Finola O'Kane
Landscape Design & Revolution in Ireland and the United States, 1688-1815

(Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, 2023)
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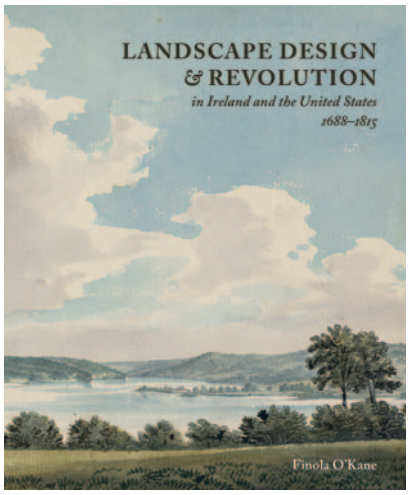
review by Joseph Manca



Finola O'Kane's *Landscape design and revolution in Ireland and the United States 1688-1815* makes a significant contribution to the field of landscape studies. That is no small feat, given the substantial amount of published scholarship on European and American landscape of that time. O'Kane proceeds through an innovative focus on how Irish and American ideas about landscape and improvement unfolded during the long eighteenth century.

O'Kane's book forms part of transatlantic studies, a field predominantly focused on the dynamics of the American, British, and Caribbean triangle. O'Kane brings Ireland into that nexus of ideological and economic exchange. She makes the case that Ireland and the United States shared like circumstances, including (at the time) similar populations, and she promotes the idea that Ireland was an 'Old World colony' where English established paradigms of rulership were repeated elsewhere, as in the thirteen Atlantic British colonies. Many Irish thinkers were intrigued by what the Americans achieved in their revolt against the British, and they hoped to imitate such results at home. Some Irish people travelled to the newly independent nation or even relocated there. O'Kane makes it clear at the beginning that the book, despite a possible reading of the title, is about Ireland and Irishmen, not primarily about the New World: the book 'starts and ends in Ireland, and takes the island as its principal test site or laboratory'.

The book is an outgrowth and extension of the author's 2013 *Ireland and the Pictureque: design, landscape painting and tourism in Ireland, 1700-1800*. Compared to the earlier study, this current book delves more into the economic and practical sphere and tilts less in the direction of the aesthetic. O'Kane situates her new book within the orbit of recent studies by Simon Schama, William Mitchell, Ann Bermingham, Stephen Daniels, and other authors who analyse landscape in the context of power, economics, and political ideology. She states at the outset, however, that her work is more empirical than theirs. A key feature of O'Kane's well-researched book is her pervasive reliance on period, written documents – especially travel accounts and letters – as well as visual material such as early maps, plans, and two-dimensional art with views.

O'Kane's study, like the scholarly works to which she compares her book, defines 'landscape' in a broad way. She relies on the idea of 'improvement', which could mean

anything from ploughing a field to laying out a pleasure garden. As period documents cited by O'Kane suggest, viewers of that time often saw a *tout ensemble* of landscape that might include raw nature, farm fields, landscape gardens and formal gardens. Irish traveller Arthur O'Connor could look at his whole national landscape and praise the 'beauteous island' of Ireland, seeing it as better than the landscapes in the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland.

O'Kane frames her book around four principal political events: a bit about the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution and, much more considerably, the American Revolution and the Irish Rebellion of 1798. O'Kane covers political revolution, agricultural revolution or reform, and revolution in gardening style, this last especially as it unfolded in the direction of the natural landscape garden. Revolutionaries or even progressive thinkers saw links between the several kinds of revolution: each change or reform would set aside old habits or systems, improve the lives of citizens, and stand as a marker for a new order of things. In a free republic, for example, a landscape garden could connote a sense of freedom, while improved systems of agriculture would increase national prosperity. Americans needed to prove to British doubters that they could establish a stable government and achieve agricultural and other kinds of prosperity.

The issue of slavery arose, inevitably, in the histories that O'Kane describes: how could republican attitudes and the quest for freedom accommodate a societal arrangement that included human bondage? Exiled Irish revolutionary Archibald Hamilton Rowan told his wife that he would buy a farm in Pennsylvania, not the American South, for he would 'not kill Indians, nor keep slaves'. For readers who do not associate Irishmen (apart from the fictional Gerald O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind*) with the enslavement of blacks, O'Kane offers vivid evidence otherwise. Pierce Butler came to America as an adult, fought in the American Revolution, and later became a United States senator from South Carolina and a signatory of the U.S. Constitution. He receives extended treatment in O'Kane's book. Butler brought with him Old World ideas about landscape design and management, and applied them to lands worked by enslaved people on his extensive holdings in South Carolina and Georgia.

Looking beyond the United States, O'Kane detected keen Irish interest in the French Revolution. O'Kane's account is focused primarily on Irish reflection on the revolutions that occurred in other places; interest the other way – in foreigners looking at how the Irish worked toward political and agricultural revolution – forms less of the book, which is about 'Ireland's oblique view of the larger protagonists'. Making an intriguing appearance in O'Kane's account is philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas about politics, progress, and society set the groundwork for the French Revolution, and who encouraged thoughtful walking through Nature.

O'Kane gives considerable attention to English traveller and author Arthur Young: he was concerned with agricultural and garden reform and wrote books about his trips to Ireland, the United States, France, and Britain. Young's readers could note, as O'Kane spells out, how his criticism of French society and political structure was bound with his negative remarks about landscape in France, where they had trouble establishing expansive landscape gardens. O'Kane indicates that Young was more sympathetic to the Irish, even as he nudged them to build more in the Brownian gardening tradition of lawns, walks, and gentle water features. O'Kane also looks at the travel writings of Irishman

Edward Savage, 'View of Mount Vernon from the north', c.1797
(courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies' Association)

Isaac Weld, who had toured Ireland, Canada, the United States, and France and was able to compare social conditions and national landscapes.

The American landscape, in particular encompassing plantations, comes into play in O'Kane's book to a significant extent. Since *Landscape Design & Revolution* is mostly about Irishmen or about the Irish-born who transplanted to the United States, few individual native-born Americans receive sustained treatment in the book. Even as parallel, comparative cases, one might have wished to see broader coverage of American agriculture and gardening, and more on the life, politics and landscapes of Thomas Jefferson (who received a few pages), James Madison (not mentioned), and other American planters and slaveholders.

O'Kane does make George Washington a central figure in her book. His correspondence with Europeans was extensive and well preserved, his writing to Irish correspondents, such as politician and reformer Sir Edward Newenham, was significant, and, in the mind of the world, he stood as a central embodiment of the American Revolution. O'Kane weaves into her narrative interactions between Washington and Irish-born Samuel Vaughan, who took part in British politics as a radical Whig, championed the new republic in America, and owned slave plantations in Jamaica.

Although nearly all of the main aesthetic features of Washington's lands at Mount Vernon were in the area around the mansion house, O'Kane usefully notes how he wanted to see the planting of clumps of trees – a mainstay of landscape gardening – on outlying farmland. O'Kane notes that specific topographical and social conditions helped to shape the arrangement of the American landscape. With that in mind, one might wish to soften O'Kane's stark statement that 'at Mount Vernon there could not be a landscape garden'. To think of it more positively: Washington had good reasons, as a republican farmer and the new Cincinnatus, for surrounding his mansion house with a variety of elements, including practical outbuildings, walled gardens, a botanical garden and bowling green. Washington did have substantial elements of a landscape garden, such as lawns, groves,

ha-ha walls and vistas. Moreover, he planned near the end of his life to make more of a landscape garden than he had before by extending lawns, creating a gravel walk along the Potomac, and ceasing major agricultural work at his home farm.

A brief review cannot describe the many facets of O'Kane's book, as she touches on many heterogeneous issues. In social matters, the book covers slavery and anti-slavery, paid workers, and emigration to the New World. Considering estate management, she writes about absenteeism, the improvement of soil, water management, and surveying methods. In the realm of material culture, O'Kane describes travellers' approaches to estates, the development of suburbia in Ireland, the establishment of prospects, views, and vistas, military touring and map-making, and a host of other visual or aesthetic subjects. The broad span of time and geography covered, and the diversity of the topics, leave room for future scholars in many areas. As it is, *Landscape Design & Revolution* is a fine addition to transatlantic and landscape studies, and is especially satisfying and trustworthy through O'Kane's extensive use of early written and visual evidence.

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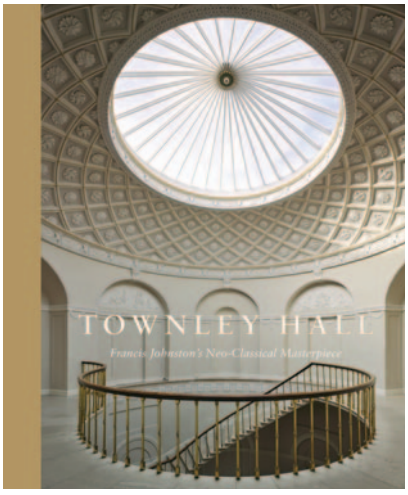
Robert O'Byrne et al

Townley Hall – Francis Johnston's Neo-Classical Masterpiece

(Gandon Editions, Kinsale, 2022) isbn 978-1-910140-31-4, 280 pages, 30x25cm, 760 illus, index, €40 hb

review by Kevin V. Mulligan



Francis Johnston's Townley Hall, begun in 1794 for Blayney Townley Balfour (1769-1856) on an elevated site above the River Boyne, north of Drogheda, is deservedly and widely accepted as a masterpiece of neoclassical design and a worthy subject for celebration, which the building and its architect receives in this copiously illustrated monograph, produced by the owners of the building, the School of Philosophy & Economic Science, to commemorate their fifty-year existence in Ireland.

Exceptionally for a country house of its size, the historic and architectural development of Townley Hall has been well documented, with its significance previously recognised as early as 1948, when, in a time of profound apathy, singular focus was given to the house in a series of thoughtful and insightful articles by Christopher Hussey in *Country Life*, accompanied by evocative photographs, some reproduced to good effect in this volume. Later, issues of the *Irish Georgian Society Bulletin* were devoted separately to the architect and the building – in 1969 with Edward McParland's seminal study of Johnston which opens with Townley Hall, and in 1987 when the polymath, and departing owner of the