

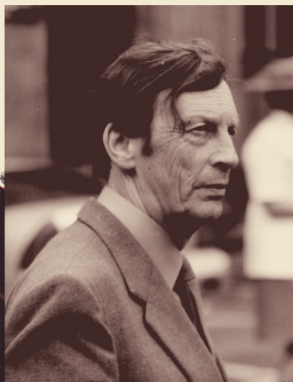
*I Call It a 'Garden',  
a Place of Seeds*



GEOFFREY DUTTON'S  
LESSONS IN CURIOSITY  
AND EXPLORATION

## Geoffrey Dutton (1924–2010)

dedicated his life to environmental exploration – from practicing pioneering medical science as a biochemistry professor to his ventures into poetry, writing, gardening, wild water swimming and climbing. Following his studies at Edinburgh University, he continued his scientific career in Dundee and built a home on a steep, rugged Perthshire hillside where he established and took care of a ‘marginal garden.’ His lifelong dialogue with the garden led to *Harvesting the Edge* (1994), *Some Branch Against the Sky* (1997) and *The Year’s Colour in a Marginal Garden* (1998). He passionately campaigned for the invigorating power of wild waters in *Swimming Free* (1972) and kept a foot on the mountain by editing the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* from 1960 to 1971. For an exploration into what lies at the intersection of his various interests, he chose verse—“to bare the essential unity of what we encounter – not passive union but dynamic equilibrium”—and published five volumes of poetry: *31 Poems* (1977), *Camp One* (1978), *Squaring the Waves* (1986), *The Concrete Garden* (1991) and *The Bare Abundance* (2002).



# I Call It a ‘Garden’, a Place of Seeds

*Geoffrey Dutton’s Lessons in Curiosity and  
Exploration*







**Geoffrey Dutton** (1924–2010) was a distinguished biomolecular scientist who was simultaneously also a poet, mountaineer, wild water swimmer, and the creator, caretaker and chronicler of a Highland garden in Perthshire, Scotland. Dutton saw no conflict between science and poetry, and eight acres of a steep and rugged hillside provided him with an experimental ground to explore this and other complex interrelationships in his search for the new. For fifty years, Dutton maintained what he called a ‘marginal garden’ – a marginal site guided with marginal effort to maximum marginal effect. His lifelong ecological dialogue with the garden was ahead of its time and is today largely forgotten, despite Dutton’s multiple publications in both prose and verse.

Amid the garden’s slow transition back into the wild margin, this publication (and the event which the publication accompanies) is a celebration – of a special place, a singular body of work and an insatiably curious individual.

Edinburgh, January 2025







“making this garden is writing a poem, and walking the paths, reading it”<sup>1</sup>

*Alec Finlay*

*Internal wildness may be cultivated. External wildness may be assisted. Both shelter.*

– Gerry Loose

<sup>1</sup> The title is a quotation from G.F. Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge* (London: Menard Press, 1994), 81.

These days lively debates swirl around the R-word, rewilding, or, how to heal wild ecology. Arguments against charred grouse-moors and idiotic reafforestation projects concocted by hedge funds; arguments for deer culls, pinewood remediation, and hutoptianism; celebrations of a spray of Mountain Mellick found on a hillside.<sup>2</sup>

In the lee of environmentalism, a cultural movement emerged, *place-awareness*: an ecopoetics fronted by artists—walking artists, foraging artists, followers of Nanism<sup>3</sup>—and writers, most notably the late Gerry Loose.

The practice of *place-awareness* is collaborative, not least, a collaboration with the land: Kathleen Jamie walks with local experts; Hayden Lorimer follows a reindeer herder; there are art-walkers at Deveron Projects Walking Institute; Harry Josephine Giles has alt. rules for hikers; Gill Russell’s makes watershed maps; John Murray’s maps reveal the ecological in the Gaelic colour spectrum; Gerry Loose wrote portraits of Sunart oakwoods and hutting at Carbeth; Andy Wightman’s *The Poor Had No Lawyers*, our ‘Hallaig’ in prose.<sup>4</sup>

Such projects envisage real-world legislation on land ownership, biodiversity, disabled access, and the democratic right to remediate wild land. Is art framing rewilding as an act of imagination, or is rewilding reframing art? Are all acts of imagination in nature proximate to gardening?

<sup>2</sup> From the Twitter/X feed of Sarah Watts, environmental scientist and conservation manager at Corrour Estate.

<sup>3</sup> Nanism: my term for the clangour over Nan Shepherd’s writings.

<sup>4</sup> In my own work, I’ve undertaken an artist residency in a pinewood, worked with Forestry Land Scotland and

John Muir Trust  
on access to  
wild land for  
disabled people,  
and authored  
poetic manifestos,  
'The Walkative  
Revolution'  
(Paths for All),  
humandwolves  
(Trees for Life),  
and urban  
rewilding.

<sup>5</sup> Details in the  
character sketch  
are drawn from  
the obituary  
of Dutton  
published in the  
SMC Journal.  
See IHMS, 'In  
Memoriam:  
Geoffrey Dutton',  
*SMC Journal* XLI,  
no. 201 (2010):  
280–85.

<sup>6</sup> Gerry  
Cambridge,  
'Beyond the Cage:  
An Interview  
with G. F. Dutton',  
*The Dark Horse*,  
Summer 2005,  
23.

I want to interpose a forgotten—*marginal*—figure into these debates, a pine whip emerging from brambles. GF Dutton was a polymath: professor of biochemistry at University of Dundee; poet; wild-swimming author of *Swimming Free: on and Below the Surface of Lake, River, and Sea* (1972); 'Salvationist' mountain-climber and storyteller publishing chucklesome reminiscences of his climbing days (some based on adventures that actually happened); player of piobreachd;<sup>5</sup> creator of a 'marginal garden' and two meditations on gardening, *Harvesting the Edge* (1994), and *Some Branch Against the Sky* (1997), and a photographic primer, *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden* (1998).

Dutton was a wandervogel of the craggy 'Walter Scott Tory' variety. A scientist, passionate about the 'hobbies' he excelled in, and an innovative editor of the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* (1960–1971), in a period termed '*the Duttonian Enlightenment*'. In the days of New Labour patrimony, when it was possible to integrate a figure like Dutton into a generalist survey of Scottish culture, I invited Geoffrey to assemble a collage of mountaineering literature for the anthology *The Way to Cold Mountain* (2001). His selection revealed a tessera of styles – eccentric Victorian aristo climbers, working class heroes, boho students, dharma bums.

Dutton was rare for his time in expressing a belief that "science and subjectivity are complementary."<sup>6</sup>

My whole point in exploring life both in science and everything else is to look for something new, something that hasn't been done before. You can't be a researcher of something which has already been done. So much verse, too, is just a repetition of what's been done already. So I was driven, more or less, by the necessity of exploring, to find something new...You have facts which are

metabolised by your brain into further facts,  
which are deduced from those which came in,  
and are tested; this is the scientific process, to  
test those further facts against demonstrable  
things. I find this exactly parallel in poetry.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cambridge,  
24–25.

His ‘*metabolised*’ poems are pared back,  
lacking in *gardeny* flowers; like roji philosophy,  
they eliminate the showy – nothing that distracts  
from quiet thought, poetry, drinking tea. Dutton’s  
poems are secular sermons motivated by curiosity.  
Poetry is “the only vehicle by which you can analyse  
... experiences in all these different media”<sup>8</sup> – by  
which he meant the immersive mediums of climbing,  
swimming, or battenning trees against the snow that  
bore down in those 1970s blizzards. His prose is more  
fruitfully poetic than his poetry and, perhaps because  
of the taciturn cast of his mind, his gardens more  
poetic than his writing: “But one afternoon the wind  
will drop; a heaviness clouds the sky; apprehensive  
silence gathers. Then a prickle on the skin. Then  
another, invisible in the suddenly damp air. Distant  
hills, nearer trees, grow paler; a breath of wind  
passes; and waves of snow reach us.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cambridge, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Dutton,  
*Harvesting the  
Edge*, 24.

Like Gerry Loose’s hut journals, or Ian Hamilton  
Finlay’s domestic *pensées*, Dutton’s writing is an  
almanac to the good life, much of which centres on  
weather.

Dutton is a precursor for an alliance between  
*place-awareness* and ecological remediation, a green  
bridge crossing over to the true remediation of  
wounded Highland landscapes, scaling the necessary  
work of repair from micro- to macrocosm. Gardening  
was his means to analyse our relationship with  
wild nature, and he occupied a glen between two  
defining figures of Scottish Green consciousness:  
the phenomenological wanderer, Nan Shepherd, and  
poet-gardener-revolutionary, Ian Hamilton Finlay.  
The pole star of Nanism is The Hill, where only a deer

cull will allow trees to return. Lower down the slopes, the two poet-gardeners, Sirius, and Orion, stand for the individual's agency to revive small acreages of wild land, creating ecologically intensive gardens as pilot-plans for a transformation that may never come.

Shepherd is referred to *everywhere* as a validating stamp for outdoorsy art and eco-poetry, even appearing in a headdress made of camera film on our national currency. Those who dote on the quietism<sup>10</sup> of *The Living Mountain* may struggle with 'improver' poets, who celebrate their hillside gardens as local and *possible* acts of care. Still, their gardens stand apart from the big houses—Crarae, Inverewe, etc.—and their plant-collections.<sup>11</sup> The depredations of sport made Duttonia and Stonypath garden islands, or island gardens, juxtaposed against the moor. Step beyond their fences and you find the familiar rackety shooting butts that define, or defile, wild land. Their eclogues reproach the grousemoor as a patched desert and remind us that the landscape of Nanism is not natural but a vast expanse of land occupied by a blood cult. This ecological richness will now be read in terms of the struggle for biodiversity and attempts to ameliorate climate breakdown.

These approaches are a matter of altitude as much as attitude. Dutton and IHF agitated for a garden revolution: culture should leave the cities and put down roots in the neglected region of the hill-farm. Their gardens were created in the same time frame, amid wild landscapes, by poets working in isolation who never met or corresponded. Duttonia as a taciturn alter ego to the more famous Little Sparta. Dutton's garden is an anthology of native and montane flora from around the world, IHF's a living archive of classical styles and setting for poem-objects. Though IHF envisaged garden centres as the new Jacobin clubs, Little Sparta<sup>12</sup> is devoted to an eccentric Hyperborean Neo-Classicism, impossible to imitate in terms of style. However, the planting—most of which was the work of my mother, Sue—is eminently

<sup>10</sup> Nan Shepherd was influenced by Lafcadio Hearn and Eastern mysticism.

<sup>11</sup> Dutton had nothing against rhododendrons, which make elegant fillers, but neither garden features plant-labels.

<sup>12</sup> The garden at Stonypath, Little Sparta, was a collaboration between Ian











Hamilton Finlay  
and Sue Finlay  
(Sue Swan).

attainable, and more native than Hellene. Duttonia too had an air of IRL possibility. We are invited to join their project of eco-horticultural transformation.

The poets lived at similar altitudes. Both gardens were wrought out of rugged land at the upper edge of cultivation. Was this the spur they needed? Winter took a tithe of sentry trees and, when the snow lay, rabbits nibbled rings halfway up the trunks – there’s an ingenuous wit in Dutton’s improvised peach-can tree-protectors to discourage the buggers.

<sup>13</sup> The location of the garden is deliberately kept vague; Dutton preferred privacy and the family still use the home.

Settling by the Forest of Alyth,<sup>13</sup> Dutton dwelt at the fringe of the wilderness he loved: mountains to climb, rivers to swim, foothills of the Grampians, gripped by rolling bands of cloud, commutes south, to the estuarine city of Dundee, where he practiced science. A ‘generalist’, he understood gardening as a combination of craft, art, and the natural sciences. He studied environmental toxicities at work, spent summer evenings pruning and strimming paths in his domestic laboratory.

<sup>14</sup> From a BBC feature on Dutton’s gardening, see ‘Gardeners’ World’ (BBC2 England, 24 July 1992).

*the gardener unchains forces, after GFD<sup>14</sup>*

*first I cleared away the bracken  
and the wild raspberries came*

*then I cleared away the wild raspberry–  
which is a dreadful thing–*

*but then the fireweed came  
which is even worse*

As Barbara Prezelj observes: “I think the garden was his personal project, not in any sentimental sense but rather as a stubborn, almost self-centred, undertaking, as if the poet was challenging himself in, or from, the margin, and making a willing commitment to this experiment, which concerned himself as much as the landscape,

for a span of fifty years. Over such a duration of time, surely a place such as this must remake you.”

This is true of IHF, who used the garden as a cure for, and affirmation of, his agoraphobia, translating vulnerability to the social world into a fierce sequestered republic defined by poetry. Dutton’s garden reflected his love of hiking and climbing. IHF landscapes were portals into an idealised past where he hoped to heal his exile.

For IHF, gardening was an art of inscription and composed views, creating an avatar of the landscapes of Claude and Poussin. With Sue’s help, he manipulated scale to create follyesque plays on perception – pond as ocean, tree as Doric column. Over time, a poetry of reflections, ripples, and shadows, gave way to a fraught mythopoetic vision of History, pitted with gloom, storms, and guillotines. Paths and trellis arches conduct the visitor to memorials and temples dedicated to: *Julie’s Garden*, *The Henry Vaughan Walk*, *Heidegger’s Holzwege*, *The Temple of Apollo*.

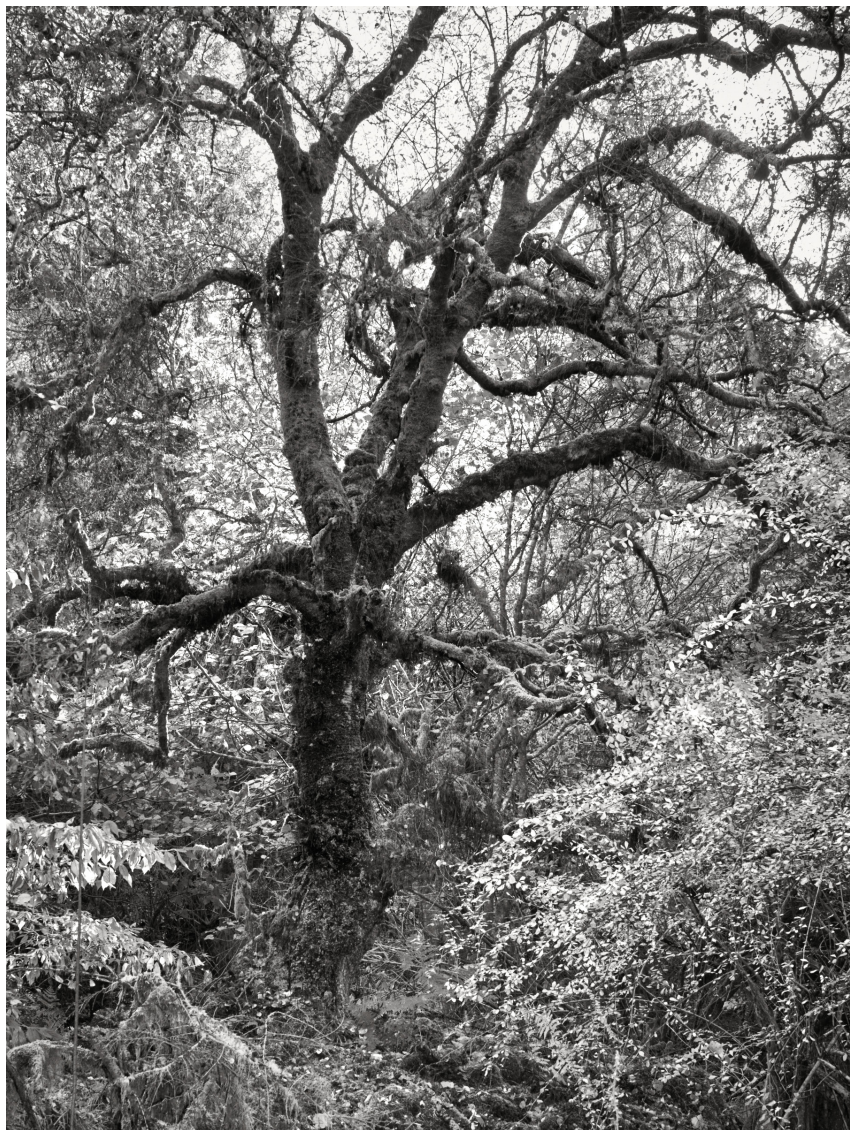
Ecopoetics implies a poem that reaches *beyond* letterforms, into assemblages of living things. Some poets would write in hyphae if they were able. Dutton’s crude benches are unadorned: no texts, no historical references, no footnotes. This is a garden of geological epochs, acknowledging the great ice which scoured the gorge, shaping hundred-foot crags, leaving a handy pool for swimming. The hazels, a reminder of Neolithic gleaners – both gardens are neighboured by hut circles, though those above Stonypath have been destroyed.

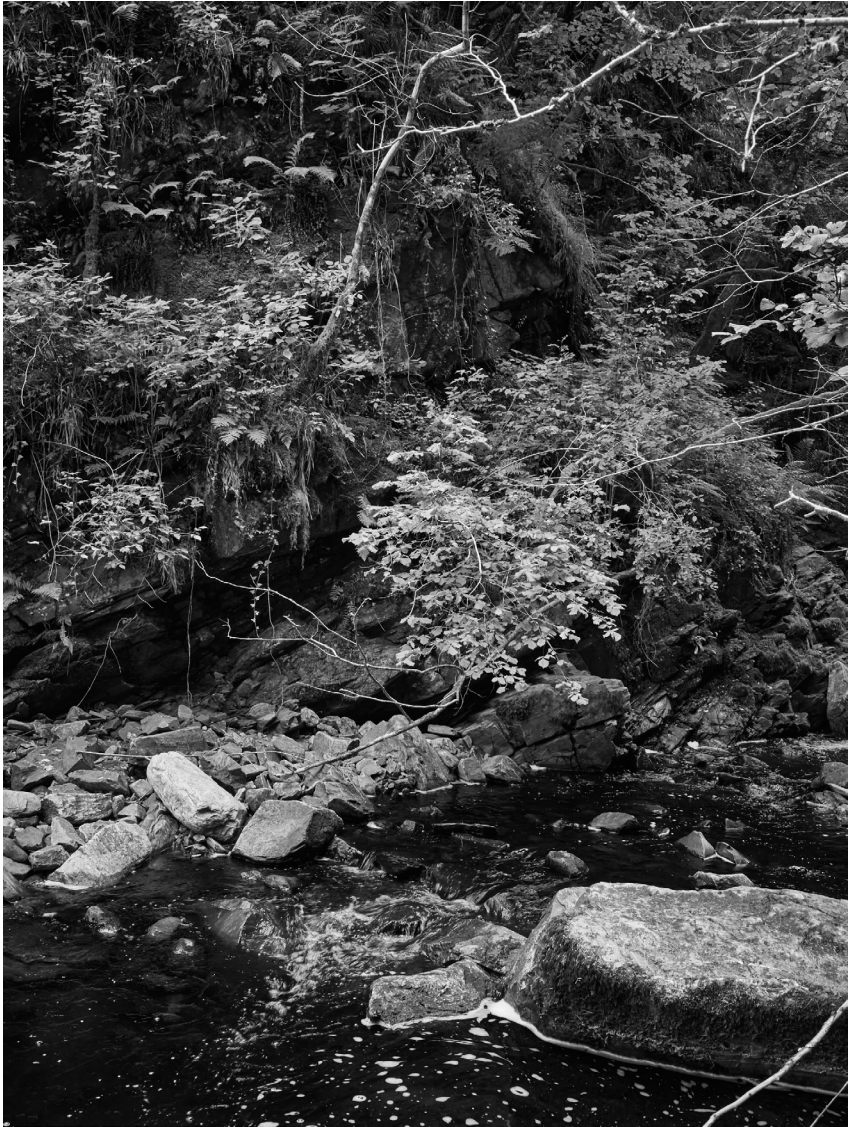
As Dutton pithily observed, “you have to dig much deeper than your spade when you cultivate this sort of garden.”<sup>15</sup> The garden map<sup>16</sup> he made overlaid a Gaelic ecological lexicon: Coille Dhubh, *black wood*, Druim Mor, *big broad ridge*, Coille Mhor, *big wood*, Aonach, *flat tableland*, An t-Sron, *the nose*,<sup>17</sup> and distinguished 5 types of ecosystems within the nine-

<sup>15</sup> ‘Gardeners’ World’.

<sup>16</sup> See G.F. Dutton, *Some Branch Against*







*the Sky* (Devon: David & Charles Publishers, 1997), 19.

<sup>17</sup> As a climber, Dutton argued for routes to be named in native Gaelic or Scots, as appropriate to their location, and regrets the use of foreign or fantastic terminology, see Sheila Young, 'Lochnagar Route Names', *SMC Journal* XLI, no. 201 (2010): 76–85.

<sup>18</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden* (Geoffrey Dutton, 1998), 47.

<sup>20</sup> Dutton, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 80.

acre spread, from heathery moor to birch scrub.

In Duttonia, there is time to sit in a garden chair made for the purpose, perhaps to make a poem or, when family duties allow, scale a mountain. A marginal garden is always made within "the limits of what one man can do in the spare of his spare time."<sup>18</sup> To plant trees was a way to watch time unwind. He was a poet of pathways, gentle transitions of altitude, and the shifts in ecological awareness these bring. In his garden, you walk uphill, along lightly marked paths, seasonally inflected, merging into the wild, while a localized intelligence reassures, *you are where you ought to be*. There are no glimpses of marble sundials or golden headed Apollos to hurry towards. Straight tracks running counter to topography are anathema to the marginal gardener, who prefers the '*inevitability*'<sup>19</sup> of adapting to wild nature: "Marginal gardening is essentially dynamic, and you help the flow, travel with it, offer it suggestions...but never fight it."<sup>20</sup>

*Shelter* is a word that appears frequently in Dutton's writings. As you zig-zag uphill, the process of adaptation is revealed as a lesson in how to resile in all weathers.

Meanwhile, at Stonypath, paths loop and reconnect, guiding you in gyres through time and space – here is Heraclitus, there Rousseau, this the cruiser Emden sailing stealthily through the herbage. One garden is an expression of upland ecological culture, the other is a poetic theatre.

Compositionally, Duttonia and Stonypath are surprisingly close in terms of syntax. Dutton describes the practice of gardening as an unintentional self-revelation: a gardener's sense of composition reveals an inner '*idea of order*', which emerges in the rhythm of paths conducting us between a series of outdoor rooms, where we pause for reflection.<sup>21</sup> At Duttonia, each room frames the idea of wilderness in a different way, creating '*epiphanies*'. IHF felt his garden didn't exist until the enclosing shrubbery took shape in



(very) late Spring. He referred to the compartments of his garden as ‘areas’, each presided over by a poem or ‘reigning deity’, sacralising his ‘idea of order’.

Duttonia is a reminder of how rare it is to experience a quantum of mountain species in the degraded Highland landscape. His garden is an ecopoetic model which overlaps with the ideal of the biodiverse *niche*, a term I derive from Gaelic place-names describing micro-territories of flora and fauna – blaeberry patch, wildcat’s gully, song-thrushes bit-of-the-wood. Dutton proposed a matrix of wilderness gardens at roughly the same marginal altitude, renewing Scotland’s abandoned hill-farms, anticipating the shift towards de-carbonisation and community land ownership.<sup>22</sup>

Although sadly unfulfilled, this inspiring vision overlaps with the revival of interest in shieling culture,<sup>23</sup> and aligns with remediation projects—the micro-enclosures alongside the rivers of Upper Deeside (Pearls in Peril), the ‘pine isles’<sup>24</sup> project by the Bealach Dearg, above Invercauld—and rewilding projects at Carrifran and Trees for Life, Dundreggan. It may be a push to claim plots for tree regeneration as wild gardens, but they are a reminder that the entire hillside would be cared for, and enriched, if deer were culled in a reasonable way.

Duttonia reminds proponents of wild land that, in the real world, sometimes wildness can be managed, and each of us could be responsible for a small portion.

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Alec Finlay is an artist & poet whose work crosses over a range of media and forms. Much of Finlay’s work considers how we as a culture, or cultures, relate to landscape and ecology, with a specific interest in place-awareness, htopianism, rewilding, and wellbeing. His artworks include *A Variety of Cultures* permanent artwork installation at Jupiter Artland; and *HUTOPIA* for the Fondazione Prada exhibition ‘Machines à penser’ at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Finlay established morning star publications in 1990. He has published over forty books and won seven Scottish Design Awards, including two Grand Prix Awards (2001, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Dutton, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Small scale transhumance benefits biodiversity.

<sup>24</sup> The ‘pine isles’ project, as I know it, was devised by Christopher Whitwell, and is discussed in my place-aware guide to the Cairngorms, *gathering* (see Alec Finlay, *Gathering: A Place-Aware Guide to the Cairngorms* (Zürich: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2018).)

















# Druimchardain's adornments: the plants of a marginal garden

*Billy Lucas*

I never thought Geoffrey Dutton a plantsman. In fact, I believed that marginal gardening—his self-styled practice—was rather crude. I have the Australian landscape architect, Julian Raxworthy, to thank for these views: I first encountered Dutton's garden, Druimchardain, in his book, *Overgrown*.<sup>1</sup> Having gardened from a young age, and soon to be embarking on my formal studies as a designer, I was keen to explore his collection of essays, concerned with identifying practices between landscape architecture and horticulture. Whilst I hoped there would be a discourse about plants, Raxworthy's essay on Druimchardain is decidedly spatial in its focus.<sup>2</sup> It discusses Dutton's process of lightly editing the existing vegetation to fashion viewpoints and 'room-like' clearings: in my mind, I associated marginal gardening with the act of wrestling native plants into partial degrees of submission with a pruning saw and a strimmer.

My views changed entirely on a dreary September day last year, when I visited Druimchardain for the first time. Dutton's daughter, Kirsty, welcomed us in after our drive up from Edinburgh. Before embarking on our tour of the garden, we were ushered to sit by the open fire located at the heart of Druimchardain's Scandinavian-style lodge, where Kirsty handed round copies of *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden* for us to peruse.<sup>3</sup> I was aware of only two texts that Dutton had written on Druimchardain – *Some Branch Against the Sky* and *Harvesting the Edge*.<sup>4</sup> *The Year's Colour* was new to me, and Kirsty explained that it was intended to function as a visual supplement to the other two

<sup>1</sup> Julian Raxworthy, *Overgrown: Practices Between Landscape Architecture and Gardening* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Julian Raxworthy, 'Marginalia', in *Overgrown: Practices Between Landscape Architecture and Gardening* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 219–70.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden* (Geoffrey Dutton, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> G.F. Dutton, *Some Branch*

*Against the Sky* (Devon: David & Charles Publishers, 1997); G.F. Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge* (London: Menard Press, 1994).

publications. It is a short book, just under fifty pages, and filled with colour photographs, organised into four seasonal chapters. Leafing through the pages, I encountered the predictable images of heather, birch, wood anemone and primrose. Yet there were also photographs depicting plants from much further afield: a variety of rare species Rhododendrons, their flowers pastel-shades of pink, purple and yellow; an unusual Chinese mountain ash, *Sorbus vilmorinii*, its identify confirmed by the pale, purple-flushed shades of its berries; *Holodiscus discolor*, a North American shrub with fluffy, drooping white panicles; *Primula florindae*, a candelabra-type cowslip from Tibet; and the fabled *Meconopsis* – the Himalayan poppy.

Unbeknownst to me, Dutton had cultivated a remarkable collection of ornamental plants at Druimchardain. In his introduction to *The Year's Colour*, he refers to these ornamentals as “horticultural adornments.”<sup>5</sup> Adornments, he explains, “extend [the] adventure – and [the] work!”<sup>6</sup> of marginal gardening: non-natives broaden the plant palette, but should only be included in the garden if they visually accord with both the native vegetation and the wider environment. If selected appropriately, the juxtaposition between native and non-native can be pleasing: New Zealand hebes and Scottish harebells, Dutton writes, make a particularly effective intercontinental combination at Druimchardain.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, a pocket of native wildflowers on the east side of the garden would be “spoilt, if interfered with”<sup>8</sup> by the exotic colours and forms of horticultural imports.

Whilst the photographs highlight Dutton’s design eye, the snippets of text that accompany each photograph reveal the grounded thinking of a horticulturist. Environmental accordance was just as important to Dutton as visual harmony. His writing shows acute awareness of the merits of—to quote the late Beth Chatto—a “right plant, right place” approach to plant selection (“For least work and

<sup>5</sup> Dutton, *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dutton, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Dutton, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Dutton, 33.











<sup>9</sup> Dutton, 2.

greatest harmony, any introductions must derive from a similar ecosystem to that of your site...”<sup>9</sup>). Adornments were selected on the basis that they would thrive in the same conditions enjoyed by Druimchardain’s natives. Even considering today’s unpredictable climate, Scotland has always been a place where pan-Himalayan and East Asian species could be grown with great success. The adornments depicted in *The Year’s Colour* certainly show Dutton’s preference for the plants of Tibet, Nepal and China, high-altitude species used to freezing cold, biting wind and driving rain – conditions encountered so frequently at Druimchardain.

### **Ruining well... Druimchardain’s adornments today**

<sup>10</sup> Dutton, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Dutton, 27.

*The Year’s Colour* depicts Druimchardain at its zenith, actively guided by Dutton’s deft hands and discerning eye. Although he was keen to distance his own practices from those of the “conventional intensive garden”<sup>10</sup> (for “in wild marginal gardens the plants themselves have to do the work...”<sup>11</sup>), maintaining the upkeep of the ornamental collection would have certainly required an occasional show of force.

Following Dutton’s death, work on the garden has been restricted to maintaining accessibility. The advance of the wild is no longer kept in check in the manner it used to be. Comparing the garden in the flesh with the 1990s photos, it is clear that much of Druimchardain’s ornamental collection has been lost, unable to withstand the increased competition and shade from vigorous natives. Those plants that survive have largely been overgrown by self-sown opportunists. At the heart of the garden, a huge moss-covered bird cherry, once the centrepiece of a glade, is now an indistinguishable part of a rapidly-closing canopy. The encroaching trees cast a heavy shade that has transformed the understory, replacing the lush green of grass with the black-brown hues of humus

and leaf-litter. Even the typically shade-tolerant beech shrubs that used to grow nearby have not endured the near-perpetual darkness.

Those ornamentals that do survive are testament to the resilience of plants in spite of sub-optimal conditions. The remaining clumps of *Rodgersia podophylla*, their leaves a fraction of their typical size, are located now in places too shady to facilitate the production of flowers. They wait patiently for their moment to access the light and proliferate once again. So too do the *Meconopsis* (I counted three survivors), resisting in the meantime the rampant spread of shade-loving deadnettle. One plant, however, appears entirely unaffected by the changing conditions: *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘*Praecox*’, which Dutton praises so highly, still flowers well under the canopy.

With so much now engulfed in a vegetal fracas, seasonality can be a useful tool with which to identify Druimchardain’s surviving adornments. The distinctive hues of autumn uncover a normally concealed *Sorbus cashmiriana*, its ripe berries, lustrous white in the low sun, a stark contrast to the muddled colours of its surroundings. An extant *Euonymus sachalinensis* is revealed by blazing foliage and the unmistakeable shapes of its seed capsules, so reminiscent of paper origami fortune tellers. At the garden’s eastern boundary, the surviving *Quercus rubra*, planted in the shelterbelt, will soon be easily identifiable by the deep-red tones of their sharply-lobed leaves, a rich colour contrast against the golden amber of the native birches among which they are entangled.

Dutton believed that his garden would “ruin well” after his passing.<sup>12</sup> Druimchardain today is visually dilapidated, at least when compared with the photographs in *The Year’s Colour*. However, the destination toward which the garden is hurtling—total reclamation by the wild—brings it closer by the year to Dutton’s archetype of the marginal garden:

<sup>12</sup> Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 82.





a space seamlessly connected to its surroundings, both visually and ecologically. With broken branches and congested stems, replete with surfeits of dead wood, the ornamentals now mirror the condition of Druimchardain's native plants, who have always stoically endured the Scottish weather without need of preening. The garden's surviving imports look as if they have always been there. In fact, the relationship between the ornamental and the indigenous at Druimchardain is now decidedly egalitarian: Dutton's prized rhododendrons, no longer covered in spring to protect against the scorch of frost, suffer now just as the natives do.

No longer pruned and kept in shape by the caprices of the gardener, the surviving adornments have taken on organic forms, each one influenced by the availability of light and space in its milieu. The resulting shapes, twisted and ungainly, are morphological windows into the intimate bonds between plant and environment at Druimchardain. Whilst the physical marks that Dutton etched into the land may have faded, even vanished, the spirit of marginal gardening certainly endures.

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# A Hand That Gardens

Barbara Prezely

Geoffrey Dutton dedicated his life to exploring possibilities in an experimental setting – be it on the page, in wild water, on a rugged Highland hillside, or in the lab. He had little patience for the “absurd compartmentation of enquiry into that of ‘scientist’ or ‘artist,’”<sup>1</sup> and rejected the notion of a wholly dispassionate researcher. If a creative pursuit promised to be “intellectually demanding and imaginatively rich,”<sup>2</sup> sparking curiosity and challenging habits of mind, chances were Dutton had at least pondered it, if not thoroughly explored it.

Dutton saw gardening as “a synthesis of explorations,”<sup>3</sup> and when a piece of barren Highland landscape became his next venture, he established what he called a ‘marginal garden’ – a garden at the limit of cultivation that enriches yet blends with the surrounding terrain, a garden whose marginal design unites both artistic endeavour and scientific enquiry. Though Dutton’s “healing hand”<sup>4</sup> occasionally appears in his writing, he strived for novelty rather than mere ecological restoration. Not what once was but what could have been – gardening as a forward movement, exploring what else could be willed into existence. In *Harvesting the Edge*, he acknowledges that given the initial moribund ecological condition of the site, a fitting question to ask is: “Why did my hands itch?”<sup>5</sup> He answers himself a few pages after: “This garden is an exploration I wished to undertake: living with a piece of country until I grew into it thoroughly, knowing it from bedrock upwards, ice age onwards, guiding and diversifying its flora and fauna within strict limits, being myself guided and maybe diversified by it; and discovering where this

<sup>1</sup> G.F. Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky* (Devon: David & Charles Publishers, 1997), 168.

<sup>2</sup> G.F. Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge* (London: Menard Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Dutton, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Dutton, 21.

relationship might lead.”<sup>6</sup> Dutton welcomed change, that equally rewarding and risky journey across the unknown, where what you make gradually remakes you.

<sup>7</sup> Dutton, 78.

<sup>8</sup> “Whatever the reason, I walk this square of land, the last station of the quest, and call it a ‘garden,’ a place of seeds.” (In Dutton, 81.)

<sup>9</sup> Dutton, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 14.

Throughout his fifty years of gardening, Dutton saw himself as an apprentice to the land, over time becoming more discerning and aesthetically attuned to the possibilities it offered. With experience, he began to understand “why good design grows from this knowledge; why wood anemone drifts only over a certain soil under a certain density of birches, and never under spruce; why oak fern sheets one side of a ridge, woodrush the other.”<sup>7</sup> His garden was a place of seeds<sup>8</sup> – reserves of plant potential that reinvigorated the depleted slope, as well as those felt instances of untapped possibility when one came closer to “a packed essence of the force behind the flux,”<sup>9</sup> to the vitality that unites all matter.

Little by little, a Highland hillside turned into fertile ground for life, as well as for thought. As hedges got pruned, so did ideas – shaped, fine-tuned, tested against the weather. Thinking became a physical, material act, as alive as his garden. “Marginality,” as Dutton attested, “is highly instructive.”<sup>10</sup> In the garden, instruction took many forms, not least those traditionally at odds with science. Looking back on “The Miraculous Issue,” one of his poems, Dutton recounts:

[The poem] described a spring I’m very much interested in, beside my house. This spring comes from far underground. It runs all year. It was regarded by local people—and this happens all over the world, of course—as a blessed spring because in winter it is warm to the hands and in the summer it is cool and refreshing. Of course, along comes a scientist with a thermometer and puts it in and finds it’s four degrees Celsius all year round. So the scientist is rather down on this notion of





blessedness in regard to the spring: it's all superstition, all ignorance. But you can't alter the fact that when you put your hand into this spring in the winter, it's warm; and when you put it in in the summer, it's cool. Now, warm and cool are the parameters which you go by as a human being. You cannot alter that. This is just as important evidence to note as is four degrees Celsius. These two are not opposed ... Science and subjectivity are complementary; completely so.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gerry Cambridge, 'Beyond the Cage: An Interview with G. F. Dutton', *The Dark Horse*, Summer 2005, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 169.

<sup>13</sup> 'Gardeners' World' (BBC2 England, 24 July 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Year's Colour in a Marginal Garden* (Geoffrey Dutton, 1998), 1.

While Dutton's scientific career enabled him to collect and examine data on enzyme ecology, it was in his garden where he attempted to answer larger questions—like those of the miraculously warm spring—and, in his words, “advance a culture.”<sup>12</sup> In a 1992 episode of *Gardeners' World*, Dutton, walking around his garden in a shirt and a tie, proclaims: “What does anybody gain from gardening but pleasure and instruction, and a little more insight into what makes the world tick, and what makes yourself tick. By going around the garden, you can find out both, especially what makes the plants tick and also, by your responses to it, what makes yourself tick. And by responses of other people to it, what makes them tick – or talk.”<sup>13</sup> Both a scientist and a poet, Dutton understood that facts fall short of lived experience. While they can identify what makes one tick, they are much less successful in explaining what drives one to talk. To harvest the edge, to borrow his phrase, is to explore this gap – the margin of what can be expressed and communicated in language and make room for, even garden with, what resides in the unspeakable. Call it sensation, atmosphere or force, call it, after Dutton, an “elusive ‘feel’.”<sup>14</sup>

To get to that point of aesthetic impact is, however, anything but thoughtless. For Dutton, gardening was, as much as his poetry, an exacting art – no plant, no word, no labour wasted. His poems

were austere, and his garden precisely rendered, “bounded by intent.”<sup>15</sup> To invent with intent meant being deliberate in his thinking, with a clear recognition that no amount of intention would predict something exact or stifle movement. Precise care and attention were just as important to him as the garden’s ability to one day “hold its own interest”<sup>16</sup> and take him by surprise.

Gardening in Duttonian style is a collaborative, attentive and intentional way of working, “a guiding of the latent design,”<sup>17</sup> with an explicit understanding that even an unobtrusive gardener is a curator that makes choices – while these remain largely dictated by the site,<sup>18</sup> Dutton is not ashamed to admit that a gardener at times acts according to their own preferences, or bias. Discussing non-native introductions to the garden, he shares his own proclivities:

Any site...imposes its own discipline, and climate and soil here make discipline strict, firmly limiting the choice. Too many species would increase labour and appear fussy in such surroundings...Yet I still, naturally, coddle my intermittent eucalyptus; or that peacock azalea that screams at everything within sight; or those three drunken and exclamatory Irish junipers now impossible to move on. One grows fond of the awkward squad.<sup>19</sup>

For all its ecosystem dynamics of plant, soil and climate, Druimchardain remains a garden wrestled out of wild nature by a human hand. As such, it is the signature of its maker – look closely and you’ll find contradictions, hesitations, ambitions and persuasions, all those traits of human nature that make Druimchardain somehow more fully alive than the next rewilded slope. “Gardening,” Dutton points

<sup>15</sup> ‘Gardeners’ World’.

<sup>16</sup> Dutton, *The Year’s Colour in a Marginal Garden*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> “I have—by taking away or adding vegetation—scooped out glades, accentuated valleys, heightened ridges, deepened hollows, flattened foregrounds; but the major effects have been dictated solely by the bones of topography and the need for shelter.” (In Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 13.)

<sup>19</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Dutton, *Some Branch Against the Sky*, 170.

out, “is a property of living systems: of the garden and of the gardener. It is as elusive to define as life itself.”<sup>20</sup> There is, as it were, no disembodied garden-making, making it “no small responsibility, a garden; however marginal.”<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his life, Dutton described himself as the garden’s temporary tenant, taking care of a piece of wild land. Aware of the transience of all that is living, he was quick to reassure everyone that his garden had *been* and that this was all that truly mattered. While the garden has lost the clear mark of design intent since his passing, becoming more markedly a canvas of natural systems, run by ecology, Druimchardain remains the manifestation of one man’s lifelong dialogue with the land. It is a place that was shaped by, and in turn shaped, a creative, inquisitive mind and a potent example of what can be done when wide curiosity, determination, and a spade come together.

*“If it, or I, or both, are obliterated tomorrow, it has been. In face of that, the entire spectrum of retribution, frost to fire, virus to vandal, is powerless. No more can waves wash away the fact that I swam through them.”<sup>22</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> Dutton, *Harvesting the Edge*, 7.

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# A Selection of Geoffrey's Poems

Initially, Druimchardain provided a place to be in and appreciate the elements; this giving rise to the need for shelter trees. Geoffrey's innately exploring nature led to his experimenting with further planting in this site of varied ecosystems, resulting in the gradual creation of a garden. His gardening journey, combining aesthetic and botanical/scientific aspects with close connection to the elements, was expressed in his poetry.

Poetry was Geoffrey's expression of his existence, not just his garden. I feel his key message was how all his diverse interests (science, mountains, wild swimming, gardens, music, literature...) were really not separate but different ways of observing, researching, asking, learning about the fundamental reasons we are here.

I have chosen a few of his poems that particularly speak to me of his essence, and of our Druimchardain. The last poem is a poem I wrote following my father's departure, leaving me with the privilege, and responsibility, of the garden's ongoing evolution.

Kirsty Jones

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**Kirsty Jones** is Geoffrey Dutton's daughter and the current caretaker of Druimchardain.

## Culture

Just to choose  
a corner of the wilderness  
is to enclose  
it with intent.

Is to create  
garden, gardener  
a life spent  
cropping the rubble, a desire  
to regulate  
what goes by,  
catch at a scent, ensure  
some branch against the sky.

Is to incur  
from the first day  
what creation cost, the haste  
to cut and tear,  
rake things over.  
At the least the need  
to look about, decide  
what wild flower  
that once had led you there  
  
is now a weed.



## After Brashing Pines

Brashing is  
lopping off dead branches, old  
entanglements, outgrown

gestures, so your trees  
rise calm and clean into their own  
September. When

you leave them, go home  
they resume  
high business, needle on needle

repeating, gathering  
the night wind, and  
you do not mind

you do not look behind  
at what's beginning again, what storm,  
what growing collision of darkness.

You have no concern,  
the job being done  
and they putting up another season,

the tall leaders  
quarrelling together  
against their stars.

## On Passing

No it is not repeat  
repeat, it is once  
only and enough.

These juniper berries bunched,  
sun-bosomed through the frost-  
needles in the bright

snow-light, meet their first  
chance to last next  
spring, and no more;

rounded-off tough  
sky-blue-bloomed, their green  
one-year-behind

successors crowding about them.  
It is enough  
to have seen a stiff

laden juniper branch,  
pausing as you are  
passing, just now once

out of the snow and never,  
coming back how often,  
to see it this way again.

The prize the primacy of it  
the instantaneous thousand  
cold needles ever

afire and berries  
thrusting their one spring  
aware out of the cluster.

Your own passing and theirs  
together, stars  
in the eternal glitter.

## stone

stone.  
like this one,  
dug out years ago  
when we were building the house.

we couldn't lift it  
lever it, blast it so  
it lies as we left it,  
just where we pass,

grey and silent,  
gathering cracks;  
eyes, eggs  
seething beneath it,

moss and ivy  
eager beside it, already  
lichen has tried it, it is marked  
for life.

I remember it yellow, unblemished,  
a growing refusal in the sunlight.  
and us kneeling before it  
sweating, dismantling its earth.



## minimal

it is only the simple sunlight  
on a fence post  
out of the snow.

and I come to set it upright  
at the cost  
of a single blow.

then I leave them to the sunlight.  
one straight post,  
trodden snow.

## The Bare Abundance

To penetrate  
the galaxies  
vast, minute  
within without  
the searching mind  
is to progress  
so far beyond  
their circle of dance  
spin of excess  
you seem to advance  
into a night  
of nothingness.

Until by chance  
some simple bright  
coherence grows,  
a reassurance  
opening out  
like sun among  
golden young  
springtime willows –  
like that it dawns,  
deep from the root  
through shudder of stems  
to leaf in the light.

Like that you sight  
maybe just once,  
calm and complete  
against its infinite

the Bare Abundance  
the One delight.

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“Culture,” “After Brashing Pines,” “On Passing,” “stone,” “minimal” and “The Bare Abundance” appear in G.F. Dutton’s poetry collection *The Bare Abundance* (Bloodaxe Books, 2002) and are reproduced here with permission from the publisher.

## Aftermath

It's in the book, how it should ruin well; go back to basics  
once he has left it to its own devices.

How it will retain its structure, and be recreatable  
for some interested person.

But it has not been abandoned; we still walk the paths,  
clearing fallen twigs or trees as necessary,  
cutting grass close, to show the way.

Still enjoy the vistas, the walkways  
and sheltered favourite places.

Greet buds and flowers each spring.

Why today does unexpected melancholy hang around me,  
instead of the usual quiet exuberance,  
as in my joyful dog companion?

I don't have my chainsaw, so I can't reopen paths today  
and it seems to matter.

So much has fallen. So much I can't reach or lift.

I feel a heavy sadness

at the decline and death of a garden where all I can do  
is tinker at the edges, try to maintain at least a shadow  
of its aesthetically guided form.

Yet I embrace bent and broken branches as part of the great  
maturity of the place,

of which I am privileged to be a part.

It began as a birch wood; always transient, now ancient.

Soon, with spring, new growth will cheerfully push up  
to fill empty spaces,

curtaining and cradling broken structures of the past.

The new will find their own way, driven by light and vigour,  
free from gardening hands and minds.



And on another brighter day  
I will stand quietly and admire it all,  
breathe in the peace, and quiet unorganized beauty  
of a garden managing its own affairs.  
Meanwhile I find solace  
in freshly emerging snowflakes in the dell,  
prettily lining the trickling mossy ditch;  
reassuringly multiplying in number and beauty  
with the years.

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“Aftermath” is a poem by Kirsty Jones, previously self-published as part of *Moments*.

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*Geoffrey Dutton's  
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