

BOOK REVIEW: DEAR FRIEND AND GARDENER

Mike Wheeler

This is a new edition of a book that was published in 1998. It now has pictures of Great Dixter and of Beth Chatto's garden, plus an introduction by Fergus Garrett. It comprises letters written in 1996 and 1997 between, what some may say are, the two greatest gardeners of recent years.

I was expecting to get bored but far from it, thanks to Christopher Lloyd. The publishers felt that the letters should concentrate more on gardening and less on 'elitist' and personal events: things such as visits to Glyndebourne. I am glad the two authors stuck to their principles and insisted that the letters gave a more rounded picture of their lives, hence including more non-horticultural information.

These letters give an insight into the lives of these famous gardeners, giving information about their relationship with each other, with those they employed and their friends, many of whom were famous in their own right. Beth Chatto also talks about her husband, Andrew, who was quite ill at the time and died in 1999. It includes the times they are ill, feeling low, excited, disappointed and just enjoying life. Of course there is a lot of discussion about the plants they are growing in their gardens and nurseries; those they like and dislike, their successes and failures.

As they wanted, the book gives a rounded picture of their lives, omitting very personal information which they probably shared during their many phone calls to each other. I therefore found it intriguing and had no trouble reading it from cover to cover in a very short period of time. I learnt many things about the authors. For instance, I didn't realise how sociable Christopher Lloyd was, frequently entertaining friends and students and doing the cooking himself. Some interesting recipes are included in their letters.

There are frustrations that I suspect are due to the publisher's requirements. For example, when the temperature is mentioned it is given in Fahrenheit and centigrade (Christopher Lloyd's thermometer only gives reading in Fahrenheit.) There is often an extended description of a plant, as well as giving it the Latin name. An example, in front of me at the moment, in one of Beth Chatto's letters is 'the Californian tree poppy, *Romneya coulteri*'. Of course, Christopher Lloyd would have known what *Romneya* was and he says in his last letter of the book that their future letters, which would not be published, would not need the extra explanatory matter included for the public.

Christopher Lloyd died in 2006 but Beth Chatto is still with us and will be 91 years old this year [2015].

Dear Friend and Gardener – Christopher Lloyd and Beth Chatto (Frances Lincoln, 2013)

~ First published in the Devon Group Newsletter, Summer 2014 ~