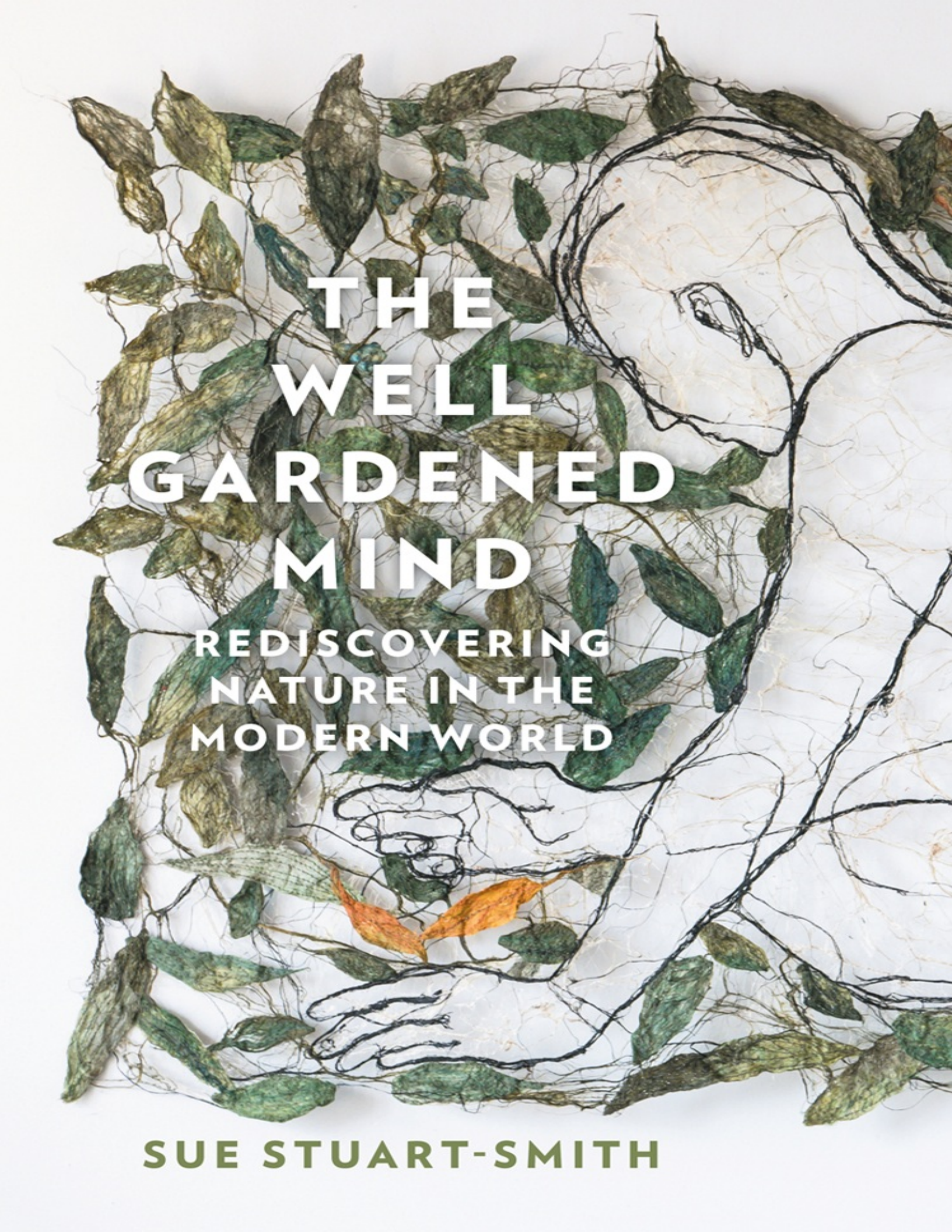
THE WELL GARDENED MIND
REDISCOVERING NATURE IN THE MODERN WORLD
SUE STUART-SMITH

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Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World

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Dedication

For Tom

Epigraph

‘All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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1

BEGINNINGS

Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

LONG BEFORE I wanted to be a psychiatrist, long before I had any inkling that gardening might play an important role in my life, I remember hearing the story of how my grandfather was restored after the First World War.

He was born Alfred Edward May, but was always known as Ted. Little more than a boy when he joined the Royal Navy, he trained as a Marconi wireless operator and became a submariner. In the spring of 1915 during the Gallipoli campaign, the submarine he was serving on ran aground in the Dardanelles. Most of the crew survived only to be taken prisoner. Ted kept a tiny diary in which he documented the early months of his captivity in Turkey but his subsequent time in a series of brutal labour camps is not recorded. The last of these was a cement factory on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, from which he eventually escaped by sea in 1918.

Ted was rescued and treated on a British hospital ship, where he recovered just enough strength to attempt the long journey home overland. Eager to be reunited with his fiancée, Fanny, whom he had left behind as a fit young man, he turned up on her doorstep in a battered old raincoat with a Turkish fez on his head. She barely recognised him for he weighed little more than six stone and had lost all of his hair. The 4,000-mile journey had, he told Fanny, been ‘horrendous’. When he underwent the naval medical examination, his malnutrition was found to be so advanced that he was given only a few months to live.

But Fanny nursed him faithfully, feeding him tiny amounts of soup and other sustenance on an hourly basis, so that gradually he was able to digest food again. Ted began the slow process of regaining his health and he and Fanny were married soon after. In that first year, he would sit for hours stroking his bald head with two soft brushes, willing his hair to grow back. When it finally did, it was prolific, but it was white.

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Love and patient determination enabled Ted to defy the gloomy prognosis he had been given but his prison camp experiences stayed with him and his terrors were worst at night. He was especially afraid of spiders and crabs because they had crawled all over the prisoners as they tried to sleep. For years to come, he could not bear to be alone in the dark.

The next phase of Ted's recovery began in 1920 when he signed up for a year-long course in horticulture, one of many initiatives set up in the postwar years with the aim of rehabilitating ex-servicemen who had been damaged by the war. After this he travelled to Canada, leaving Fanny at home. He went in search of new opportunities, in the hope that working the land might further improve his physical and mental strength. At that time the Canadian government was running programmes to encourage ex-servicemen to migrate and thousands of men who had returned from the war made that long Atlantic crossing.

Ted laboured on the wheat harvest in Winnipeg and then found more settled employment as a gardener on a cattle ranch in Alberta. Fanny joined him for some of the two years he spent there but for whatever reason their dream of starting a new life in Canada did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, Ted returned to England a stronger, fitter man.

A few years later, he and Fanny bought a smallholding in Hampshire where Ted kept pigs, bees and hens, and grew flowers, fruit and vegetables. For five years during the Second World War, he worked at the Admiralty wireless station in London; my mother remembers his pigskin suitcase, which travelled up with him on the train, packed full of home-slaughtered meat and home-grown vegetables. He and the suitcase would then return carrying supplies of sugar, butter and tea. She relates with some pride how the family never had to eat margarine during the war and that Ted even grew his own tobacco.

I remember his good humour and warmth of spirit, a warmth that emanated from a man who seemed to my childish eyes to be robust and at ease with himself. He was not intimidating and did not wear his traumas on his sleeve. He spent hours tending his garden and his greenhouse and was almost always attached to a pipe with his tobacco pouch never far away. Ted's long and healthy life – he lived into his late seventies – and his reconciliation to some of the appalling abuses he experienced, is attributed in our family mythology to the restorative effects of gardening and working the land.

Ted died suddenly when I was twelve from an aneurysm that ruptured while he was out walking his much-loved Shetland sheepdog. The local paper ran an obituary entitled: 'Once youngest submariner dies'. It described how Ted had been reported dead twice during the First World War and that when he and a group of other prisoners escaped from the cement factory, they had lived for

group of other prisoners escaped from the cement factory, they had lived for twenty-three days on water alone. The obituary's closing words document his love of gardening: 'He devoted much of his leisure time to the cultivation of his extensive garden and achieved fame locally as the grower of several rare orchids.'

Somewhere inside her, my mother must have drawn on this when my father's death, in his late forties, left her a relatively young widow. In the second spring afterwards she found a new home and took on the task of restoring a neglected cottage garden. Even then, in my youthful, self-preoccupied state, I noticed that alongside the digging and weeding, a parallel process of reconciling herself to her loss was taking place.

At that stage of my life, gardening was not something I thought I would ever devote much time to. I was interested in the world of literature and was intent on embracing the life of the mind. As far as I was concerned gardening was a form of outdoor housework and I would no more have plucked a weed than baked a scone or washed the curtains.

My father had been in and out of hospital during my university years and he died just as I started my final year. The news came by phone in the early hours one morning and as soon as dawn broke I walked out into the quiet Cambridge streets, through the park and down to the river. It was a bright, sunny October day and the world was green and still. The trees and the grass and the water were somehow consoling and in those peaceful surroundings, I found it possible to acknowledge to myself the awful reality, that beautiful as the day was, my father was no longer alive to see it.

Perhaps this green and watery place reminded me of happier times and of the landscape that had first made an impression on me as a child. My father kept a boat on the Thames and when my brother and I were small, we spent many holidays and weekends on the water, once making an expedition up to the river's source, or as near to it as we could get. I remember the stillness of the early morning mists, the feeling of freedom playing in the summer meadows and fishing with my brother, in what was then our favourite pastime.

During my last few terms at Cambridge, poetry took on a new emotional significance. My world had irrevocably changed and I clung to verses that spoke of the consolations of nature and the cycle of life. Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot were both sustaining, but above all I turned to Wordsworth, the poet who himself had learned:

> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity …

Grief is isolating and it is no less so when it is a shared experience. A loss that devastates a family generates a need to lean on each other but at the same time, everyone is bereft, everyone is in a state of collapse. There is an impulse to protect each other from too much raw emotion and it can be easier to let feelings surface away from people. Trees, water, stones and sky may be impervious to human emotion but they are not rejecting of us either. Nature is unperturbed by our feelings and in there being no contagion, we can experience a kind of consolation that helps assuage the loneliness of loss.

In the first few years that followed my father's death, I was drawn towards nature, not in gardens, but by the sea. His ashes had been committed near his family home on the south coast, in the waters of the Solent, a busy channel full of boats and ships, but it was on the long solitary beaches of north Norfolk, with barely a boat in sight, that I found greatest solace. The horizons were the widest I had ever seen. It felt like the edge of the known world and seemed as close to him as I could be.

Having studied Freud for one of my exam papers, I developed an interest in the workings of the mind. I gave up my plan to do a PhD in literature and decided I would train to be a doctor. Then, in the third year of my medical training, I married Tom for whom gardening was a way of life. I decided that if he loved it, then I would too but if I'm honest, I was still a garden sceptic. Gardening seemed at that point to be another chore that had to be done, although it was nicer (as long as the sun was shining) to be outdoors rather than in.

A few years later, along with our tiny baby Rose, we moved to some converted farm buildings close to Tom's family home at Serge Hill in Hertfordshire. Over the next few years Rose was joined by Ben and Harry while Tom and I hurled ourselves into making a garden from scratch. The Barn, as we had named our new home, was surrounded by an open field and its position on a north-facing hill exposed to the winds meant that above all, we needed shelter. We carved out some plots from the stony field around us, planting trees and hedges and making enclosures of wattle fencing as well as labouring over the ground to improve it. None of this could have happened without an enormous amount of help and encouragement from Tom's parents and a number of willing friends. When we held stone-picking parties, Rose along with her grandparents, aunts and uncles, joined in the task of filling up endless buckets of rocks and pebbles that needed to be carted away.

I had been physically and emotionally uprooted and needed to rebuild my sense of home but still, I was not particularly conscious that gardening might play a part in helping me put down roots. I was much more aware of the