

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Hunt, John Dixon. *John Evelyn: A Life of Domesticity*

Jennifer Strtak

Volume 41, Number 4, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061945ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061945ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Strtak, J. (2018). Review of [Hunt, John Dixon. *John Evelyn: A Life of Domesticity*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(4), 248–250. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061945ar>

Hunt, John Dixon.

John Evelyn: A Life of Domesticity.

London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Pp. 328 + 51 b/w ill. ISBN 978-1-78023-836-4 (hardcover) £14.95.

John Dixon Hunt's thoroughly illustrated book takes readers on a journey through John Evelyn's efforts at domesticity. The work differs markedly from other texts on Evelyn because it does not overwhelmingly focus upon the gardener and writer's *Diary*. Instead, it focuses attention on leading biographies and public and private collections of Evelyn's pedagogical and scientific writings.

Hunt addresses, in a balanced way, key moments from Evelyn's public and personal life, family, home, and interests. What emerges is a fresh portrait of the acclaimed seventeenth-century figure, one that paints him as a man intent upon employing his personal pursuits for the betterment of England. Engaging in activities such as numismatics and arboriculture was Evelyn's means of coping with the religious and political disorder that afflicted seventeenth-century England. However, indulging in personal activities allowed Evelyn to contemplate and write on social issues and environmental changes and, ultimately, contribute knowledge and insight to early Enlightenment culture.

In chapter 1, Hunt offers readers two definitions of domesticity. First, and more familiarly, domesticity encompasses participation in the events of home and family life. Second, it consists of harnessing and transporting concepts, designs, and resources from one place to another. Domesticity was for Evelyn, on both intimate and public levels, inextricably linked with improvement. This connection therefore compelled him to constantly seek to make novel and foreign ideas available to his family, friends, and nation. If ideas could be adapted and made better they could be used for growth and enrichment.

Chapters 2 through 5 illustrate how Evelyn's early life and travels influenced his passion for domesticity. Born into a wealthy family, Evelyn's life was marked by privilege from an early age. An opportunity was made for him to study at Eton; however, his dislike of the school's disciplinary regime deterred him from attending. Though later educated at Oxford, his most impactful learning experiences were his Continental travels. In 1641 he visited parks and gardens in the Low Countries, and between 1643 and 1647 he journeyed through Italy and France, where he indulged his passion for gardening by visiting Pierre Morin's oval garden.

Evelyn worked out from his personal passions and enthusiasms as he domesticated ideas and designs from the Continent. An important medium of domestication for Evelyn was translation. He translated European texts on landscape design and arboriculture that he thought could be used to increase knowledge about town planning and gardening in England. He often added personal remarks and designs—which he had acquired through first-hand observations while travelling—to these translations. As Evelyn synthesized information on Europe's gardening heritage with his knowledge of England's climate and topography, he laid the foundation for English gardening.

Evelyn's efforts at horticultural domestication were furthered at Sayes Court, the home he shared with his wife, his children, and his friends. Sayes Court was both a family dwelling and a site of experimentation where Evelyn investigated how foreign forms and ideas could be combined and used to improve domestic circumstances. At Sayes Court, Evelyn replicated Morin's oval grove; however, the French design was not compatible with English weather. He therefore eliminated the oval and extended the grove to create a garden better suited to the English climate and terrain. In reinterpreting and renewing French landscape design, Evelyn built a bridge between Continental and domestic knowledge and methods, and established himself as a distinguished figure in English landscaping.

Chapters 6 through 10 address Evelyn's civil servitude and participation in the Royal Society. During the second and third Dutch Wars he served as a commissioner for sick and wounded seamen and prisoners of war and helped to organize accommodations, supplies, and medical care for soldiers throughout England. County visits presented chances to meet admirals and commissioners, an aspect of the job that Evelyn greatly enjoyed as he believed that communing with people was the most profitable mode of learning.

At the Royal Society, Evelyn dedicated himself to the creation and advancement of knowledge. In October 1662, he gave a lecture on forestry, which he turned into the bestseller *Sylva*. The work called for the private domestication of timber for the benefit of the state, as the Royal Navy required timber to build wooden walls for military and commercial activities. *Sylva* was continuously reprinted in following years, with successive generations adding observations and information to Evelyn's thoughts, analyses, and notes.

Hunt returns to domesticity in Evelyn's private life in the last two chapters. Evelyn spent most of the 1670s in the company of the young maid of honour,

Margaret Godolphin. Their bond was platonic but deep and caused Evelyn to further develop his already strong sense of piety. For Margaret, he composed *Oeconomics to a Newly Married Friend*, a treatise similar to that which he had composed for his wife in 1648.

In 1699, upon the death of his brother, John inherited Wotton House, the seat of the Evelyn family. The two had created England's first Italian garden there in the mid-seventeenth century and when John inherited the property he dedicated much time to the management of the estate and gardens. With knowledge that Wotton would fall to his grandson Jack, Evelyn wrote *Memories for my Grand-son*, an instruction book with practical knowledge and advice for the care of Wotton. The instruction book was Evelyn's way of ensuring that the family home and gardens remained a paradise of arboreal richness and natural amenities in future years.

Hunt's book is lucid, well-documented, and an informative read for those looking to explore John Evelyn as a keen gardener, an avid learner, and an instructor, both inside and outside of the family. In reading this book we are left with the understanding that Evelyn's public and private efforts at domesticity were of equal importance: paramount to Evelyn was encouraging local labour for the benefit of the wider society. Hunt's detailed emphasis on Evelyn's horticultural achievements and advocacy for synthesis, learning, and domestic improvement therefore renders this text a most useful tool in pulling the curtain a little further back on the renowned gardener and intellectual.

JENNIFER STRTAK

Yale University

Jimenes, Rémi.

Charlotte Guillard. Une femme imprimeur à la Renaissance.

Rennes, Tours : Presses universitaires de Rennes, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais de Tours, 2017. 303 p. + 90 fig., 4 tableaux. ISBN 978-2-7535-7316-1 (relié) 34 €.

Précédé d'une brève préface de Roger Chartier, le magnifique ouvrage de Rémi Jimenes convoque en une série de tableaux éloquentes l'ensemble des acteurs de la production du livre imprimé à Paris dans la première moitié du XVI^e siècle.