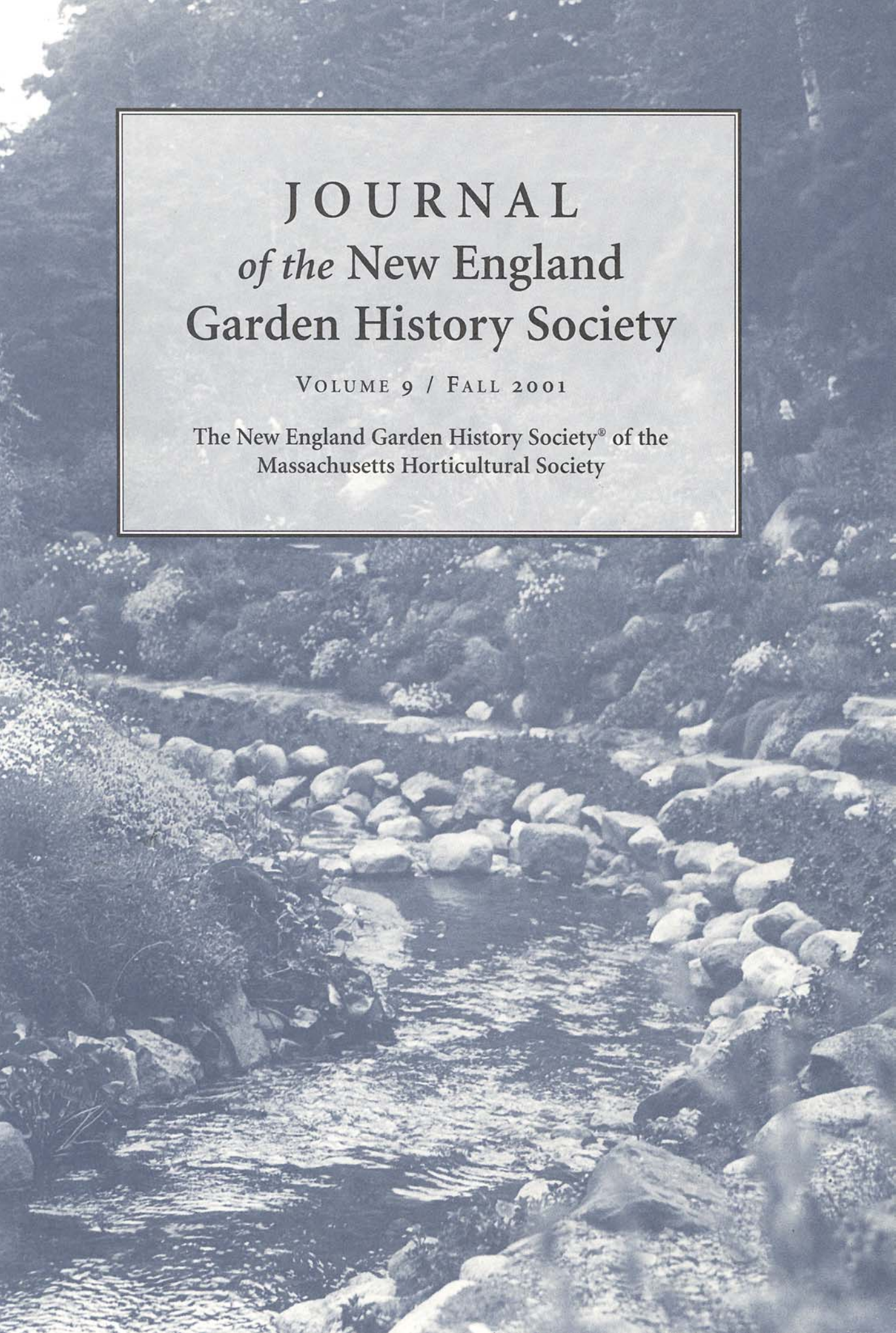

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Les Jardins de Métis
Elsie Reford's Canadian Garden

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1926, ELSIE REFORD (1872–1967) began transforming her fishing camp on the Métis River into a garden. Located on the Gaspé Peninsula, 220 miles northeast of Quebec City, the gardens she created were the northernmost in eastern North America. Known as Les Jardins de Métis or the Reford Gardens, they have been open to the public since 1962. Few other gardens have been created in such difficult conditions. Located hundreds of miles from the nearest nursery, it is hard to fathom the challenges Elsie Reford faced. She began with a spruce forest, eventually shaping it into a garden that boasted one of the largest collections of plants in its day (Figure 1). To accomplish this, she excavated, built stone walls, moved trees, and brought in boulders from neighboring fields. The especially fine compost required for the exotic plants she grew came from leaves she bartered from local farmers. Where experienced plantsmen had failed, Elsie succeeded in transplanting rare species, like azaleas and Tibetan blue poppies. She trained local men—farmers and fishing guides—making them expert gardeners, and together they built a remarkable garden over three decades.

Elsie Stephen Meighen (Figure 2) grew up in Montreal where her father, Robert Meighen (1837–1911), was president of the Lake of the Woods Milling Company, the largest flour-milling company in the British Empire. Emigrating from Ireland as a boy, Robert Meighen left a partnership in his brother's dry goods firm in eastern Ontario to make his fortune in Montreal. He became one of the pillars of

Fig. 1. A forest of conifers forms the backdrop for Elsie Reford's gardens, 1930s. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Montreal's business community and one of the city's prominent imperialists, promoting political and economic ties with Great Britain.[1] Her mother, Elsie Stephen, was the youngest sister of George Stephen (later Lord Mount Stephen), a railroad baron who had made a fortune with his cousin Donald Smith (later Lord Strathcona) and J. J. Hill in Minnesota and Manitoba in the 1870s.[2] Stephen founded the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1889 and

presided over the syndicate that built the transcontinental railroad that linked Montreal to Vancouver, completed in 1885.

George Stephen lived in Montreal, but took several weeks off every summer for salmon fishing on the rivers of eastern Quebec. In the 1870s he leased the Métis River and then bought a property overlooking the river in 1886. A year later he built Estevan Lodge, a rambling wooden building sufficiently large to accommodate his fishing parties (Figure 3). After being made a peer in 1891 (he was the first Canadian to be given this honor), Stephen moved to England to take his seat in the House of Lords and to assume a prominent position in the City of London. Thereafter, he spent little time in Canada and loaned Estevan Lodge to his friends, who made annual pilgrimages to the Métis River to ply its waters. These friends included Gaspard Farrer of Baring Brothers, James Stillman of the National City Bank (the precursor of Citibank), Percy Rockefeller, and John Sterling (of the Wall Street firm Shearman and Sterling and the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University).[3] Sterling, who served as Stephen's lawyer, was one of the principal users of the property, hosting fishing parties every July.

Fig. 2. Elsie Stephen Reford, 1905. Photograph by William Notman and Sons. Courtesy McCord Museum of Canadian History.

One of the most frequent visitors was Elsie Reford, who came to Estevan every August and eventually inherited the property in 1918. Reportedly Stephen's favorite niece, Elsie Reford was perhaps the only one of his nieces and nephews with sufficient resources to maintain the property and the river.[4] She had inherited a third of her father's substantial fortune and was married to Robert Wilson Reford, a shipping agent and a connoisseur of art—he amassed one of the largest collections of art in

Fig. 3. Estevan Lodge, Grand-Métis, 1942. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Fig. 4. Elsie Reford and her guide with her catch of the day, circa 1905. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Canada. He was also a passionate amateur photographer and, in fact, took hundreds of photographs of Elsie Reford's garden.

Gardening was by no means Elsie's first calling. She had been coming to Grand-Métis since the early 1900s to fish the pools on the river; she also rode horseback, canoed, and hunted (Figure 4). When an operation for appendicitis curtailed some of these outdoor activities, her doctor suggested gardening as a genteel alternative to fishing. Elsie was fifty-four years old. During the summer of 1926, she began laying out the gardens and supervising their construction. The gardens would take ten years to build and would extend over more than twenty acres. With the exception of a flagpole, a cedar hedge, and a tree-lined driveway, the property had no landscaping when she embarked on her life's work. It was, after all, only a fishing lodge.

Although she had shown no predilection for gardening as a young woman, her gardening heritage was nonetheless deeply rooted. Her uncle, George Stephen's Montreal mansion had an extensive orchard, garden, and a conservatory for tropical plants (Figure 5). After Robert Meighen bought the house in 1900, when Stephen moved to Britain, he developed an outstanding collection of orchids, which were on view during open days organized by the Montreal Horticultural Society. Prior to World War I, Elsie became interested in the Garden City Movement in England. While visiting England in May 1911, Elsie toured Hampstead Garden Suburb with Mabel Choate, who would later create Naumkeag, the well-known house in Lenox, Massachusetts.[5] Elsie Reford had initially met the Choate family through Lord Mount Stephen.[6] Elsie promoted the idea for a garden suburb in Montreal by organizing a committee to seek funding for the project and to select the site where it could be built.

Fig. 5. A garden party at the Robert Meighen residence, Montreal, July 1908. Photograph by William Notman and Sons. Courtesy McCord Museum of Canadian History.

Fig. 6. Page's Brook, which flows through the property, provides a natural setting for Elsie Reford's plantings, circa 1935. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Undoubtedly some inspiration for Elsie Reford's gardens came from her frequent visits to English country houses. She often accompanied her husband when he attended annual board meetings in England in his capacity as the Canadian director of the Cunard Line. She was a frequent visitor to her uncle's country house, Brocket Hall, in Hertfordshire, which had extensive gardens.[7] Frances Wolseley, who was Lord Mount Stephen's godchild and the daughter of his good friend, Field Marshal Garnet Wolseley, received covert financial support from her godfather that enabled her to open the Glynde School for Lady Gardeners, one of the first gardening schools in England.[8] This school became a model for the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture, Gardening, and Horticulture for Women in Groton, Massachusetts.[9]

With only occasional references available, it is difficult to establish how much influence any of these people may have had on Elsie Reford. Whatever the source of her passion for gardening, Elsie Reford's gardens were her individual creation. She deliberately eschewed professional help. "There has been no landscape architect to head off mistakes, costly in time and work to remedy, but each one of them teaching something," she wrote in an article published in the *Lily Yearbook* of the North American Lily Society in 1949.[10] Perhaps as a result of this, the gardens are remarkably free of formality and ornamentation and show few obvious "quotations" from other gardens.

Rather than create a series of garden rooms adjacent to the house, Elsie chose instead to develop a series of gardens in a valley hundreds of yards away. Several are nestled alongside the banks of Page's Brook, a stream that threads its way through the property from east to west, wending its way to the Métis River (Figure 6). "Nowhere is there any formal planting," she wrote. "There are no flower beds, the gardens having been fashioned more or less to follow the twisting and curving of the little stream with short stretches of woods left here and there between them."[11] The result is strikingly original. Elsie Reford designed a path that meanders from one garden to another, occasionally interrupted by bridges that span the brook.

Elsie Reford had to overcome many difficulties in bringing her garden to life. First among them was her seasonal allergies that left her bedridden for days on end before she eventually obtained relief from a

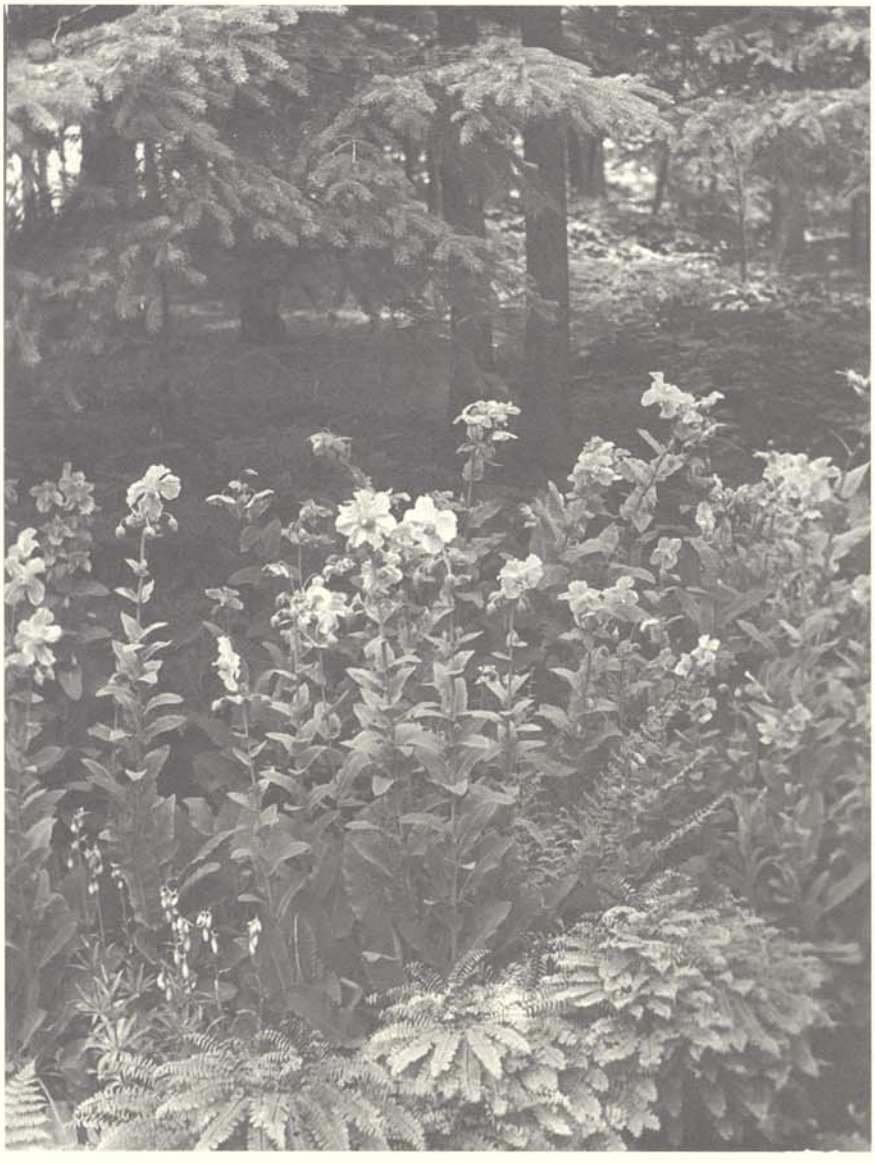

Fig. 7. Blue Poppy Glade, circa 1930s. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Harley Street doctor. The second obstacle was the property itself. Since Estevan was first and foremost a fishing lodge, the site was chosen for its proximity to a salmon river and its dramatic views, not for the quality of the soil. When she began digging, she quickly realized how forbidding the task of building a garden at Grand-Métis would be. "In the matter of good natural soil Estevan has been rather niggardly dealt with," she wrote. "When the first gardens came to be carved out it was found that there was nothing adequate for horticultural purposes."[12]

The topsoil was poor and underneath there was nothing but clay. To counteract nature's deficiencies, Elsie had to specially create soil for each of the plants she had selected, bringing peat and sand from her farms. "Time and patience were largely drawn upon to transfer and mix thoroughly these two ingredients and bring up gravel from the beaches to add to them. Leaf mould presented more of a difficulty, for there were not sufficient deciduous trees in our woods to supply all that has been required, but that too has been overcome by resorting to a system of barter—salmon from the Métis river being exchanged for leaves from a neighbour's grove."[13] This exchange must have appeared fortuitous to local farmers who were in the throes of the Great Depression. Then, as now, the gardens provided much-needed work to an

area with high unemployment.

Elsie Reford's genius as a gardener was born of knowledge of the needs of plants. Over the course of her long life, she had become an expert plantswoman. She detailed her work in garden diaries that she kept religiously every day during the summer. The entries are often mundane, but they are invaluable today as work proceeds to restore the gardens. By the end of her life, through her articles published by the Royal Horticultural Society and the North American Lily Society, Elsie Reford was able to counsel other gardeners about how to achieve success growing plants in a cold climate. She was humble, but visitors marveled at her encyclopedic knowledge.

When she began gardening, there were only a handful of local examples to follow. The province of Quebec had boasted gardens since the first colonists arrived in the sixteenth century; the hospitals and religious orders often had extensive gardens. Spencerwood, a large estate near Quebec City, was mentioned in the 1850 edition of J. C. Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Gardening*.[14] Additionally, the Island of Montreal was home to several magnificent gardens, including those of the art collector and department store owner, Cleveland Morgan, whose alpine garden in Senneville was one of the most important in North America in the 1930s.[15] But no one had tried gardening in the Lower St. Lawrence region, certainly not on the scale that Elsie Reford envisioned.

"The gardens," she wrote, "are geographically placed where a climate of forbidding severity might well be expected." To her surprise, she found the property ideal for the cultivation of exotic plants. Today its proximity to the St. Lawrence and the Métis rivers provides generous levels of atmospheric moisture. In winter, the average snowfall of 11½ feet or more offers a fleecy blanket that protects the gardens.[16] The snow arrives early (November) and leaves late (May), insulating plants from the harsh winter winds, killer frosts, and the severe temperatures that can range as low as -30°F in January and February. Even though the region is considered Zone 4, plants deemed hardy in milder climates, such as those that grow in Zone 6, often endure the climate and sometimes thrive. While the days without frost are few (110 on average), the short growing season has the effect of encouraging rapid growth. Plants burst into life once the snow has melted. In summer, the daytime and nighttime temperatures vary considerably, with warm days and cool nights. The cool night air helps to maintain bloom, which can endure several weeks longer than in other gardens. These conditions proved to be ideal for Elsie to grow such plants as the Tibetan blue poppy *(Meconopsis betonicifolia)* and the alpines, providing an environment similar to their native habitat.

Elsie Reford discovered that there were several microclimates within the garden itself. The most fragile plants, such as azaleas, Japanese red maples, and blue poppies, not generally hardy in this climate, were placed in pockets where they did not suffer the ill effects of biting winds. She knew she was being adventurous. Her excitement is hinted in her garden diary for May 25, 1939: "tried planting as a great innovation a shrub, namely an *Acer palmatum atropurpureum*. . . it is an experiment and may succeed."[17]

Her *Meconopsis* collection provides an insight into her contacts and talents. Elsie Reford reserved the Blue Poppy Glade for the display of her rarest and most enchanting plants (Figure 7). The Himalayan blue poppy is one of the marvels of the plant world. Native to the Tsangpo Gorge in the southeast corner of Tibet, it grows at altitudes of 10,000 to 13,000 feet. The English plant explorer Frank Kingdon Ward, who discovered the plant in 1924, described its most outstanding characteristic: "Its flowers were flawless, of that intense almost luminous turquoise blue one associates with the clear atmosphere of the roof of the world."[18] The Himalayan blue poppy has enchanted and mesmerized gardeners since plants raised from the seed that Ward brought back from Tibet were introduced to gardeners at a meeting of the Royal Horticultural Society in London in 1926.

Intrigued by the enthusiasm that the blue poppy generated, Elsie Reford was among the first gardeners in North America to attempt cultivating them, using seeds obtained from Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Gardens in the 1930s. Her success, while not

Fig. 8. The High Bank, circa 1930s. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

immediate, was considerable. By 1936, she had more than half a dozen species of *Meconopsis*, including *M. betonicifolia, M. grandis, M. integrifolia, M. napauluensis, M. quintuplinervia,* and *M. simplicifolia.*[19] In 1946, Frank Kingdon Ward wrote about receiving "a letter of thanks from a lady in Canada, enclosing a photograph showing hundreds of plants flowering in her garden on the shore of the St. Lawrence estuary. 'So well does it grow that to walk along a path between gently sloping banks entirely veiled with the exquisite blue poppies is like going through some ethereal valley in a land of dreams.'"[20] The lady was Elsie Reford.

Elsie Reford had no training as a garden designer. While she collected and appreciated art, she laid no claim to talents as an artist. Her approach to garden design was largely intuitive, guided by the topography of the site. She also read widely. In addition to the standard works on plants, her library contained several books by Gertrude Jekyll and a well-thumbed copy of *The English Flower Garden* by William Robinson. From her reading and from her own appreciation of the landscape, Elsie Reford designed a garden that integrated native and exotic plants in a flowing, naturalistic fashion (Figure 8).

There is only one straight line in the gardens. "There is perhaps a very slight approach to something of a formal nature," she wrote, "in the double herbaceous border of over 300 feet in length, hence its name 'The Long Walk.' From its 7-foot path, between the sloping borders each 12 feet wide, there is a vista across to the far blue hills of the north shore."[21] It was here that Elsie Reford was at her most flamboyant (Figure 9). With a careful selection of plants providing a succession of bloom, the Long Walk is in bloom from the moment the snow melts until the first frost. Lilacs

Fig. 9. The Long Walk in midsummer, with its 300-foot-long double herbaceous borders, 1930s. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

were succeeded by peonies, delphinium, lilies, and roses, supplemented by the occasional annual. The quantities were sometimes prodigious. Her order book for 1932 shows that she planted 862 peonies that autumn (Figure 10).[22]

Each garden had its own particularities. Over time each of them was given a name. By naming a garden, she bestowed on it both a personality and a permanence. During a visit in the 1930s, she named a garden in honor of her eldest grandson, Robert, and it was thereafter known as Robert's Garden. Not surprisingly her other grandchildren wanted their own gardens too. Another grandson laid claim to the Scree Garden, which she agreed to only reluctantly, not certain that the garden would prove to be a success. When it was a success, she sometimes referred to it as "Michael's miracle." Over the years her grandchildren, Maryon, Boris, Sonja, and Alexis, had gardens named in their honor.

Elsie Reford was also a plant collector. Lilies were her favorite and accounted for her largest collection, with more than sixty species (Figure 11). "A lily garden in the Lower St. Lawrence Valley" was her description of her gardens. Attracted by their form and rarity, she was also intrigued by the expected difficulty of raising lilies in Grand-Métis. To her surprise, they enjoyed the climate as much as she did. "In the clarity and purity of the atmosphere of the Lower St. Lawrence, in a garden where they have Spruce woods to shelter them and a running brook to sing to them Lilies do grow amazingly."[23] In late summer, as she wrote, "there rise in broken waves literally thousands of *Lilium regale* to waft their fragrance over the land."[24]

One of her proudest achievements was with the *Cardiocrinum giganteum*, the Giant Himalayan Lily. Planted in 1938, she lived to see it bloom on

Fig. 10. The Long Walk in late June filled with Elsie Reford's prized double pink peonies, 1932. Photograph by Robert Wilson Reford. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

several occasions.[25] "There will be other newcomers and always there will be the desire to widen experience and enrich still further this little corner of the world with treasures which nature, in her wisdom and generosity, has distributed elsewhere and to hail and welcome, as they come to us, the rewards of the patient work of the hybridizers."[26]

She also collected gentians. These sometimes diminutive alpine plants, native to high mountain regions the world over, produce extraordinary flowers, but are rare and difficult to find.[27] She took pride in developing one of few gentian gardens in the world to display her substantial collection. In 1944, she wrote, "Into the borders of the Gentian Walk there were replanted in October three thousand three hundred and fifty four *G. Wellsii*, many [of which] were sent to other gardens while over two thousand were put into reserve to await the day when more time and labour will become available for the pursuit of the ancient craft of gardening—when the heavy war clouds will cease to cast their long, dark shadows of sorrow and peace will return to men's lives over the face of the earth."[28]

Elsie Reford's gardens were strictly for her own enjoyment. They were opened to the public several times during World War II in aid of the Queen's Fund for air raid victims.[29] While she did not shun visitors, she did not encourage them either. On occasion, botanists and gardeners were allowed to pay visits. Among them was Henry Teuscher, the conservator of the Montreal Botanical Gardens. Trained in Berlin and formerly of the New York Botanical Gardens, Teuscher designed the Montreal Botanical Gardens and oversaw its construction between 1936 and 1938. Paying several visits to Elsie Reford's gardens in the 1940s, he became convinced of their importance. Later, in the late 1950s, when Elsie Reford's son, Brigadier Bruce Reford, began to question his ability to maintain the gardens he had been given,

Fig. 11. Elsie Reford admiring a stand of her favorite *Lilium martagon* var. *album*, circa 1936. Photograph by Robert Wilson. Courtesy Reford Family Archives.

Teuscher offered to lobby the government of Quebec. He hoped the government would transform the gardens into a center for research into Nordic plants. While Teuscher was not successful in creating a research station, his arguments did prevail in the sense that the government acquired the gardens in 1961, two years after Elsie Reford's death, seeing in them an opportunity to develop tourism in eastern Quebec.

The Reford Gardens have been shaped by the passion of Elsie Reford, sculpted by her hand, and transformed by her taste. Time too, has played a role. Many of the plants that she introduced to the gardens flourish today. Trees tower where they were once hardly visible. Some of her collections, such as the gentians, vanished after her departure. This collection and others are being painstakingly rebuilt. Every year, more than two hundred varieties and species are re-introduced, bringing the total number to more than 3,000. To manage an historic garden is to search for a happy balance between the legacy of the creator and the march of time. Since 1995, when the gardens were privatized by the Government of Quebec, some parts of

the gardens have been fully restored. Other areas remain untouched, waiting for adequate resources. Now a showcase for contemporary gardens, the core of the property remains the historic gardens created by Elsie Reford, remarkable creations by an extraordinary woman. Just as they were during Elsie Reford's lifetime, the gardens are in constant evolution.

Notes

1. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* XIV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 752–55.
2. For further information on George Stephen, see Heather Gilbert, *Awakening Continent: The Life of Lord Mount Stephen* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1965) and *The End of the Road: The Life of Lord Mount Stephen* (Aberdeen University Press, 1977).
3. Gaspard Farrer and his brother Henry had employed the architect Sir Edwin Luytens to design their house at 7 St. James's Square, London, and Lutyens used their mews and chauffeur's cottage as the office for his Delhi commission. He would later build their summer house, The Salutation, in Sandwich in Kent (Jane Brown, *Lutyens and the Edwardians*, London: Viking, 1996, 130). For more on Farrer, see Philip Ziegler, *The Sixth Great Power Barings*, 1762–1929 (London: William Collins, 1988). Several members of Barings were clients of both Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Although Lord Mount Stephen was one of Barings's preferred clients, there is no information to suggest that Elsie Reford met either Lutyens or Jeykll.
4. Stephen had an adopted daughter, Lady Alice Northcote (wife of Lord Northcote, Governor-General of Australia from 1904–1908), but no natural children of his own.
5. Letter, Elsie Reford to Lord Grey, 25 May 1911, Reford Family Collection.
6. Elsie Reford and Mabel Choate may have attended the same finishing school. Their paths would have crossed through social connections, since Mabel Choate's father served as Ambassador to the Court of St. James.
7. Helen Allingham, the famed English watercolor artist, painted a series of watercolors of Brocket Hall. See Helen Allingham and Marcus B. Huish, *Happy England* (London: A. and C. Black, 1903), plate 65.
8. Field Marshal Garnet Wolseley, the tempermental Commander-in-chief of the British Army, was Gilbert and Sullivan's "model of a modern major general."
9. Marjory Pegram, *The Wolseley Heritage: The Story of Frances Viscountess Wolseley and Her Parents* (London, John Murray, n.d.). For further information on Frances Wolseley, see Sue Bennett, *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2000), 125-27; Jane Brown, *Eminent Gardeners: Some People of Influence and Their Gardens, 1880–1980* (London: Viking, 1990), 20–39. Vicountess Wolseley is the author of *Gardening for Women* (London: Cassell, 1908), *In a College Garden* (London: John Murray, 1916), *Gardens, Their Form and Design* (London: Edward Arnold, 1919), and *Some of the Smaller Manor Houses of Sussex* (London: Medici Society, 1925).
10. Elsie Reford, "A Lily Garden in the Lower St. Lawrence Valley," *The Lily Yearbook of the North American Lily Society* 2 (1949): 75.
11. Ibid., 71.
12. Ibid.
13. Mrs. R. Wilson Reford, "Lilies at Estevan Lodge, Grand Métis, Province of Quebec, Canada," *The Royal Horticultural Society Lily Yearbook* 8 (1939): 8.
14. John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1850), 341.
15. Morgan's gardens are the subject of ongoing research by the author. See his article, "Rock-Gardening in the Province of Quebec," in *Rock Gardens and Rock Plants*, Report of the Conference held by the Royal Horticultural Society and the Alpine Garden Society (London: Royal Horticultural Society, 1936), 20–29.
16. *The Lily Yearbook of the North American Lily Society* (1949): 70.
17. Elsie Reford, Garden Diary, 25 May 1939, Reford Family Collection.
18. Frank Kingdon Ward, "Blue Poppies," *The Garden Beautiful*, July, 1946, 11.
19. Reford, Garden Diary, June 1936, 27 June 1939, Reford Family Collection.
20. Ward, "Blue Poppies," 15.
21. *The Lily Yearbook of the North American Lily Society* (1949): 71.
22. Reford, Garden Diary, 1932, Reford Family Collection.
23. *The Royal Horticultural Society Lily Yearbook* (1939): 14.
24. *The Lily Yearbook of the North American Lily Society* (1949): 71.
25. *The Royal Horticultural Society Lily Yearbook* (1939): 14
26. Ibid.
27. Elsie Reford, "Gentiana Macaulayi, variety Wellsii, at Estevan Lodge, Grand-Metis, P.Q. Canada," in Edwinna von Baeyer and Pleasance Crawford, eds., *Garden Voices: Two Centuries of Canadian Garden Writing* (Toronto: Random House, 1995), 242.
28. Von Baeyer and Crawford, *Garden Voices*, 240.
29. Reford, Garden Diary, 6 August 1941, Reford Family Collection.