A NEW FILM shows how Alexander Reford has continued his great-grandmother's work, in his own way

Historic gardens have a story to tell

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

It has been a decade since Alexander Reford launched a contemporary-garden festival near his great-grandmother's spectacular gardens on the lower banks of the St. Lawrence River. On a five-hectare plot, separated from the river by stands of towering pine trees, the International Garden Festival at the Jardins de Métis has added the brio of cutting-edge design to the landscape dominated since the 1920s by Elsie Reford's traditional English garden, renowned for its varieties of primula, lilies, roses, gentians and its emblem, the rare Himalayan blue poppy.

Each spring, dozens of gardeners dig and plant and build, working furiously to prepare for the public opening of both the historic and contemporary gardens. A week or so before the June opening, the creators of the "avant-gardens" – designers, artists and landscape architects from around the world – arrive to work.

In May 2008, I was there, too, not as a writer or visitor this time, but as a newly minted member of a film crew documenting the seasons and the players in these gardens, the object of passion and dedication that has spanned generations.

For while Elsie Reford flouted the conventions of the upper classes and spent her summers nurturing her increasing fascination with plants, decades later her great-grandson Alexander, a historian and writer, would give up life in the big city to re-energize the site and add his own unconventional touch.

I had often wondered what motivated them to make such sacrifices. The fertility of the Reford Gardens, 350 kilometers east of Quebec City in a micro-climate created by moist air and a heavy snow cover, is extraordinary. Elsie was entranced by the possibilities of growing species of lilies (she loved Martagon best) and other flowers; it seemed the more she carved out her precious garden alongside the brook that runs through the property, the more ambitious she became. She could have been socializing, relaxing, but until old age she would be gardening – from spring to fall, from dawn to dusk.

LOUISE TANGUAY JARDINS DE MÉTIS

Elsie Reford's Crabapple Garden at the Jardins de Métis: Reford flouted the conventions of the upper classes and spent her summers nurturing her increasing fascination with plants.

ROBERT BARONET JARDINS DE MÉTIS

Alexander Reford, a historian and writer, gave up city life to re-energize the gardens.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

Elsie Reford in an undated photo: She gardened from dawn to dusk, spring to fall.

Alexander, it seemed to me, had done much the same thing, leaving the University of Toronto to re-acquire the gardens from the Quebec government on behalf of his family and, with an unyielding determination, launching new projects, becoming French speaking and doggedly increasing the relevance of his great-grandmother's legacy. He writes about the gardens, speaks all over the world about them, and lives now in the village of St. Octave, on a high bluff overlooking the river and the gardens below.

Why, I wondered, did the gardens engender such devotion in these two people? What thread bound them, each accomplished in their own right, to this property? Many times as I wandered along those garden paths, the wind tossing the tops of the trees and the scent of flowers in the air, I imagined the gardens as Elsie or Alexander knew them, before the public saw them, at dusk or in early morning.

An idea for a documentary film grew from that, and to my delight was greeted with interest by two Montreal filmmakers, Barry Lazar and Garry Beitel. Their production company set about fine-tuning the proposal, looking for funding, bringing director, cinematographer and soundman on-board – and, in the process, putting me on a steep filmmaking learning curve. The film, Twice Upon a Garden, screens the weekend of March 26 to 28 at the International Festival of Films on Art.

My first job was researching Elsie Reford's story, scouring archival letters and journals, finding individuals close to the story to interview. I spent countless hours with the director, Philippe Baylaucq, a seasoned documentary filmmaker, poring over details and discussing the trajectory of the story. I soon realized that planning is everything, from the type of equipment, transportation and accommodation to the itinerary for each shooting day, since full use must be made of time on the site.

And I mean full use. We would assemble around 6 a.m., breakfast and organize snacks for the day. Bad weather? No problem. We were out there in fog, winter winds, rain or shine; I was the designated umbrella holder during downpours, not over a person but one important piece of equipment: the camera. The shooting day rarely ended before 7 or 8 p.m.

We drove around the site in covered golf carts, from the historic to the festival gardens or to Estevan, the lodge that was once the centrepiece of the property when it was a salmon-fishing destination, now housing a fine restaurant, exhibits and historic memorabilia. We filmed the greenhouses and gardens out of public view, one of them growing hundreds of breathtaking blue poppies.

As I logged film, noting the events on each 30-minute cassette, I marvelled at the patient consideration of cameraman Marc Gadoury with every shot, the director alongside him, soundman André Boisvert capturing the audio. Sometimes they seemed to wait forever, then something delightful would happen – a group of children running into a scene, thousands of snow geese settling on the shore or, once, magically, when filming a garden of wires and silver balls being assembled by a trio of Italian designers, discovering in the foreground an intricate spider web, dotted with silvery dewdrops. We logged 100 hours of film before we were through.

We followed horticulturist Patricia Gallant from early spring walkabout to her autumn wrapping of the plants, the garden workers digging and cleaning in the historic gardens and helping the festival garden designers – some of them increasingly anxious as opening day loomed – to prepare their variously clever gardens: raising sod-covered mounds, sinking pipes for a water display, wiring up potatoes for sound.

We interviewed Alexander and other principals in the story, recorded the frenetic activity in the kitchen for dinner events and the rushing Mitis River as it made its way to the St. Lawrence. We spent time in scissor lifts for a bird's eye view, in streams to get a water view and forever at the end of a jib, a boom with a camera on one end designed to get really close to those exquisite flowers. I recall hours in a field of lupins, an entire afternoon filming roses on the Long Walk, an evening under a full moon recording night photographer Linda Rutenberg and her husband as they torchlit and photographed a plant with leaves so giant it looked positively primeval.

The conductor of this great visual symphony was director Baylaucq, now filmmaker-in-residence at the National Film Board in Montreal. A consummate craftsman and, as important, a skilled organizer and negotiator, he has been making films for more than two decades.

In my role as writer, researcher and general factotum, I spent countless hours with Baylaucq before, during and after the filming, discussing the content and narrative arc of the story.

Part of the allure of great gardens is the story. The walled garden at Charleston Farm in Sussex is so much more evocative because Vanessa Bell entertained her sister Virginia Woolf on the terrace; Sissinghurst's white garden is more magical when one imagines Vita Sackville-West and her husband coming up with a plan for it 80 years earlier.

The gardens at Métis tell the story of a decisive woman who in her younger life communed with major political figures in the city, rode and fished in the country and, finally, discovered the joy of creating a beautiful garden. Her legacy has found a champion in her great-grandson.

Together, they built one of the great gardens of Canada and gave me the opportunity to realize an experience I had always wished to have – to wander through those gardens at dusk like Elsie did, with only the wind in the trees and the scent of Regal lilies for company.

Twice Upon a Garden will screen in competition at the International Festival of Films on Art on Friday, March 26, at 6:30 p.m. at the Canadian Centre for Ar-

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