

Cathryn Spence, *Nature's Favourite Child: Thomas Robins and the Art of the Georgian Garden* (Stephen Morris, Bradford-on-Avon 2021). 312 pp, 266 illustrations [ISBN 978-1-838472-63-4].

A significant proportion of the work of Thomas Robins, the mid-eighteenth century painter (1716-1770), is of subjects in Gloucestershire, and in Bath and its environs. The first part of the title comes from a poem in the *Bath and Bristol Chronicle* lamenting Robins' death; the second part is a link to the artist's varied output. The substantial corpus of Robins' work has not been appreciated, a situation which Cathryn Spence's beautiful book will certainly change.

Spence presents a thoroughly researched life of Thomas Robins. He lived much of his life in Charlton Kings where he was born and baptised. His father was a maltster, and at least two of Thomas's brothers were set up in artisan businesses: blacksmith and carpenter. Spence has unravelled the family relationships; as in other cases in the book, the details are not always easy to follow, and family trees might have helped; this is a minor quibble set against the extensive information which Spence has assembled. Robins was probably apprenticed to Jacob Portret, a fan painter who owned a property in Charlton Kings which he bequeathed to Robins. Robins' sense of humour is illustrated by the 'View of his House and Garden' in the Sketch Book, the garden of which appears to be the road over which the water from the four springs in Spring Bottom runs to a mill stream of the Chelt.

Fan-painting required delicate brushwork, and Spence has demonstrated Robins' extraordinary refinement of line and brush strokes and his accuracy of observation. He continued to paint fans at all stages of his life. His fans depicted Cheltenham's early spa buildings and Well Walk, and he secured the patronage of Lady Stapleton, whose newly built Great House he later painted on a larger scale. Fascinating drawings of Cheltenham are reproduced from the Sketch Book. (I cannot help noting with sadness how much James Hodsdon would have appreciated the Cheltenham material). Robins moved to Bath in 1767, only three years before his death, and twenty years before the heyday of Cheltenham's popularity with George III's stay at Bayshill.

Spence has studied the Sketch Book; it is a collection of loose leaves not very carefully assembled into a volume. Some drawings are really sketchy, many effectively finished pieces of artwork and some coloured; Robins experimented with technique here. Spence has noted the paper used, details of his techniques, and the condition of each page, study informed by her work in the Prints, Drawings and Paintings Department of the V&A. Her ambition was to identify all 133 sketches, which she has largely achieved; conversely, the sketches with their notes have enabled her to identify unlabelled paintings while they suggest that there may be more Robins' pictures to be discovered.

In Gloucestershire she has illustrated and discussed Haymes Place in Bishop's Cleeve, with the astonishing windmill, Hailes (which is compared with Johannes Kip's drawing and engraving – not the work of Leendert Knijff), Sudeley Castle, Sandywell in Dowdeswell and Cirencester Park, with a long discussion of Alfred's Hall. There is an interesting account of Lilliput Hall in Cold Ashton. Benjamin Hyatt's two houses,

Marybone House in Gloucester and 'Buenos Aires' in Painswick, and his woodland retreat, Pan's Lodge, are together in one chapter. Buenos Aires is particularly important to the author who is a consultant in the restoration of the gardens now called the 'Painswick Rococo Garden'. In her extended discussion of the 'rococo' categorisation, she finds it has little precise meaning. However, Robins can be categorised as a rococo painter, as his paintings often had decorative borders, enlivened with birds, insects and flowers. Robins' Prospect of Henbury Village is beautifully observed, and the precise outlines of the buildings can be compared with Kip's engraving. Pasted on the back is a sheet with the names of the subscribers and monies paid and owing for 'A Southwest Prospect of the City of Bath' (engraved by H Roberts).

And so to Bath. There was an obvious link between the likelihood of patrons taking the waters at Cheltenham and at Bath. Spence has worked out many possible and interesting links between Robins and his patrons. His drawings of houses and public buildings in Bath as they were erected are a unique record, and Spence is very familiar with the detail as she was for some years Director/Curator of the Building of Bath Museum. Later chapters cover scattered houses and landscapes further afield, in Shropshire, Warwickshire, Surrey and Essex (Kelvedon Hatch is near Brentwood), which Robins probably visited because of commissions. There is a somewhat diffuse chapter on the craze for chinoiserie, which loses the focus on Thomas Robins while suggesting it influenced his style.

Robins was a gifted naturalist, a talent which his son Luke John inherited. Luke spent much of his life collecting and drawing specimens in Jamaica. Spence uncovered a network of gentry buying and exchanging specimens, almost certainly a source of further commissions. She was led to this by visiting Hanford House in Dorset, the seat of Henry Seymer when Robins painted it. Both Thomas and Luke Robins' paintings are wonderfully vivid, the son's only marginally less so than the father's. Chapter 9 is devoted to these paintings.

*Nature's Favourite Child* is a thick book printed in landscape format. Regrettably, some illustrations are not large enough to allow the reader to see, even with a magnifying glass, details which are described; selected vignettes would have been interesting. Some illustrations are not by Robins. Every chapter contains notes of principal sources. There are many Acknowledgements, a Bibliography and an Index which includes each illustration, though these are not cross-referenced to variant spellings or place names but employ the wording of the rubrics.

Spence has pursued Robins not just in this country but in America and on the continent, in private hands as well as in public collections. She has visited sites, and met current owners, leading to important discoveries. Her book is a triumph of diligent research and presentation.