O n the television show *Backyard Blitz*, household gardens are designed and built in a couple of hours. In Britain in the eighteenth century people were prepared to take a bit longer. As Tim Blanning notes: 'No one baulked at planting vast woods that could not possibly mature for two centuries.'

Gardens feature prominently in Blanning’s monumental *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648 to 1815*. The gardens at Versailles in France were formal, regular, linear and arranged on an axis that had at its centre the royal palace. There wasn’t much left to chance—everything was planned and rational. The Versailles garden was making a political statement. The attempt in 1661 of Charles II to bring Andre Le Notre, the designer of Versailles to London was regarded by many English at the time as another example of Stuart efforts to impose an absolutist regime on the nation.

By contrast the English garden self-consciously imitated nature. The English regarded their landscape style as ‘free’ and unrestricted. The English believed that their method of gardening should match their method of politics. In 1712 Joseph Addison discussed both:

> The mind of man naturally hates everything that looks like a restraint upon it, and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of confinement, when the sight is pent up in a narrow compass ... On the contrary, a spacious horizon is an image of liberty, where the eye has room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the immensity of its views, and to lose itself amidst a variety of objects that offer themselves to its observation.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury wrote about the symbolism of gardens. One of Shaftesbury’s tutors had been John Locke. Shaftesbury said that formal gardens were a ‘corruption of taste’ and that they were ‘unknown to our ancestors, and are unnatural to such a climate as Great Britain’.

The English didn’t only use their gardens to make symbolic stands against continental despotism. They used their gardens against each other. Opponents of Prime Minister Robert Walpole retired to their estates to plot the leader’s downfall and design their gardens. Lord Cobham, one of Walpole’s adversaries, constructed various temples on his estate. There was the ‘Temple of Modern Virtue’ in a deliberate state of disrepair which had a headless statue of Walpole; a ‘Temple of Ancient Virtue’ with various Greek heroes who had fought against corruption; and a ‘Temple of British Worthies’ (including King Alfred, Queen Elizabeth I, John Hampden, John Locke, and Isaac Newton). It would be interesting to know whether Kevin Rudd has a statue of Ben Chifley in the garden of his Brisbane home, or Malcolm Turnbull a statue of Robert Menzies.

Blanning is not afraid of giving an opinion. Take for example his analysis of the French Revolutionary Wars, which is quite a bit different from the nostalgia and romanticism with which they are usually viewed:

> ...for the hapless Belgians, Germans, Spanish, Dutch and Italians in their path [of the French], they brought not liberation but exploitation in the form of cash levies and the requisition of everything that could be consumed or moved. As the armies were both exceptionally large and exceptionally undisciplined, they also inflicted looting, murder and rape on an unprecedented scale. Although attempts by the locals to resort to armed resistance were ruthlessly crushed, persistent passive resistance ensured that the French could maintain their conquests only by force.

It was a dismal experience for the revolutionaries ... The rest of Europe, they concluded, had shown that they were still steeped in ignorance and prejudice, unworthy of liberation. Robespierre was not alone in thinking that the French people had outstripped the rest of the human race by two millennia and now constituted what amounted to a different species.

A good example of Blanning’s manner is the way in which he considers the implications of Catherine the Great’s annexation of Crimea in 1783 and Russia gaining access to the Black Sea and the four strategic rivers of Eastern Europe: the Dniester, the Bug, the Dnieper, and the Don. Blanning regards this as a geopolitical turning point comparable...
Eighteenth century political propaganda

In *The Pursuit of Glory* Tim Blanning analyses the two etchings by William Hogarth entitled ‘The Invasion’, produced in 1756 when England and France were at war.

In the first etching Hogarth portrays the French outside an inn on the French coast waiting to embark on the invasion.

1. The sign outside the inn has the legend ‘Soupe Meagre a la Sabot Royale’ (poor Royal shoe soup)—a wooden shoe being the traditional symbol of poverty
2. Emaciated soldiers roast frogs
3. A friar is ready to accompany the soldiers—equipped with his tools for hunting down heresy and with an architectural plan to build a monastery
4. Women plow the fields
5. Conscripts are driven on to the ships at the point of a bayonet.

In the second etching Hogarth represents the English.

1. Soldiers gather outside an inn named ‘The Duke of Cumberland’, the victor of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746
2. The sign proclaims that beef is served every day, roasted or boiled
3. A caricature of Louis XV holding gallows with the message ‘You take my fine Ships, you be de Pirate, you be de Tief, me send my grand Armies and hang you all, Marblu.’
4. A song-sheet for ‘Rule Britannia’
5. The contrast with the reluctant French conscripts is clear as a youth stands on tiptoe to meet the required height for military service.

In the eighteenth century political propaganda to the British defeat of France in the Napoleonic wars. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards Russia regarded the Balkans and the Mediterranean as a sphere of interest and from it came Russia’s entry into the wars of the French Revolution in 1798 and the collapse of the First Republic; the Crimean War of the 1850s and the expulsion of Austria from Italy and Germany; and arguably at least, the First World War too. Blanning could have gone on to say, but he doesn’t, that from Russia’s entry into the First World War came the Russian Revolution.

*The Pursuit of Glory* is about much more than European gardens in the years between the end of the Thirty Years War and Napoleon. There’s lots in it about roads, rivers, and religion. And there’s also lots of politics and war. Many historians would struggle to cover any one of these topics properly. Blanning deals with all of these topics, and many more brilliantly—which is why this has been voted in numerous competitions as one of the best books of history in recent years.