

*To Sir Thomas Hanbury,
from a gardener to a Gardener.*

I saw the Garden for the first time in 1967.

In that moment, despite the immaturity of my fifteen years, I felt an emotion stretching far beyond the natural beauty of the place, so that my bad memories of Ligurian seaside summer camps ('the boy is delicate, he needs sea air!') were completely washed away by the colours and scents of an extraordinary paradise.

Later visits filled me with wonder once again.

During the years of the economic boom, the ideal garden for a provincial teenager from Lombardy usually consisted of some rather sad standard roses, monkey-puzzles placed (somewhat improbably) in the middle of flower beds and planted around by red and yellow tulips, funereal thujas surrounded by painted pottery dwarves and a goldfish pond.

Suddenly I found myself surrounded by unknown winter-flowering shrubs, collections of succulents growing out in the open, citrus fruit the size of a football, palm-trees of dizzying height and the noise of the wind and the sea.

It was an intense experience of discovery - something extraordinary, but for real.

Slowly, over the years that followed, I began to understand the true genius of the place.

I have always maintained that designing a garden is the one human activity which brings a man closer to the creator of the biblical Eden, making him almost god-like himself in his own personal paradise.

"AUDIVERUNT VOCEM DOMINI DEI DEAMBULANTIS IN HORTO"

reads a marble plaque in one of the avenues but the spirit of the place whose presence I sensed was that which Sir Thomas Hanbury himself articulated for nearly half a century.

Over the years I have passed the threshold of the garden on innumerable occasions with friends, lovers and botanists but more often than not alone, and in all sorts of different moods.

I have lived through the period of its splendour when there were romantic entrances to be made from the beach or the Roman road; and I have experienced the dark period of its decline that called to mind the sufferings and deprivations of an under-esteemed old man who retreats into the dignity of silence.

And now I can welcome its unexpected, slow rebirth, thanks to the passion of the current curators.

Sir Thomas Hanbury created beauty - true and universal beauty, ever-changing and fragile like all beauty, because it is a living thing, a beauty so great that it will save the world, as prophesied by Dostoyevsky's idiot, Prince Miskin.

And now it's up to the world, and to all of us, to save that beauty.

G.C.