such theories into practice because this was the year in which the young painter and future landscape designer, William Kent, returned from Italy to England with his patron, Lord Burlington. If the period of change which followed is divided into two, the first thirty years were Kent's, and succeeding thirty Brown's.

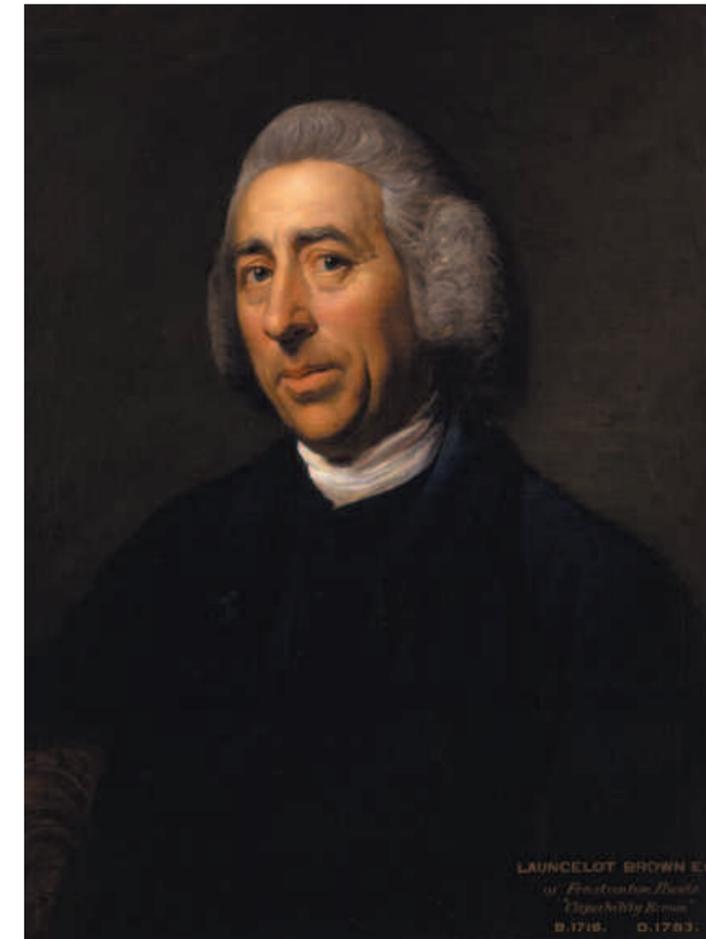
Kent did what the new taste in gardening demanded, what his experiences of Italy and of paintings of the Italian landscape suggested, and what technical developments like the ha-ha allowed. Modern taste demanded the abolition of formal beds, clipped avenues and 'foolish

waterworks'; Italy and its painters suggested garden temples, monuments and ruins; the ha-ha allowed the irregularities of nature into the garden and improvements into the surrounding park. Stowe in Buckinghamshire is the most famous of the gardens to which Kent applied his designs. And the story of Brown's work begins precisely where Kent's ends: in this magnificent, ornament-littered garden, to which Kent contributed so much and where Brown became head gardener.

The landscapes Brown designed were costly. Unless his clients had been enormously rich his plans could never have been carried out. Since national peace and prosperity often go together, it is easy to forget that the years of Brown's working life were far from peaceful. In 1745 while he was at Stowe an invading Scottish army almost threw the Hanoverians off the throne. For twenty-five out of the forty-four years between his arrival in the South and his death, England was at war either with continental enemies or with her American colonies. The remarkable thing is how little these wars and the turbulent political events which accompanied them affected Brown's professional life. In office or out, come peace or war, the great landowners of England wanted and were able to afford the sort of grandiose parks which Brown made for them.

When Lady Cobham moved back to Stoke Park in 1750, Brown drew up a landscape plan which included linking five quadrangular pools to make a river-like lake and, although this design was not immediately constructed, this is the lake which now forms the western boundary of the grounds of the Manor House. John Rocque's map of 1761 shows the five ponds. Also, an engraving of a painting by H. Pugh in 1765 of Thomas Penn and his family in front of the old Manor House shows the five ponds converted into a lake.

Capability Brown moved on to create other landscapes and gardens, including Broadlands in Hampshire. At the request of the second Viscount Palmerston, between 1767 and 1780 Capability Brown completed the 'deformalising' work begun



Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who lived from 1715 to 1783, is still today considered to have been a landscaping genius. Born in Northumberland, he moved south possibly to find a warmer climate, as he suffered from asthma. After work on the estates at Stowe, Stoke Park and Sutton House, he was appointed Head Gardener at Hampton Court and Gardener at St James's.

earlier by William Kent and planned and organised further landscaping. He was also involved in planning the project to 'square' the house in a new classic Palladian style. The house was eventually owned by the famous Mountbatten family and, in 1981, HRH Prince Charles and HRH Princess Diana spent the first night of their honeymoon in the house.

Brown also carried out commissions at Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire, Navestock in Essex, Compton Wynyates in Warwickshire, Rothley in his native county of Northumberland, and many of England's other lovely houses.

THOMAS GRAY

The mid-18th century brings us to Thomas Gray and his association with Stoke Park. This is a book about Stoke Park, not Thomas Gray, but he was one of Britain's greatest poets and he spent a great deal of time in Stoke Poges, and we must therefore include considerable detail about him and his importance in the history of Stoke Park.

Lionel Rigby explains well the atmosphere of Stoke Poges in Gray's day, writing that Stoke Poges was a collection of

scattered hamlets stretching as far south as the Bath Road in Slough. This was a busy road, with 60 to 80 coaches a day, and Slough itself was an important staging post on the London-Bath route. Gray had a house in London, while his aunts and mother lived in Stoke Poges, so he will have learned the discomforts of coach travel as well as the dangers from highwaymen and footpads on his frequent journeys to visit them.

Born in Cornhill in London in 1716, Thomas Gray was the only one of twelve children to survive infancy. His father was both eccentric and violent, and Gray's upbringing and education were controlled by his long-suffering mother, Dorothy. She and her sister, Mary Antrobus, opened a milliner's shop in Cornhill which enabled her to support Thomas at Eton College and Cambridge.

Fortunately, Dorothy's two brothers, Robert and William Antrobus, were masters at Eton, and Robert looked after Thomas when he went to the school, at the age of nine, in 1725. As Robert lived at Burnham, close to Stoke Poges, Gray also spent his holidays there.

At Eton, Thomas formed friendships with Horace Walpole, Richard West and Thomas Ashton in a 'Quadruple Alliance', a little group dedicated to literary pursuits. It was at Eton that he developed a love of Greek and Italian literature, and their influence can be seen in his subsequent poetry. In 1735 Gray and Walpole went up to Cambridge, and three years later they went on a Grand Tour of Europe together. Unfortunately, they quarrelled and Gray returned

home alone. Shortly afterwards his father died and Gray settled in at Peterhouse College in Cambridge, where he took a degree in law.

Gray is, of course, most famous for his poem 'Elegy written in a Country Church-Yard', and the churchyard is that of St Giles' church in Stoke Poges. Robert L. Mack produced a deeply researched and beautifully written biography of Thomas Gray, and I am grateful to him for much of what follows about Gray. Here he is on the quality and importance of the 'Elegy':

Gray's successful creation, within the sometimes troubled arc of the poem's narrative, [was that] of a fully rounded and fully imagined poetic persona – a persona intimately related, as we shall see, to the Thomas Gray of history, but a being who grew also, in the course of time, to assume a life (and, for that matter, a death) of his own. Many of the Elegy's earliest readers were impressed by its speaker's ability to express apparently familiar thoughts in a paradoxically new and powerfully realized language of consolation. The Elegy seemed perfectly to fulfil the standard of Alexander Pope, whose criterion had been expressed earlier in the century in his own *Essay on Criticism* (1711), and who had then famously judged the art of true poetic wit to lie in its writer's ability successfully and naturally to express 'what oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest'. Much the same principle, of course, was to inform Samuel Johnson's widely celebrated (if otherwise contextually qualified) praise of the Elegy as abounding with 'images which find a mirror in every mind,

Thomas Gray was one of England's greatest poets. His most famous poem is 'Elegy written in a Country Church-Yard', and the churchyard is that of St Giles' church next to Stoke Park.



and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an "echo". The sympathetic persona of the *Elegy* seemed for many to speak in an unpremeditated and spontaneous language of private meditation – a language of direct devotion – and, in so doing, seemed likewise to articulate a form of prayer that effected a forceful combination of secular, stoic candour, on the one hand, with the unflinching honesty which would appear to be demanded of true Christian belief, on the other. The voice of Gray's poem, in other words, seemed almost instantly to possess a rhetorical authority that moved beyond any merely formal or calculated intellectual engagement with its subject matter, an authority which confronted some of the imminently real yet at the same time oddly intangible issues that continue still to lie just beneath our talk of death and dying – subjects as ambitiously speculative as the nature and 'meaning' of death itself, the relative worth of our existence as embodied human beings, and the possibly dubious value of all gestures of remembrance and commemoration.

Other sites have been claimed as providing the inspiration for the 'Elegy', whether it was nearby Burnham or distant Durham, but in Mack's words, 'the provenance of St Giles is very close to irrefutable'. The church became very important to Gray and he often retreated there during the difficult summer of 1742 when his great friend Richard West died.

As for the 'Elegy' itself and when it was composed, here is what another Gray biographer, R.W. Kelton-Cremer, wrote:

It is unlikely that the exact dates of the composition of the 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard' will ever be known. Unless some fresh and conclusive evidence is forthcoming, opinion on the matter will always be

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divided, and controversy will be profitless. The poem may have been begun, and indeed in Mason's view the greater part of it was written, during the sad and eventful summer of 1742. But it seems more probable, in my own submission, that Gray merely wrote a few of the opening stanzas in 1742, and continued to work upon the poem at irregular intervals during the next eight years. At one stage he brought it to a tentative conclusion, and in this form it possessed a unity of structure and of sentiment which the final version does not retain. At some later date he began to work on it again, and introduced for the first time a deeply personal note, which dominated the poem to its close and greatly altered its mood. Again we have no details or dates; we do not know whether these final additions were a sudden inspiration, or the outcome of months and perhaps years of labour. We only emerge from conjecture into certainty in the summer of 1750, when Gray wrote to Walpole from Stoke on the twelfth of June, enclosing a manuscript of the completed *Elegy*, and telling him that 'having put an end to a thing, whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it to you'.

In analysing the poem itself, Kelton-Cremer continued:

It is almost impossible to analyse a work which for two centuries has formed a part of the English heritage, so familiar, so constantly quoted, so universally beloved. The exquisite twilight scene with which it opens; the long series of reflections upon fame and obscurity, ambition and destiny; those stanzas, tolling like solemn bells, which seem to voice all that can be expressed of sadness, resignation and hope – since childhood they have been a part of our consciousness, exerting upon us the same irresistible spell as they did upon our forefathers. For all its familiarity the *Elegy* retains to an extraordinary degree its original eloquence and mystery, its power to move the heart with those 'divine truisms that make us weep'.

Gray told his readers more about himself in the *Elegy* than in any other poem. Yet this introduction of his own personality was an afterthought; and some critics have felt that by his final additions to the *Elegy*, and by the epitaph in particular, he destroyed the symmetry of something that

was already perfect. In its original form, the poem consisted of the first eighteen stanzas as they exist at present, stanzas in which the mood is unaltered and the argument moves steadily forward without a check or digression. The poet's attention was fixed throughout on the rude forefathers of the hamlet, their simple virtues, their destiny remote from the splendours and miseries of greatness. Then he brought his poem to a close with four more stanzas, rejected in the final version, in which he briefly touched upon his own perplexities and reconciled them to the common lot of humankind:

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success
But more to Innocence, their Safety owe
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate,
By Night & lonely contemplation led
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate,

Hark how the sacred Calm that broods around
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease
In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace.

No more with Reason & thyself at Strife
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

Such was the poem as it was originally conceived, a perfect artistic whole, completely harmonious in form and context alike. But Gray was still not satisfied, and at some later date he resumed work upon it once more. He rejected the sixteen lines which had provided so superb a close, only incorporating some scattered fragments from them in the five new stan-

zas which now took place. ... Amid the sober philosophic musings a fresh note begins to be heard, a sudden note of human loneliness and anguish in the face of death:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies.
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

It is easy to see why poetry went to the heart of Johnson, another profoundly lonely man, and preoccupied as Gray never was by the horror of death, the dread of leaving this warm familiar world.

After his own death, a permanent memorial to Gray was raised near the site of his grave (a cenotaph designed by John Bacon was also erected in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, beneath that of John Milton). At Stoke Park, 100

Gray's Memorial, in the field adjoining St Giles' church, is a large cenotaph. On the four sides are inscriptions. Three of them are quotations from Gray's poems. John Penn, the grandson of the founder of Pennsylvania, paid for the monument.

He was assisted by the painter Joseph Farington to choose between a design by Paine and one by James Wyatt. Farington recorded in his diary on 25 July 1798: 'Wyatt wishes it to be 21 or 23 feet to clear the Horizon. Mr Penn thought if 16 feet and coming below Horizon it would have good effect, but came into Wyatt's idea at last.'

And on 16 August 1798: 'Mr Penn ... thinks no necessity for stones to be inserted for the inscription of Gray's monument, but letters might be let into the brickwork. I proposed to leave them painted only in imitation of whatever shaped figures Wyatt may recommend. Mr Penn much approved this idea.'



yards outside the churchyard, a monumental stone sarcophagus was built on a raised pedestal fifteen feet high, with verses from both the 'Elegy' and the 'Eton Ode' inscribed on it. Gray had requested a 'frail memorial' but this monument, designed by architect James Wyatt, is no frail memorial. The three acres in which the monument stands, and which have been officially designated 'Gray's Fields', were bought by private individuals and donated to the National Trust in 1921. Three years later, enough money was raised by public subscription to buy a further ten acres nearby. Thanks to these philanthropists of the early 20th century, the monument stands in a space not wildly different from how it would have been when Gray himself was alive.

At this time, in the aftermath of the terrible slaughter of the First World War between 1914 and 1918, Gray's 'Elegy' took on a new force for many.

As Mack put it:

Universal relevance is always, to some extent, a matter of perceived applicability. That having been said, in the aftermath of the Great War Gray's poem suddenly was called upon to commemorate the depth of a disaster that amounted in many minds to the brutal extermination of an entire world of innocence and promise. The familiar, half-muttered verse of Gray's *Elegy*, once memorized in childhood and repeated in snatches and fragments throughout a lifetime of retrospectively mild tribulation, returned home suddenly, and to a country bled white by the cost of sacrifice, with a force and a unity of feeling greater than they had ever before possessed.

The ground around the Stoke Poges churchyard also grew with sad significance. Almost side by side with the 'rude forefathers' of the village's distant and increasingly irretrievable past was commemorated a younger generation – a generation sacrificed before its time, immolated even in

the promise of its youth. Of the many men and boys who left Stoke Poges for the front in the dark years that followed and were measured from August 1914, forty-eight were never to see their Buckinghamshire home again, a high cost for a village which counted only 1,500 souls. Most of those who fell in the War, of course, were destined never even to be returned to English soil ('Alas, alas for England', lamented one of the many elegists of the period of these soldiers, 'They have their graves afar'). A tablet inscribed with the names of those lost to Stoke Poges and erected by public subscription was unveiled on the north wall of the Chancel of St Giles in January 1920. As time passed the survivors of war turned their footsteps to the church and to its burial ground in their search for some sense of closure and in their hope of dumb forgetfulness; the same individuals turned their hearts and their minds to the *Elegy* for the articulation of meaning, and the respectful tribute of attention. Modern gestures were exchanged for ancient ones, and Thomas Gray's most famous poem was once again transformed.

During his adult life, Gray spent many summers at West End House, Stoke Poges, the house of his widowed aunt, Anna Rogers, and her two sisters, Mary Antrobus and Dorothy Gray, his mother. Mack wrote:

There were worse things to endure in this world than the fussing care of a loving mother, or the constant solicitation of her equally loving and doting sisters. Life at Stoke Poges looked soon to be as comforting and sedate as Gray could possibly desire. The indigenous delights of an English spring had lost nothing in now being compared to the rather more spectacular glories of their several counterparts on the Continent and along the Mediterranean. Like Robert Browning just over one hundred years later, Gray in the spring and early summer of 1742 felt an intense connection with the peculiarly English behaviour of a peculiarly English spring – the buttercups, the blossoming hedges, and the thick, luxurious shade of the English oak. Following a sound night's sleep and a leisurely breakfast, he once again traced the lanes and hedges of the Buckinghamshire countryside until, volume in hand, he settled on a suit-

able place to resume his conversations with the literary past. Some afternoons found him basking in the sunlight beside the slow-moving stream, its rushes gently swaying in a mild wind. On other occasions he sought a thicker canopy of a glade of beech trees and, letting his book fall to his side, lay on his back in the blue-green shades of the foliage and lost himself in listening to the sounds of the season – the passing herds in the midday heat, the quiet buzz and flutterings of bees, butterflies and other insects in the heavy, post-meridian air. The church-yard of St Giles, too – the rays of the late afternoon sun falling aslant its ancient graves and crumbling pavements – invited retreat and meditation, and Gray would often have turned his footsteps in the direction of the tombstones on those warm and quiet afternoons.

When the 'Elegy' was written, Gray apparently did not think about publishing it and did not even send a copy to his close friend, Thomas Wharton. However, another friend, Horace Walpole, saw it and was absolutely delighted with it, feeling it confirmed his view of Gray's genius. He gave copies to all his circle of friends, many of whom also made copies and circulated them. Someone who read it was Lady Cobham, who, as we saw, moved from Stowe to Stoke Park after the death of her husband.

She was amazed to learn from the Reverend Robert Pult, the tutor of a young nobleman at Eton and an acquaintance of Gray, that the scene of the 'Elegy' was the churchyard outside her garden and that the poet was at that moment living in the parish.

Not sure how to meet Gray or how to call on two elderly widows living in her parish, Lady Cobham decided that Lady Schaub's acquaintance with Lady Brown, who knew Gray, was sufficient, and she and Miss Speed called on Mrs Rogers and

Mrs Gray. Lady Cobham, Henrietta Speed and Lady Schaub were a sophisticated group and presented something of a challenge to Gray, 'for which his increasingly comfortable life at a Cambridge college had done little to prepare him'. However, when Gray called on them he was soon put at ease by Lady Cobham's warm-hearted friendliness and Miss Speed's gaiety, and before long he became a constant guest.

In 1757 Gray was offered, but declined, the Poet Laureateship and in 1768 was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University. Already acknowledged as one of the most learned men in Europe in his day, he died in Cambridge on 30 July 1771. He had expressed a desire to be buried 'in a coffin of seasoned oak, neither lined nor covered'.

Bizarre though it may seem, Gray did not want the 'Elegy' published, deeming it beneath the dignity of a gentleman to accept money for a literary work. He was mortified when the editor of a periodical called *Magazine of Magazines* wrote to him and told him he was going to publish the 'Elegy'. Gray wanted to frustrate this blatant piracy, but *Magazine of Magazines* published it in February 1751 and other magazines followed suit in March and April.

Knowledge of the 'Elegy' spread worldwide. Another biographer of Gray, F. McDermott, in a book compiled for the Penn-Gray Society called *William Penn, Thomas Gray*, wrote:

Even away on the far-off River Montmorency, in Canada, an incident occurred which was to add yet another tribute to the already immortal poem. A young recruit in the Engineers, later Professor Robison, the

mathematician, happened to be in the same boat as the afterwards famous General Wolfe, when the latter was creeping along with muffled oars to inspect his posts before the attack on Quebec. And though the General never returned to England, the recruit did, and told of how Wolfe, during that memorable journey, recited most of the *Elegy*, remarking afterwards that he would prefer to be the author of that poem even to achieving the glory of beating the French on the next day.

During the whole of his lifetime, Gray received only one payment for his writings – £40 (about £450 in today's money) for the publication of his *Pindaric Odes*, probably because it was printed on a press in Strawberry Hill, Twickenham set up by his close friend, Horace Walpole.