

BOOK REVIEWS

Nature displaced, nature displayed: order and beauty in botanical gardens, by Nuala C. Johnson, London and New York, Tauris Historical Geography Series No. 7, 2011, 272 pp., UK£ 59.50 (hardback), ISBN 1848857128

Botanical gardens are one of the best modern incarnations of the Peripatetic Schools of ancient Greece. Learning as you walk is probably the most natural and, certainly, the most ancient way to learn. Our forebears learnt about the world by observing and walking through it. Other cultures fixed their history and knowledge on the landscape, most notably through the remarkable Songlines of the Australian Aborigines. Pondering on natural philosophy as they walked enabled the ancient Greeks to perfect their understanding of everything from the nature of matter to political theory. A garden acts as just the same kind of framework – they make the perfect memory map in our minds on which to hang hundreds of facts. To learn botany or horticulture, it is vital to walk amongst and to see, to feel and to handle plants.

Having worked at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin for 16 years, I was more than pleasantly surprised by this book. It is a clever analysis of what botanical gardens are all about, and by recounting and contrasting the history of three botanical gardens in these islands – Belfast, Dublin and Cambridge – Dr Johnson explores these gardens from a fresh and a new perspective. Her methods work well, and what might be the somewhat tedious history of any organisation is far better seen in comparison with that of other like-minded establishments. Replacing wild nature with an ordered and cultivated landscape can be brought about, as Nuala Johnson shows, in many different ways.

Dublin was established in 1795 through the serendipitous meeting of Walter Wade and John Foster. Foster was eager to plant the family estate at Collon in County Louth with exotic trees. Little wonder he recognised the need for a botanical garden in Ireland and helped to steer it through parliament. In his view, Ireland had an agricultural and horticultural backwardness that needed correcting. Founded by a government bill and nurtured by the Dublin Society, Glasnevin soon became, in the words of its superintendent David Moore, a place to ‘foster a taste for testing and enhancing agricultural practise and expertise [for] farmers, labourers and herdsman’. Walter Wade was anxious that the garden did not become the preserve of a university or academics, but that it should play a ‘national’ function as well. Two years before it was established, there had been a proposal to found the garden through a triumvirate of the Dublin Society, Trinity College Dublin and the College of Physicians, and Speaker Foster had vigorously opposed this.

Belfast in comparison was founded as a private limited company through the sale of shares to members of the Belfast Natural History Society. This method had been employed by them previously to found their museum. It is a sorry reflection today that such remarkable philanthropy and passion are no longer utilised to establish such fine

institutions. The principle behind their zeal was that such a garden was of 'utmost importance to the citizenry of Belfast'.

Cambridge Botanic Garden had its origin before either of the Irish gardens as a physic garden. It was privately founded in 1760 by Richard Walker, the vice-master of Trinity College, who donated it to the university in 1762. His reasoning was that the practice of 'Physic' was of the greatest utility to mankind, and knowledge of plants was fundamental to that. The gardens were to undergo a revolution when the trustees gave way to the idea of using the land to establish the Fitzwilliam Museum. In 1825, John Henslow was appointed professor of Botany and undertook the establishment of the garden at its new and current site. Henslow was to foster the early career of Charles Darwin just three years later. His far-sighted vision meant that the new garden was founded almost entirely upon scientific principles and became an exemplar of botanical science. Henslow was a passionate advocate of observation, and he saw the classroom aspects of the garden as their greatest and most abiding value.

Botanical gardens founded by government order, private enterprise or academic need provide remarkably different routes to the same end. What all these gardens had, and still have, in common was that beside their disparate purposes they were all essentially visually pleasing. The role of the botanical garden has never been more important for inspiring future plant scientists – after all one of the greatest questions facing the human race is 'how will we feed our grandchildren?' The National Botanic Gardens in Dublin may have been founded to dispel 'horticultural backwardness', but similar to all botanical gardens continues to educate all visitors in the fact that plants really are of the utmost importance to mankind.

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Mapping, measurement and metropolis: how land surveyors shaped eighteenth-century Dublin, by Finnian Ó Cionnaith, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2012, 278 pp., €45 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84682-348-0

Ó Cionnaith's book opens with a dramatic description of the tragic collapse of Essex Bridge on a rainy night in 1687, leading to the death of a coachman and one of his horses. The incident serves to highlight the strain on the city's many cramped thoroughfares before the Wide Streets Commission transformed large portions of the city centre from the mid-eighteenth century into the familiar, grand, Georgian streets that typify Dublin today. Throughout the book, the author relates similarly engaging stories that illuminate the daily life, concerns and practices of the several land surveyors that operated in and shaped Dublin city in the eighteenth century.

The book is divided into five parts, each containing on average four chapters. Part I: Chapters 1 and 2 describe land surveying in eighteenth-century Dublin as loosely controlled, competitive, controversial and of varying standard. Many of the best practitioners came from abroad to apply their trade in Ireland (John Rocque, Herman Moll, etc.), but often had to 'adjust to Irish surveying traditions if they wished to operate