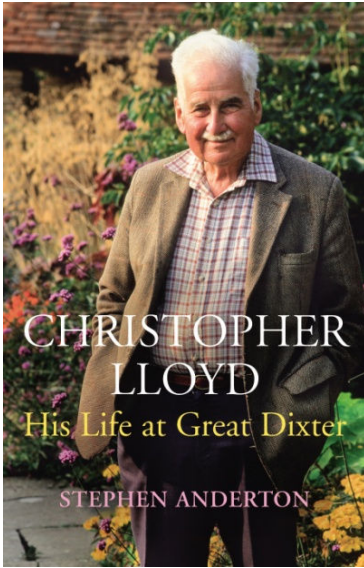


BOOK REVIEWS JULY-AUGUST 2010



Christopher Lloyd: His Life at Great Dixter

by Stephen Anderton

Chatto & Windus £20.00 (Amazon £12.50)

ISBN 9780701181130

This is a sizzling book - I couldn't put it down! Largely because I couldn't believe that Christopher Lloyd's mother was so dreadful! Not only in what she did and said but that she bombarded her teenage son with copies of letters sent to other members of the family, highly critical of all of them - except Christopher. Her daughter couldn't wait to get away from her (and later in life, committed suicide) and the daughters-in-law spent most of their time, as far as I could see, trying to keep the grandchildren out of

her way. Stephen Anderton included so many quotes from her letters, as if to say 'I'm not making this up you know', that it is difficult to see anything other than a completely self-centred, self-deluded woman - whose hold over Lloyd only broke with her death, when he was 51.

It is therefore no surprise that Christopher Lloyd stayed at home, where he may have felt bombarded but 'safe'; unable to work in institutions and leaving Wye College after a dispute. He was known for having a sharp tongue, even to his friends, leaving Beth Chatto in tears on one visit. The word 'lonely' appears a great deal in the book; at school, at home, in the garden, on tour. Yet he formed deep friendships with men, both homo- and hetero-sexual, including the unnamed Pip and Fergus Garrett who enlivened and has 'inherited' his garden. (I never could understand all that fuss about pulling out the roses - was it just artificial media chattering? (heaven forbid....) - especially when the result was, and is, so breathtaking and magical.

What Stephen Anderton does is to pull the likeable and not-so-likeable parts of Christopher Lloyd together to allow us to have a picture of the man behind the genial, and funny, public persona most of us saw (his spats were regarded as 'eccentricities'). This is a man, not a 'national treasure', one whom his friends really loved, and loved to visit. His books are assessed into brilliant and average: the ones he wrote without pictures are regarded as the best, while Anderton says that some books show clearly that they were written under the dictation of a publisher, and were not truly 'Lloydian'. Certainly, I have read and re-read *The Well-Tempered Garden* and the book of Observer articles published after his death, and gained much from them. Lloyd's tours in his seventies and eighties left me gasping at his energy. This book is an extremely frank book, so shortly after Lloyd's death. Stephen Anderton was a friend but there is nothing friend-prejudiced or remotely gushy in this clear-eyed no-holds-barred biography.

I did not meet Christopher Lloyd, but I did have a postcard from him when I wrote to tell him that the exotic garden was like Diaghilev's Ballet Russe, a sentiment that obviously pleased him as the card came by return of post. It nestles inside my copy of *Colour for Adventurous Gardeners*, which does have pictures and is totally delicious.

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