

Elizabethanne Boran, E. Charles Nelson and Emer Lawlor (eds)

BOTANY & GARDENS IN EARLY MODERN IRELAND

(Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2022) isbn 978-1-80151-023-3, 336pp, 25x18cm, 91 illus., €45 hb

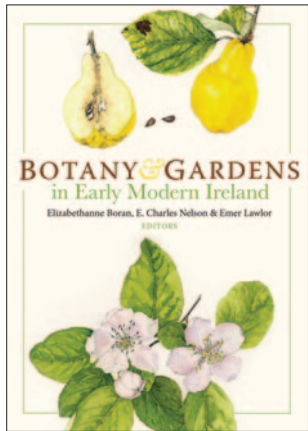
Robert O'Byrne and Finola O'Kane (eds)

DIGGING NEW GROUND:

THE IRISH COUNTRY HOUSE GARDEN, 1650-1900

(Irish Georgian Society, Dublin, 2022) isbn 978-1-838139-03-2, 224pp, 25x22cm, 127 illus., €40 hb

review by Toby Barnard



GARDENING, IN IRELAND AS ELSEWHERE, TENDS TO BE CATEGORISED AS EITHER USEFUL or ornamental. Yet, such a stark dichotomy over-simplifies; what was grown for humans or animals to eat, to cure illnesses, to dye cloth or to fashion housing, furnishings, tools, utensils and vessels might well enhance the look of the landscape. Given this range of applications, it is no surprise that the history of gardening in Ireland has attracted increasing attention. On the grandest scale, it forms an element in the studies of how land was reclaimed from the wild and then settled and cultivated. Archaeologists and landscape historians have identified what was grown, the new crops that were introduced and the techniques for their cultivation.

Many changes reflected other upheavals to which the island was subjected. Indigenous habits were condemned as inefficiently unproductive and slothful. The strange and imported were prized. It took centuries for the merits of the local ecology and traditional methods of exploiting it to be appreciated. Settlers from overseas brought with them unfamiliar tastes and aspirations; as the known world was enlarged, so novel foods and plants became available. A few were adopted with enthusiasm and success in Ireland, notably the potato; others, such as tobacco, proved unsuited to the climate, and those requiring costly nurture, like pineapples and melons, were confined to the estates of the wealthy, and thereby served as denominators of status. Meanwhile, first tulips, and soon magnolias, camellias, wisteria, and rhododendrons blossomed.

These two collections of essays originated in one case in setting the rich printed holdings of the Worth Library in Dublin in wider contexts. The second volume accompanied a striking exhibition under the auspices of the Irish Georgian Society. While neither volume aims to be a comprehensive history of Irish gardens and gardening, each outlines the main developments and offers numerous innovative insights. The role of print in stimulating botanical interests and in guiding gardeners is strongly represented. So too the ways in which the unfamiliar permeated Ireland, whether through published manuals, imported plants, changing horticultural fancies and fashions in landscaping or through adept individuals.

The term ‘botany’ suggests systematic study with efforts to describe accurately and to classify. It frequently shades into gardening, but not invariably. Sometimes it smacks of the stuffy library. Gardening was a wider-spread activity than poring over learned treatises. It encompassed a variety of approaches. Utility might be the sharpest spur to garden: then the household might be fed and doctored; others could be gratified with gifts of seasonal produce; the surplus might even be sold. It afforded pleasure, recreation and instruction; it could show the owner’s judgment and accomplishment and wealth. Yet, it is unclear how much the results owed to the proprietor alone. Women and children might be active in choosing, designing and cultivating. In *Botany & gardens in early modern Ireland*, Ruth Musielak argues persuasively that more credit for innovation and achievement in the eighteenth century should go to Laetitia Molesworth, the Countess of Orrery and Mary Delany. Early in the nineteenth century, Ellen Hutchins, remote on the margins of Bantry Bay, emerges as a talented collector and recorder of seaweeds, mosses, ferns and flowers. Finola O’Kane hints at what nuns may have contributed through their convent gardens. If sometimes the enclosures were organised to replicate a calvary, they – in common with monastic establishments – had to feed and heal a community as well as encouraging awe and thanks for divine bounty. More recently, Catherine FitzGerald in *Digging new ground* traces some of her own ideas as a landscape designer to female forbears in and around Glin in county Limerick.

Developments before the eighteenth century are traced and many of the known gardens and parks catalogued by Terence Reeves-Smith, E.C. Nelson and Vanda Costello. If in outline this is familiar, often thanks to the same authors’ earlier researches, much fresh detail is added. From the later seventeenth century, documentation becomes more abundant. Increasingly, the making and care of a garden or demesne became yet another aspect of commercialisation and the vagaries of fashionable consumerism; the role of individual fancy as to what was grown or how the ground was laid out might be negligible. Not only the physical labour but also the proficiency came from employees, whether fashionable landscape designers or adept propagators, plantsmen and nursery-keepers. Stephen Daniels and Finola O’Kane speculate about the influence of Humphrey Repton’s short stay in Dublin during 1783 may have had over his subsequent career as a designer. The encroachments of powerful individuals on Phoenix Park suggest how patronage networks that spanned the Irish Sea affected innovations in Ireland, including responses to the natural world. Elsewhere, the pervasive influence of the Low Countries, where many from Ireland had been educated – often in medicine – or traded and travelled, recurs in several accounts. Holland was a frequent source of lavish botanical books as well as of specimens shipped from remote continents via the Dutch East India Company.

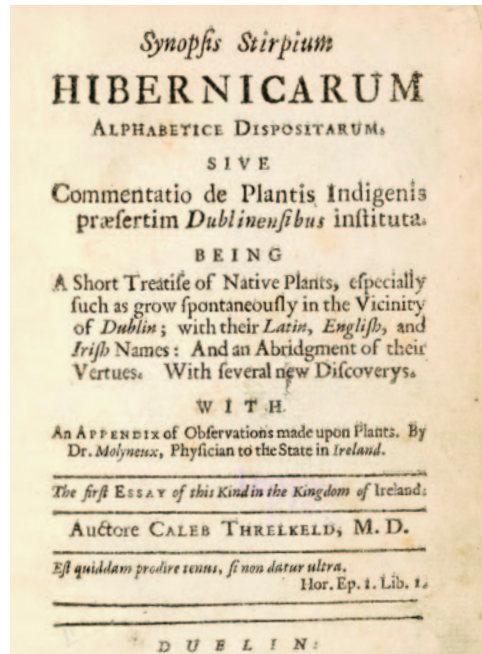
The earliest efforts to note both the common and unusual flora in Ireland arose as part of the bid to describe its terrain and to exploit its resources more exactly. As such they were frequently associated with the processes of colonisation and confiscation, although one precocious example, examined by Charles Nelson, focuses on an early seventeenth-century exile, Philip O’Sullivan Beare, who in his natural history was anxious to refute some of the disparagement shown by newcomers. The compiler of the first detailed Irish flora to be published (in 1726), Caleb Threkeld, is accorded searching attention. His achievements are applauded and his background introduces themes that recur

among botanists and gardeners. Threkeld originated in north-west England, where he served as a dissenting minister, before settling in Dublin. Curiosity about the world around him, an urge to better understand the seemingly infinite variety of creation, a sense of wonder, even an appreciation of ‘the beauty’ of some plants can be detected in Threkeld’s cataloguing and comments. Like many other careful investigators, he enquired after the therapeutic powers of what was growing, hoping that more accurate identification of their properties would yield public benefits. John Rutty, another polymathic enquirer in mid-eighteenth-century Dublin had similar hopes, as did Charles Smith, the Dungarvan-born apothecary prominent in documenting the Irish terrain. Yet, with at best sparse illustration, published herbals and floras seldom allowed precise identification of specific species, and could mislead seriously. Noxious plants were sometimes mistaken for the edible with fatal results. E.C. Nelson in describing the successive botanical gardens maintained by Trinity College stresses their educational purpose, not least to aid the accurate identification of the useful and toxic plants.

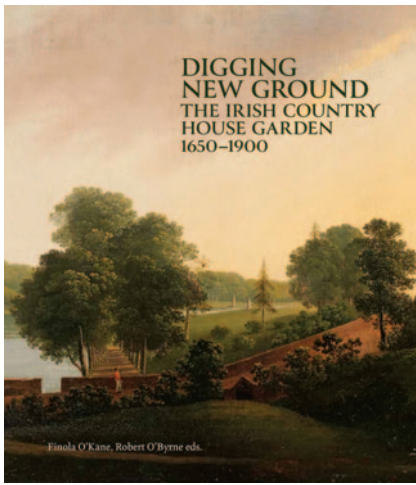
At a more prestigious level of the medical trade than Threkeld, Rutty or Smith, Edward Worth, a successful Dublin physician, showed how botany fitted into his practical and theoretical scientific interests. Worth was an avid collector of books, mostly published outside Ireland or Britain. Many were bequeathed to Dr Steeven’s Hospital in Dublin, where they are now being carefully studied. Elizabethanne Boran, their current custodian, offers an illuminating analysis of Worth’s botanical volumes, suggesting that they reveal both his curiosity and his quest for costly bibliographical rarities. He seems to have been content to garden from the comfort of his study and savour from afar the splendours of the prince-bishop’s garden at Eichstätt.

The availability of ‘paper gardens’ to those in Dublin is further shown by Susan Hemmens’s discussion of the holdings in Marsh’s Library and what, nearly a century later, was acquired by Trinity College with the Fagel collection. The unexpected purchase of the latter brought a mass of documentation about the prosperity of eighteenth-century Holland which had allowed the creation and lavish planting of Dutch gardens. No explicit contrast is drawn between this abundance and the much more attenuated and under-developed condition of Irish gardening throughout that period. Yet, as several of the studies reveal, Ireland possessed ample space – encouraging ambitious schemes – cheap labour, desirable natives such as the arbutus with an appeal equal to if not surpassing that of imported exotics, and a gen-

*Caleb Threkeld, SYNOPSIS STIRPIUM
HIBERNICARUM (Dublin, 1726), title page*
(courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)



erally temperate climate which favoured a variety of alluring species. Cumbersome and costly herbals and floras, even when copiously illustrated, did not school many. More accessible were the month-by-month summaries of gardening tasks included in almanacs. Even with these, the instructions were too perfunctory to assist a novice. Scepticism was voiced frequently about the value of printed guides, as with conduct, fencing, dancing or cooking, and that direct, hands-on experience was the only sure route to understanding. Guidance of this sort, verbal and by example, rarely leaves a trace.



If botanising and gardening offered pleasures, they were weighted with ideological and political significance. Reform of agricultural and horticultural practices was included in the package of 'improvements' which Norman, English and Scottish settlers sought to apply to the conquered island. The laborious was to be preferred to the allegedly easy-going ways that the indigenes had followed. Moreover, by the seventeenth century, if not earlier, the style in which landscapes were arranged was believed to denote political leanings. The formality favoured – it was contended – in France, the Low Countries and central Europe gave way to more picturesque and naturalistic plantings. The ar-

ival and adoption of these fashions in Ireland have been documented, notably by Finola O'Kane. In *Digging new ground*, Jonathan Phibbs seeks to identify what may be distinctively Irish in made landscapes. In addition to a profligate use of labour, moving masses of earth and digging deep channels, and a different attitude to the treatment of water, he notes a sometimes perverse siting of houses in relation to the natural or man-made terrain.

Once more we are in the realm of the grandiose: such costly gestures were undertaken by few and have perhaps attracted disproportionate attention, especially when some elements have survived (as at Carton) or can be reconstructed through plans and accounts. The humdrum, on a smaller scale and – in common with almost all gardens – transient, prove much more elusive. That it became a commercial activity, potentially profitable both to those who could grow marketable crops and those who supplied seeds, seedlings and saplings, is now being shown. Accomplished designers also prospered. A welcome perspective is offered by Robert O'Byrne's account of the career of John Hennessy Saul, who learnt his gardening on aristocratic estates around Youghal in county Cork. Eventually he moved to the United States where he built a successful business and high reputation as supplier of plants.

Valuable too is Patrick Bowe's detailed reconstruction of the long and successful career of John Sutherland between 1755 and 1826. Sutherland laid out numerous parks, some of which survive. Similarly, Laura Johnstone assesses the prolific activities of James Fraser and Ninian Niven, mostly in the environs of Victorian Dublin and on a comparatively modest scale. Altered farming, the construction of railways and roads together with

*Presentation Convent, Fermoy,
county Cork*
(National Library of Ireland /
Lawrence collection)



social and economic changes brought new gardening fashions. Conservatories became the ‘must-have’ for the modish garden. Through newspapers, especially the advertisements, and through photography this quickening pace of cultivation can be discerned. Both general merchants and specialists competed to supply the rare and exotic, but also the staples of farming, the kitchen garden, orchard and flower beds. Even so, it remains hazy how far into the lives of the modestly circumstanced, these developments reached. Diminutive urban and suburban plots of sour earth gave little scope for horticultural display: the popularity of pot-plants and window-boxes have yet to be assessed.

Thomas Pakenham celebrates the creators of arboreta in the nineteenth century, mostly peers. John Foster, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, was among the first. He was also a prime mover in the establishment of the Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin. It continued to thrive thanks to Ninian Niven and two generations of Moores. Among intrepid plant-hunters were the Irish-born Augustine Henry and later Lady Charlotte Wheeler-Cuffe. China and the Indian sub-continent yielded particular treasures, which were then raised in Ireland.

Although many of the most ambitious gardens have vanished, they are more likely than the modest to have left traces and documentation through which their contours can be recovered. Inevitably the exceptional is more interesting than the humdrum; the poetic preferred to the prosaic, even when productive. Parallel with the flourishing of ‘big house’ studies in recent decades has been the proliferation of Irish garden histories. Illuminating as these are, they may distort emphases: ornament and caprice not utility and hard labour predominate in explaining the designs. The modest efforts, of town-dwellers, professionals, the middling sorts, may be assumed as the commerce in plants, tools and gardening accessories expanded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As recreation, amusements, healthy exercise, education and an acknowledgment of divine bounty, tending a garden was recommended, and enjoyed by many. But just how widely the habit spread remains unclear. Idealists and romantics envisaged fecund potato gardens and cabbage patches, and informed consumption of wild herbs and berries. How readily and fruitfully cottiers and labourers delved on their plots after a day’s exhausting paid work is not easily discerned. Evidence

abounds of the marketing of staples, with implications of the growing commercialisation of farming and horticulture. An accompanying but less welcome development was theft. Orchards were notoriously vulnerable to opportunist thieves. If some robbed garden produce from hunger, other did so from bravado or, more ominously, for gain. Hot-houses, abundant in the wealthier suburbs of Dublin and other large towns, were raided: desirable and expensive fruits such as grapes, melons and pineapples were stolen, as were immature plants being raised in nurseries; presumably there was a ready sale for such desiderata at bargain prices. So gardening even on a modest scale, let alone on vast acres, added to the resentments of those excluded from such activities and the chances of worsening the privileged.

Not only are gardens evanescent, reaching maturity and then prone to decline, they are exposed to fickle tastes, commercial redevelopment and simple ignorance, as O'Byrne's and O'Kane's introduction warns. However, there is a more cheering recognition: renewal is constantly possible. New techniques and technologies, fresh sports and variants are added to the gardeners' arsenal. Catherine FitzGerald, herself involved in the revival at Hillsborough, lists other sites which have been renewed recently: Annesgrove (Cork); Derreen (Kerry); Doneraile (Cork) and Glenarm (Antrim). Furthermore, just as species from elsewhere continue to enrich Ireland, so too the history of garden design and gardening benefits from new studies focused on other places. In relation to Ireland, there is much to ponder in recent publications such as Roderick Floud on the economic history of English gardens (2019), Clare Hickman with *The doctor's garden* (2021), Zachary Dorner's *Merchants of medicines* (2020), on the relationship between drugs, botany and exploration, and Tom Williamson's several penetrating forays into the making of rural landscapes.

Finnian Ó Cionnaith

LAND SURVEYING IN IRELAND, 1690-1830

(Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2022) isbn 978-1-80151-014-1, 272pp, 24x16 cm, 50 b/w illus, €35 hb

review by Finola O'Kane



FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, land surveying may seem a little specific initially as a book topic. This book, however, convinces that it was fundamental to the spatial design of Ireland, bringing to life the individuals, networks, education and society of the men who measured, apportioned and sometimes valued the country's land. The consequences of their surveys may yet be appreciated in the lines of Irish ditches, boundaries and townlands, particularly because of their legal weight as property delineations, but also by having created the web of walls, roads and fields that characterises the Irish landscape more generally. Placing considerable emphasis on the life, works and practices of three surveyors,