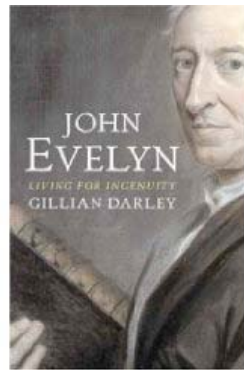
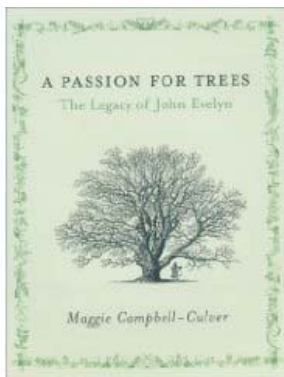


# HISTORIC GARDENS

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***John Evelyn: Living for Ingenuity, by Gillian Darley.***  
**Yale University Press.**

**384 pages. £25.00.**  
**ISBN 0-300-11227-0.**

***A Passion for Trees: the Legacy of John Evelyn, by Maggie Campbell-Culver.***  
**Eden Project Books.**

**282 pages. £25.00.**  
**ISBN 9781903919477.**

History has not been kind to John Evelyn (1620-1706). Both in his lifetime and posthumously as a diarist, he has been constantly upstaged by his good friend Samuel Pepys. Pepys was at the heart of Restoration England, everyone knew him, most liked him, he was popular (perhaps over-popular) with the ladies. In short, Pepys was fun and Evelyn was not. Serious, scholarly, scientific and quietly pious, he was an admirable man, though possibly a bit of a bore. He was certainly long-winded and diffuse and ruefully said of himself: "some take me for a Schole Master." Pepys described him as 'very knowing'.

Evelyn was, of course a gardener and a garden writer. He created a famous garden for himself at Sayes Court in Deptford (then a small dockyard town and now a dreary run-down area of south east London) and advised the great men of the day on planting their gardens. The most famous of his writings in his own lifetime was *Sylva* (1664), which started life as the report of the Royal Society (of which Evelyn was a founder member) into the state of the nation's timber, given the depredations of the Civil War and the ever-increasing needs of the Royal Navy.

Evelyn was a great producer of what we would now term 'popular' books on the arts and sciences, many of them translated from the French, such as *The French Gardiner* (1658), *Parallel of Architecture* (1664) and *Idea of the Perfection of Painting* (1668). He was also a pioneer environmentalist. His *Fumifugium* (1661) contained a blueprint for ridding London and other big cities of the pollution caused by coal fires which ultimately led to the famous but lethal Victorian 'pea-souper' fogs. One hopes that in some Elysian heaven, Evelyn looked down with approval when, on virtually the 300th anniversary of his book, the Government of the day eventually got round to passing the Clean Air Acts which rid Londoners of their traditional fog once and for all.

Evelyn was a dab hand at the motto. Look at an English one pound coin. On its milled edge is engraved *Decus et Tutamen*, an anti-clipping device adopted by the Mint in 1663 at Evelyn's suggestion and still in use.

Does Evelyn merit a biography? Gillian Darley, in her *John Evelyn: Living for Ingenuity*, attempts to answer this question but, sadly, her book falls down on three counts. The first is that, having amassed the facts, she seems unable to process them. There is little attempt to

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separate the wheat from the chaff, the vital from the trivial. Everything is there - with the odd glaring exception, such as Evelyn's actual date of birth! It is just not there in any manageable form. Secondly, the book is a very hard slog owing to a total absence of a literary style. To these faults could be added a third: a massive over-citation of original sources. This is intended, of course, to prove that the author has studied the original sources, but this is not an academic thesis; it is a book intended for the general public. And Darley retains the original spelling. This may be cute if the book contains only a handful of citations, but when they are all in the non-standardised - indeed random - orthography of the 17th century the result is mightily tiresome. Furthermore, Evelyn does not bear too much quotation. To be frank, while Pepys's diary combines the late Nigel Dempster with the raunchier bits of the News of the World, Evelyn's reads like nothing so much as a precursor of that even more famous diarist, Mr Pooter.

On the other hand, Maggie Campbell-Culver, like Pepys (though, of course, without the naughty bits) is fun. Her latest book, *A Passion for Trees: the Legacy of John Evelyn*, takes Evelyn's *Sylva* as its starting point and produces an entertaining monograph on each of the principal trees he discusses. Beautifully produced and illustrated, *A Passion for Trees* is Campbell-Culver at her best. Alder arcana, quirky facts about the quercus, plain truths on the plane - the book will prompt the reader to say "well, I never knew that" or "how on earth did she find this out?"

Indeed, the reader will find an excellent life and assessment of Evelyn in the opening to Campbell-Culver's book. What is more, unlike Darley's dogged chronological narrative, *A Passion for Trees* (while providing the necessary biographical framework) treats Evelyn thematically, discussing, for example, Evelyn's work at Sayes Court, his fame as a garden writer and his influence as a garden adviser, as separate topics in a much more sensible way of dealing with a person who had a long life but one readily compartmentalised. Also, unlike Darley, Campbell-Culver includes succinct descriptions of the Royal Society (which Darley assumes her readers already know all about) and the Council of Trade and Foreign Plantations, in both of which Evelyn played an important part.

All the topics in *Sylva*, both the chapters on individual species and the chapters on arboreal husbandry, are treated first in Evelyn's own terms and then historically, with emphasis on the development of knowledge and techniques since the 17th century. Even the law relating to trees is covered (handily, the author is married to a lawyer - often the case with garden writers).

Even if you know nothing and care less about John Evelyn (or possibly, like *1066 And All That*, believe that Evelyn was really Pepys's wife), *A Passion for Trees* will delight and fascinate you.  
*Review by Richard B Mawrey, August 2007.*

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