Reviews

Saving the horses

Ali Smith, *Glyph*, Hamish Hamilton 2026, 268 pages, ISBN 9780241665596, £20
Ian McEwan, *What We Can Know*, Jonathan Cape 2025, 304 pages, ISBN 9781787335738, £22

"At the moment our world is darker than I have ever seen … we need [narratives] to survive" Ali Smith has said, in April 2024 at the Edvard Munch 'Trembling Earth' exhibition in Oslo, a sentiment with which the author of *What We Can Know* would doubtless concur. Both novels reviewed here can loosely be described as dystopian, although it's the ramifying control mechanisms of a totalitarian state in *Glyph's* sibling predecessor *Gliff*, also from 2024, that come closest. There the rich harvest of neglected female artists, legendary modernist experimentalists (Schwitters, Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth) and literary heavyweights (Shakespeare, Rilke, Katharine Mansfield), whose life-giving energies empowered Smith's passionate resistance to the social divisions, corruption and racism of Brexit and Covid in her *Seasonal Quartet* (2016-20), has almost entirely withered away. In its stead among *Gliff"s* epigraphs one comes across this dire prognostication, by the Italian philosopher of human potentiality under the sign of its immanent erasure, Giorgio Agamben:

> *"Which house is burning? The country where you live, or Europe, or the whole world? Perhaps the houses, the cities have already burned down – who knows how long ago? – in a single immense blaze that we pretended not to see ... it encircles and envelops us at every moment."*

Not much room in such a scenario for an answering creativity, although Smith then cites lines by an obscure 19th century Scots poet, William Shelley, the product of a lifetime's inequality and exclusion, that suggest otherwise:

> *"Now haud ye cheerie, neebors a' / And gliff life's girnin' worriecraw" ["Now keep cheerful, neighbours all, and frighten life's grinning hobgoblin/scarecrow"].*

It's the briefest of reminders of art's healing, subversive power – and all the more treasurable for that, in a world like *Gliff's* where the only other

named example, a novel by Max Frisch one of the young protagonists carries, itself an odyssey of personal, epochal resilience, ends up in a government trashcan. A similar fate awaits the manuscript of the sonnet sequence at the heart of *What We Can Know*, by the fictional poet Francis Blundy, briefly afforded iconic status as a counterblast to catastrophic climate change but also – and this is why it must disappear – a compendium of falsehoods, deceptions and grubbily, lethally fractured human relationships.

In *Gliff* gender-fluid teenage Bri and their younger sister are essentially nomads, cast adrift from parenting, and categorised as "unverifiables" who must be brought to heel by an all-encompassing digitalisation (smartphone "educators" that constantly record and indoctrinate, AI, local "Designated Data Collectors", omnipresent surveillance) intolerant of any form of life that doesn't serve the established order, corporate, supremacist, misogynistic, brutal, environmentally destructive – the list is a familiar one. The recalcitrant poor are herded into factories and into the grip of an industrial savagery reminiscent of the 19th century while "the VIPS and governors … wandered through the room holding their wineglasses … congratulating each other … making speeches", an Orwellian vision indeed; community centres are bulldozed to make way for gated estates; the remainder of the internet-fixated population are "smoothed as if airbrushed" into compliance. Unverifiability, when the fugitives link up with others who've so far resisted this onslaught, has a markedly contemporary set of references:

> *"One person here had been unverified for saying out loud that a war was a war when it wasn't permitted to call it a war. Another has found herself declared unverifiable for writing online that the killing of many people by another people was genocide. Another had been unverified for defaming the oil conglomerates by saying they were directly responsible for climate catastrophe. Another had been unverified for speaking at a protest about people's right to protest".*

But when, subsequently, the criteria applied to those under scrutiny widen to include "ethnicity/creed/disability", there can be little doubt where this is going – whole categories of people stripped of their right to exist, or "bare animals" as Agamben calls them in *Homo Sacer* with Auschwitz as his paradigm, disposed of by sovereign power in a pattern we now see repeating itself across the globe. "What can one woman do against the behemoth [?]" asks Bri and Rose's mother. Yet she does all that's possible on an individual level before the system catches up with her, steeling them against the hallucinatory effects of a life online ("experience the real realities as your

foremost realities"), teaching them, through her own example as whistleblower in a conglomerate manufacturing toxic weedkiller, that small acts of defiance can be everything. Against this backdrop they, and the novel, maintain a remarkable optimism. Their chief resource, shared with the author, is a desire to tell their own story, a shared logophilia, a relationship that makes sense of the world through wordplay and fable, and on top of this a joy in the lived moment that binds them to one another and to the world around them, the "gliff" of a "transient glance … passing sensation … faint trace … unexpected view … sudden surprising fall of sunlight". One such encounter, with farmers' horses destined for the abattoir, and one in particular whose "eye shone like a liquid source", confirms them in their sustained opposition to the status quo.

The epigraphs to *Glyph*, and the artwork on its cover – Munch's 'The Pathfinder', where a young man delicately leads a stumbling horse through a forest – are advance warning of a far more cataclysmic, species-threatening terrain, but one in which the work of imaginative, compassionate resistance must continue. Balzac's "machine under which God Himself would be squashed like a fly" and Agamben's "the dead are perhaps the most demanding objects of love" are swiftly followed by visceral images drawn from a succession of war zones past and present. *Gliff's* "mountainous movement across the earth [making] a clamour so huge and righteous that it gathered everything true to it" – Smith at her most radical and incantatory on behalf of the impoverished and exploited – is replaced by "a landscape we don't even notice ourselves in any more, all the dead from the new wars spilling down the sides of it like avalanche". What was once a horse's "shocking", "beautiful" eye has been blinded by a gas attack in the trenches; the soldier moved to rescue it is executed for desertion. Another story handed down to the next pair of children tells of the flattened shadow of "something that had once been human" over which tank columns have passed, three decades later, on a country road in France. "… An empty skin, how sore it must have been … that soreness has been going round and round the world since, like a bird looking for somewhere to land" – the sisters bend all their efforts towards reconstructing the circumstances and summoning the victims of both atrocities from oblivion, and are rewarded with an astonishing apparition. But their pastward gaze is considered a form of mumbo-jumbo by Patch's daughter Billie, who carries the novel forward to Gaza (already glimpsed in its full horror in the third chapter but left hanging), Palestinian activism, the "gang of dictatorial old men running the planet" and the ongoing savagery of the manosphere exemplified, in her view, by the torture and evisceration of the murdered Ukrainian journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna. "What did they do with her tongue? Where are her eyes now? … Did they feed them to the pigs?"

Billie's diatribe ("Open your eyes. / Look past yourselves. / See where we are now. / Look what's happening. / Get to the real story") raises uneasy questions about how far literature should go in terms of direct political confrontation; Smith chooses to end on a more conciliatory note, a lyrical, consoling evocation of the scene portrayed with such tenderness by Munch: "Green shadow accompanies the horse. Green shadow casts him too. Green shadow precedes them. It forms them both".

The "ornate anachronism" of Blundy's Renaissance-formatted poems in *What We Can Know*, the 'Corona for Vivien', makes them unlikely candidates, surely, for stardom in the street battles against planetary breakdown, however accomplished their technical mastery, the "gorgeous music of the words, evocation of companionable love and love of teeming nature". Their first and only outing is at an Oxford gathering of old fogies and inscribed, as a birthday gift and with pointed irony, on stretched calfskin (vellum) – "A dead animal has conferred novel sensuality on my words. Now they are alive". It's as if the obliterated remnant of a man on a French road and the "green dream" of *Gliff's* ending could be anything other than morally incompatible, a consummate heartlessness redolent of "a comfortable kind of English existence that masked turmoil and carelessness with the lives of others" – or as Benjamin famously put it "There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism". The novel is a curious, unsettling amalgam of withering scorn for the literary elite and an earnest attempt to situate itself within the wider debate on survival: "the fame of the Blundy evening has grown through the years as cities, landscapes and institutions have drowned or withered". We're given the vantage point of a 22nd century scholar obsessed with locating Blundy's lost manuscript but also able to map, in convincingly linear fashion, the AI-triggered nuclear skirmishes of the period known as the "Derangement", the ensuing 'Inundation' or rise in sea levels, "tsunamis, wars, starvation and disease" and, perhaps a little surprisingly, the emergence ("we scraped through") of a relatively coherent humanity confined, in the Northern hemisphere, to the uplands but still possessed of universities and a comprehensive digital archive courtesy of Nigeria [sic]. Much of this convinces, but it's with the narrator's voyage to the Cotswold Islands – the hunt for the 'Corona' nearing its end – that McEwan's prose seems to relax into something more hospitable, a rich immersion in the natural world that produces moments of limpid observation as affecting as anything in Smith.

> *"In the gloaming, we heard the sad ululating cry of a loon calling across the glassy water… We saw shoals of small grey and orange fish, freshwater turtles and water snakes among fronds of pale green seagrass …"*

Compared to this, the protracted, forensic revelation that follows of the human antagonisms and betrayals secreted in Blundy's magnum opus is a murky, dispiriting business indeed. "Whether Jack and Jill can pull their marriage together trumps what happened at Thermopylae", reflects the narrator, on his own students' propensity to abandon history.

Stephen Winfield

Ancient combat

Sarah E. Bond, *Strike: Labor, Unions, and Resistance in the Roman Empire*, Yale University Press, 2025, 254 pages, hardback ISBN 9780300273144, £25

Sarah Bond professes ancient history at the University of Iowa. This book crystallizes her prolific previous writings on cognate topics. YouTube has an interview with her about it. Apart from half a dozen dutiful dust-jacket plaudits, there is a valuable review by professional classicist Jerry Toner in *TLS* January 9, 2026, plus an available online one by Michael Saint. For supplement to these present remarks, see my 'Ancient Socialism' (Spokesman, September 2012).

Strike comprises seven chapters plus Introduction and Conclusion, 30 pages of notes both referential and supplementing the main narrative, 22-page Bibliography, 13-page serviceable Index, three black and white maps, nine black and white illustrations (unlisted).

It would be ungenerous to carp at such a rich bibliography. These can never be complete, and authors have the right to pick and choose. However, since Bond frequently adduces British practices for comparative purposes, she would have learned a lot from Ralph Darlington's *Labour Unrest in Britain 1910-14* (2023, reviewed by me in *Spokesman* 156). There is also Christopher Zelchmann's *Radical Antiquity* (2025) which she would not have had a chance to see. Still, I iterate that both Bibliography and Notes bear witness to the acute and meticulous quality of Bond's research.

Bond' s style is work-woman-like, no trendy jargon or newspeak, you can always understand her (not always true with academic tomes). Her book, though, can be tiresomely repetitive, with too many things said too many times. It needs some sub-editing but that is nearly a dead art nowadays.

There is also the question of relevance. I suppose the word 'Resistance' in her title justifies ranging far beyond the blazoned STRIKE. But the chapter on Spartacus goes too far from her ostensible main theme. He has,

of course, become a romanticized figure, thanks to the ' We Are Spartacus' film based on communist Howard Fast's novel. There are other works, such as those by Arthur Koestler and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and adoption of his name by a variety of leftist movements (there's one such active within Canada Post's workforce). I fancy Spartacus and company simply wanted to fight their way to overseas and home. That is, always supposing he really did come from Thrace (Bulgaria): 'Thracian' can also denote a type of gladiatorial armour. Bond would have done better to focus on the first Sicilian slave revolt (135-2 BC) whose leader, Eunus, proclaimed a utopian programme of social reform. For much more on all this, see my article in *Classical Journal* 62 (1967), 289-94 (available online).

The same applies to Bond's final chapter on Byzantine athletic factions in the sixth century, spotlighting the 'Victory' riot of AD 532, which cost thousands of lives and devastated much of Constantinople. It's hard to classify this as labour unrest. Bond ignores a contemporary text describing verbal exchanges between emperor Justinian and Factional spokesmen. Complaints are voiced, but not a word about withdrawal of labour. If they had any sort of ideological bent, it was religious rather than political as their chants and slogans show. I agree with Alan Cameron (cited by Bond) that we are simply dealing with fans and hooligans.

Bond does not discuss the most militant of ancient labour groups: Cobblers. Their later sole and soul-mates were ably described by Eric Hobsbawm (*Uncommon People,* 1998) who sadly laments the twentieth-century's dearth of revolutionary shoe-menders. Socrates would hang around their workshops, denounced by orator Lysias as 'known haunts of trouble-makers'. Cicero says the same about their Roman counterparts. The Byzantine historian Agathias dismisses one agitator as 'being a cobbler, he was of no social significance'. 'Let the Cobbler Stick to His Last' comes straight from the Latin. It may have been meant as a warning to them to stay away from labour agitation.

The second-century AD Greek satirist Lucian is also left out by Bond. He frequently uses cobblers as spokesmen for the poor and oppressed, a theme that dominates other of his dialogues. In late Byzantine times (1374), he was imitated by Alexios Macrembolites in *Dialogue Between the Rich and the Poor.*

I discussed Lucian's opinions in my first published article back in 1961 (*Classical Quarterly* 11, 199-208 — abstract and discussion by others online). Some denounced me as being too Marxist in approach. I remained unrepentant, knowing that Marx himself frequently adduced Lucian (details in S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature,* 1976, reprint 2011). Lucian often assumed the role of Cynic philosopher, about which brand of maverick champions of the poor Bond might profitably have said a few

words. They were much suspected in this role by Roman authorities.

Peasant revolts are a further highly relevant topic, especially in the middle and late Roman periods, which deserve some account — especially the Bacaudae in Gaul and Donatists in North Africa. Here, I am glad to salute the work of my old Nottingham professor, Edward Thompson, whose series of pioneering books and articles transformed the subject — a then current joke held that Thompson had actually invented late Roman antiquity. In my piece on the Donatists (*Nottingham Medieval Studies* 6, 1962, 3-11) I pointed to a passage in St Augustine complaining about one member who organized a bakers' strike against the Catholic gentry (further detailed in my note on Roman strikes in *Classical Journal* 59, 1963, 275-6).

So much for what is not there. Now, about what is. Bond rightly is hesitant how best to define the Latin word *collegium,* used of groups who fomented labour action. 'Union' is too anachronistic. 'Guild' in its mediaeval sense has its champions, but does not seem quite right. 'Assembles' risks confusion with the Roman political voting mechanisms. At the risk of begging the question, I tend to plump for 'Associations'

Along with setting out her stall, 'In this book I tell the story of Roman labourers', Bond's Introduction offers two lapel-grabbers. First, the origin of our word STRIKE, owed to Sunderland sailors who struck their sails in April 1768 as a sign of intent to walk off the job, an action emulated the next month by their London counterparts. The second pinpoints the Egyptian necropolis workers who, circa 1157 BC, downed tools in protest against low wages and bad working conditions. Not the sort of thing to peep through such Hollywood recreations of their history as *Land of the Pharaohs,* starring Jack Hawkins as the Great Pyramid-building Cheops.

Bond commends Marx and Engels (p7) for describing the Military Secession of the Plebeians (493 BC) as "pivotal for the leverage of their demands'. More conservative historians might mutter 'Mutiny'. For all their famed discipline on the battlefield, the Roman legions became endlessly militant in demanding pay rises, thereby damaging Roman border security so much in the third century AD as to endanger the Empire's very existence. Things reached such a point that the dying emperor, Septimius Severus, told his successor sons 'Enrich the Soldiers. To Hell with the Rest.'

Bond does a good job cataloguing the suggestively huge number of *Collegia*. They often sound like the old print unions. She pays some special attention to Theatrical ones, where it was worth mentioning that Percennius, who fomented a serious military stoppage in AD 14, had previously been on the stage. Mention of Percennius evokes memory of Thersites in Homer's *Iliad* who denounces the Greek Generals for hogging the best loot (beautiful captive princesses) and urges his fellow squaddies to down weapons and go home.

Bond regards Julius Caesar and the emperors as unremittingly hostile to these associations. Trajan, for instance, denied a provincial governor permission to form a fifteen-man fire brigade as 'contrary to the spirit of our age'. However, there were exceptions of sorts. Tiberius executed an inventor of unbreakable glass and Vespasian suppressed a scheme for moving building materials more efficiently because, as he remarked, 'I must feed my poor commoners'.

Claudius was faced with a distinctive kind of wildcat strike. At the Games, combatants lined up with the usual chant 'We Who Are About to Die Salute You'. Trying to make a joke, Claudius replied 'Or Not'. The men took (or pretended to) this as a sign they had been let off for the day and marched away. It took a deal of desperate bargaining to get them back.

Bond devotes the best part of a chapter to the Mint Workers' strike in the reign of Aurelian (AD 270-5) which resulted in their mass carnage. It needs to be remembered that, in the absence of modern communications and technology, coins were not just 'the denarius in your pocket' but vital items of imperial propaganda, and in some cases the only evidence for existence of the more ephemeral emperors of 'The Age of Chaos' (AD 235-85).

Happily, there was no such bloody retribution against striking Mint workers in 2003 at Llantrisant, Wales, in 2003. See Anne Duggan's report in *Socialist Worker* (November 15, 2003) online. Also see online a *Guardian* report of a jury finding the death of a Welsh Mint worker to have been 'Unlawful' because of neglect of safety practices.

A Pompeian graffito was put up by an aspiring candidate for political office promising to work closely with the authorities. You can see this and other such on websites listing Pompeian inscriptions. It is fun to contrast this with Works Convenor Syd Harroway's 'The Social Contract? You Can Stuff It!' Syd was gently mocked for this by Ken Coates in *Socialist Register* (1971).

Despite the above reservations about content and relevance, Bond has written a very valuable book for those interested in both Roman and Labour history. The breadth and depth of her researches into the ancient and modern sources are quite admirable. Whilst, as her massive Bibliography shows, she may not have said the first word on some things, on many she has probably said the last. Overall, a Striking Achievement!

Barry Baldwin

Collapse?

Luke Kemp, *Goliath's Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse*, Penguin Viking 2025, Hardback, 580 pages, ISBN 9780241741238, £25

In their 2026 statement, the Atomic Scientists responsible for setting the hands of the 'Doomsday Clock', warn that "[o]ur current trajectory is unsustainable." Further, they state that it is now "85 seconds to midnight" – "midnight" signifying the end of human civilisation or a 'collapse' in the vernacular deployed by Luke Kemp in *Goliath's Curse*. That Kemp's 450 pages of archaeological and anthropological exposition, analysis and argument – augmented by close to 100 pages of detailed notes – explain that "collapse" is a common feature of human society gives some sobering long-range context as we approach "midnight" in the here and now.

Unlike the Atomic Scientists, who provide an annual warning informed by short- and medium-range (historically speaking) analysis, in *Goliath's Curse* Kemp attempts a world history where "collapse" is a core, recurring and indeed a driving feature of human society to date. In a comparatively brief end section of the book, he applies the 'lessons' of his researches to our present constellation of collapse-inducing drivers.

What, then, has driven human society – and the arrangements of customs, practices, power networks, economic relations and hierarchies developed within such societies – towards repeated "collapse"? Kemp's main thesis, buttressed by extensive interpretations of the archaeological record, is that: when the ensemble of factors that emerge in any human society reach a certain point characterised by rising inequality, institutionalisation of extractive – economic and otherwise – relations and concentrated rule they become "Goliath" systems, vulnerable to unexpected events. These events may be 'classically catastrophic', such as an earthquake or drought or eruption. They may also resemble the smaller-scale and entirely unexpected, as with the Biblical telling of the story.

In Kemp's account of these cycles of collapse, the 'event' of collapse itself has driven the further development of human society, whilst admitting that the 'next collapse' looks set to be terminal. This thesis stands in contradiction to the idea – promoted by Stephen Pinker and many others – of a continuous, upward arc of cultural and civilisational human development. Kemp's account, mobilising a blooming archaeological record and his interpretation of it within the 'Goliath framework', also dispels the enduring claim that pre-'civilisational' humans were brutish, violent and destructive creatures. Peter Kropotkin's 1893 lecture 'Justice and Morality' – a rebuttal of the ideas promoted by 'Darwin's Bulldog',

Thomas Huxley – did similar work, without the benefit of access to the latest archaeological findings but with the benefit of a great deal more in the way of clear alternative ideas or coherent ideology. This is no accident as Kemp himself is expressly averse to ideology, which he dismisses simply as "stories to justify" inequality. This one-sided assessment of systems of ideas and their material basis is a central weakness of *Goliath's Curse* and one which invites critical attention to Kemp's overall approach. The limits of this approach are most fully exhibited in the final sections of the book, which deal with the contemporary prospect of collapse, where the intellectual apparatus has a distinctly utilitarian aspect familiar in the burgeoning academic field of 'catastrophic risk'.

The next collapse – be it thermonuclear, climate catastrophe, pandemic or AI induced – will, as the Atomic Scientists and a host of others explain, likely be terminal for humanity. None of the creative drivers Kemp identifies from previous collapses will propel the next instalment of human society. Kemp acknowledges as much but his proposed remedies amount to abstract policy proposals that – like the earlier sections of his book – take no account of how radical breaks in the social order occurred or might occur (short of "collapse"). This is at the very least an insufficient approach given the stakes.

Despite some insufficiency, Kemp's book offers an encyclopaedic and truly fascinating account of a key part of human history and serves as a warning to us all.

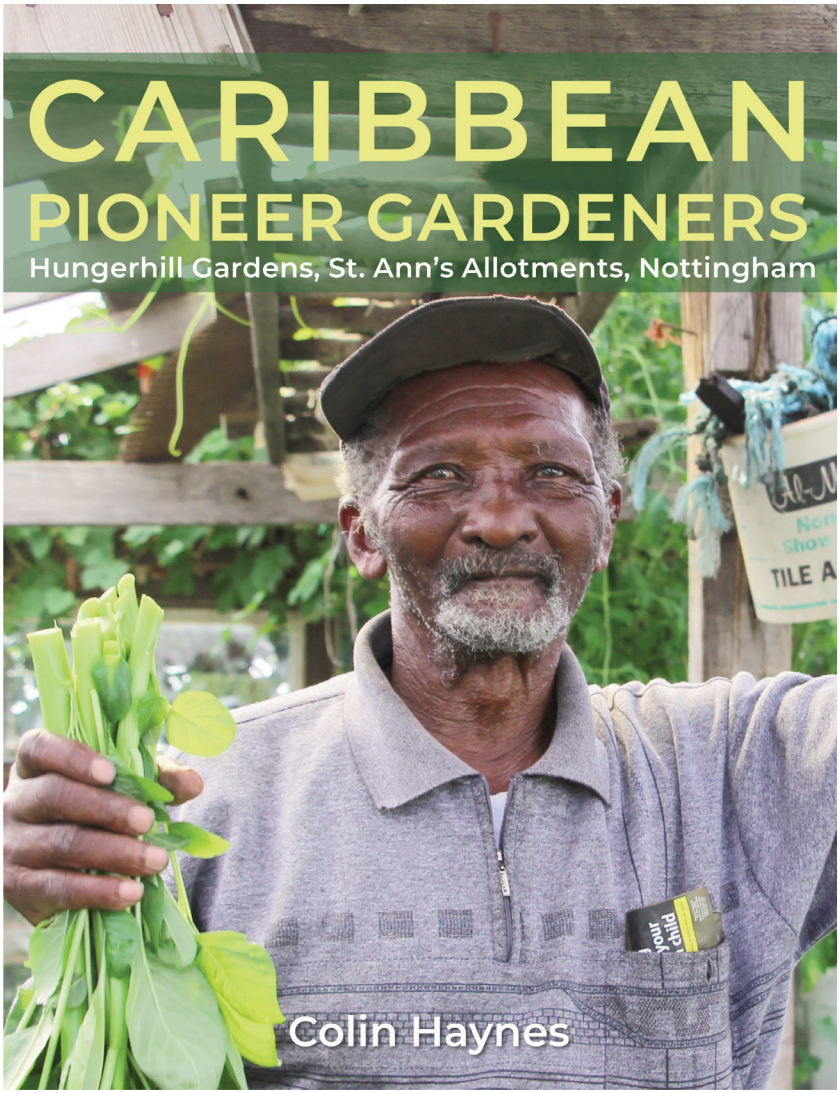
Tom Unterrainer

Fruit of the Earth

Colin Haynes, *Caribbean Pioneer Gardeners: Hungerhill Gardens, St Ann's Allotments, Nottingham*, Five Leaves Publications, 2026, 76 pages large format, full colour photos, paperback ISBN 9781915434449, £12.99

Nottingham has a distinguished gardening history, celebrated for its roses and Harry Wheatcroft, the socialist nurseryman who introduced the Peace Rose to Britain. Now, the Caribbean Pioneer Gardeners adds a wholesome, abundant and fruitful new chapter to that history. Colin Haynes' photographic record of cultivating Hungerhill Gardens, aka St Ann's Allotments, testifies to Nottingham's clement climate and fertile soil on the south-facing slopes of the Trent Valley. It features the experiences of six Caribbean gardeners, told in their own words. They had been brought up on smallholdings in Jamaica and were already experienced gardeners

when they found the overgrown plots in St Ann's available for very low rents. They learned to grow crops they knew in a colder climate.

Over the years, they were able to take on additional plots and produce large quantities of vegetables for their families and to satisfy the demand in the community. They built remarkable greenhouses and summer houses with scrap materials, and cultivated using traditional tools from Jamaica, bequeathing a vibrant legacy to Britain's oldest and largest allotment site.

Tony Simpson