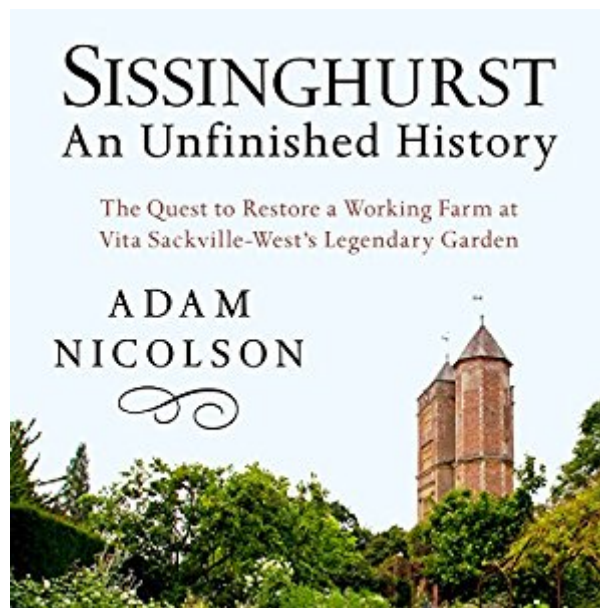


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Sissinghurst, An Unfinished History: The Quest To Restore A Working Farm At Vita Sackville-West's Legendary Garden



Synopsis

Adam Nicolson's powerful memoir reveals the history of one of Europe's most famous gardens and the ongoing battle over its future. From lavish palace for Elizabethan nobles to dreary jailhouse for 18th-century prisoners of war, from well-manicured country house for a string of landed families to weed-choked ruin, Sissinghurst, in Kent, has become one of the most illustrious estates in England - and its future may prove to be just as intriguing as its past. In the 1930s, English poet Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, acquired land that had once been owned by Vita's ancestors. Together they created elaborate gardens filled with roses, apple trees, vivid flowers, and scenic paths lined with hedges and pink brick walls. Vita, a gardening correspondent for the Observer and a close friend of Virginia Woolf, opened Sissinghurst to the public. But the thriving working farm began to change after her death. Her son, Nigel, instituted sweeping changes, including transferring ownership of the estate to Britain's National Trust in 1967 to avoid extensive taxation. For author Adam Nicolson, the grandson of Harold and Vita, Sissinghurst was always more than a tourist attraction; it was his home. As a boy, Nicolson hiked the same trails that Roman conquerors walked centuries before. With wistful imagination, fascination with natural beauty, and connection to the land, Nicolson has returned home to restore Sissinghurst's glory. His journey to recreate a sustainable and functioning farm, despite resistance from the National Trust, makes for a compelling memoir of family, history, and the powerful relationship between people and nature.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I value Adam Nicolson's thorough description of the efforts he and his family have taken to bring farming back to Sissinghurst, and thereby fold the past into the present - making a working farm and orchards a part of Sissinghurst again in conjunction with the famous garden. The resistance that Adam encountered to this idea from its conception - the outright rudeness of Sissinghurst's employees (so much for British reserve!) - the years it's taken to get the plan going, and the necessity of explaining his reasons over and over to so many people, including mocking journalists and other commentators - seems totally ridiculous. The National Trust and the residents and employees of Sissinghurst are extremely lucky that he didn't just throw up his hands and say, the hell with it. (But I don't think the grandson of Vita Sackville-West would ever back down from a challenge.) I admired the detailed history of Sissinghurst and the Kentish Weald that the author provides. But to me, these portions of the book are not quite as interesting as Nicolson's interactions with the National Trust personnel, and the way he dealt with the prejudices of Sissinghurst employees to a working farm close to the gardens and their objections to incorporating the farm's produce into the restaurant's menu. For example, my preference is for the sections of the book that discussed the tenant farmers of V. Sackville-West's and Harold Nicolson's time, and beyond, than the section of the book detailing the lives of the residents of Sissinghurst during its Tudor period. What I think I will also remember about this book is learning about the unhappy life of Nigel Nicolson.

The body of work chronicling history of rural England has received a new and somewhat unusual contribution with Adam Nicholson's book, "Sissinghurst." Truth in advertising compels me to admit that I visited this establishment in the mid-1990s, briefly met his father Nigel Nicholson (I did not know who he was when I did and might have asked why he published "Portrait of a Marriage" had I known) and even managed to implement some of his grandmother Vita Sackville West's ideas about gardening, however imperfectly, into my own small backyard, most notably her fondness for Iceberg roses. I am also a huge fan of his grandfather Harold's diaries which feature encounters with everyone from the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, to Winston Churchill, Charles Lindberg, Antony Eden and Virginia Woolf. Finally, I too have a house in my past that has played as large a role in my life as Sissinghurst does for Adam Nicholson. I am therefore very favourably disposed to like this book, just on the fact of its pedigree alone. Adam Nicolson provides the readers of this book with not just a history of Sissinghurst, but a vision of it for the future which could be applied to other similar establishments throughout the United Kingdom. Sissinghurst lies in Kent, an area renowned for its agricultural bounty. It is thought to be capable of growing just about anything and for many

years served as major source of food for London and other large cities.

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