

Building My Zen Garden: The Adventures and Occasional Mayhem of a Western Amateur Seeking to Create a Peaceful Place That Calms the Soul by Kieran Egan is a good book with a long title. The book jacket misleadingly bills this as a hilarious adventure of an Irish-born Canadian professor as he builds a garden of peace and serenity in a neglected corner of his back yard. This is neither "Buster Keaton Builds a Gazebo" nor "The Nutty Professor does Zen."

I wouldn't describe the book as hilarious and reference to Egan's ancestry is an attempt to exploit Irish stereotypes.

Egan is no typical Irishman, nor Canadian, for that matter. He is exceptional. In his book, he refers to a classical, religious education, he holds two PhDs from American universities: one from Stanford and one from Cornell, he is a professor of education at Simon Fraser University, and he has published sixteen academic books. He is a grandfather, along with his wife he is an empty-nester, and he continues to lead a successful academic career.

His project of building a Japanese tea house and Zen garden in a back corner of his Burnaby yard seems to be a self-prescribed exercise in detaching himself from the work that got him to this point in his life. Landscape gardening and building construction are endeavors largely untried by Egan.

While other houses in his neighbourhood are being razed and replaced by larger buildings with grander price tags and concomitantly smaller gardens, Egan swims counter-current, electing to improve his garden. His act will add relatively little to the resale value of his home, but it offers respite for Egan both in its construction and as a tranquil study upon completion.

Far from spontaneously starting to build without a plan, Egan is quite methodical. It was a visit to Japan where he observed the transformation of his friends' balcony from a dull few square meters into a treat for the eye and spirit that inspired the project. Thereafter Egan spends as much time selecting the design and materials for the different aspects of his project as he does with its construction.

In fact, Egan reads about the history of Japanese gardens and tea houses. His research is remarkably thorough and it enriches him, it improves the authenticity of the undertaking and it enhances Egan's narrative as he shares the fruit of his labour. Along with Egan's research, he includes asides such as the public health value of cats in controlling rats that spread disease.

This is a chatty book about a man enthusing over a current project. On a deeper level it is about a man preparing for a change. There are anecdotes about locating suppliers of nursery stock appropriate for a Zen garden, and receiving delivery and planting instructions. There are stories familiar to most readers about dealing with building supply stores and trying to fill a small and specialized need in a store that sells large volumes of standard needs. For me, the most interesting of Egan's anecdotes is when Egan relinquishes the carpentry work to a carpenter, not entirely, but as the lead hand. Together, Egan and his carpenter create a synergy of design and building experience. The rate of progress and the quality of the project jump and Egan finishes with an attractive tea house cum study situated in a Zen garden.

The tea house and garden complement each other to create an ideal place for Egan to do whatever Egan decides to do next.