



James Fraser (1793-1863), landscape gardener

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THE CAREERS OF MANY PROFESSIONAL EIGHTEENTH- AND EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY architects in Ireland, such as James Gandon and the Morrisons, are now well known. Those of the professional landscape gardeners of the same period are less so. Their contribution to the design and layout of Ireland's historic parks and gardens is exemplified in the career of John Sutherland.¹ The career of one of his successors, James Fraser, embodies the continuing contribution of the professional landscape gardener to the Irish environment during the first half of the nineteenth century.² The present account focusses on recent discoveries with respect to his life and career, indicating that the scope of his practice was wider than previously thought.

James Fraser was born in 1793 in Scotland and arrived in Dublin from Edinburgh to work in partnership with his compatriot and friend, J.T. Mackay, who had been appointed in 1805 to lay out a new botanic garden for Trinity College Dublin.³ Soon after his arrival, he worked on the creation of a new demesne at Dartfield, county Galway, for a successful barrister, Henry Burke.⁴ His next employment was at Terenure House in Dublin, working for Frederick Bourne, one of Ireland's most successful entrepreneurs, his garden there used for relaxation from his business (Plate 4).⁵ By 1838 Terenure was described as having 'magnificent gardens, hothouses and shrubberies of evergreens, its grottoes, urns and rustic seats ... its fine sheet of water, insulated banqueting house, fishing temple, winding walks and picturesque bridges'.⁶ In the next decade its praises were still being touted, described as a series of 'complex gardens and dressed grounds' containing 'the best private collections of plants in this country'.⁷ It is notable that Fraser's initial patrons such as Burke and Bourne did not come from the great landowning elite but from that of the new self-made man, a type of client that was to become more common as the nineteenth century progressed. Fraser's curatorship of the prestigious garden at Terenure, which was open to the public on Sundays, must have allowed his abilities to become known to a wider public. This may have encouraged him to offer his services more widely, which he did in 1828, being then able to take advantage of the death the

1 – *Saunderscourt, Crossabeg, Co Wexford*

Fraser noted of his woodland plantations in 1844: 'the young plantations mark out the long and flowing boundary lines: and even to the passer-by the commencement of that character is apparent which this extensive place is intended to receive.' (6" O.S. map, 1829-41, © Ordnance Survey Ireland)

following year of the well-established professional landscape gardener, Alexander McLeish.⁸

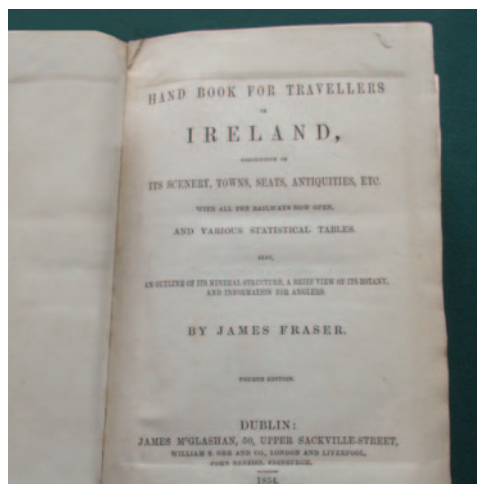
Fraser's decision to develop his own business was touted by the London-based botanist and landscape designer, John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843) in his *Gardener's Magazine*, remarking that: 'from what we know of his science and experience, and of his manner, we are almost sure he will be successful'.⁹ Endorsements such as Loudon's were important. Loudon acknowledged him as a friend and one who had provided material for *The Gardener's Magazine* on Irish subjects.¹⁰ Although Fraser's subsequent work involved landscape design, his intention at the beginning was to combine it with forest-management. Both areas, although distinct, overlapped in the extensive woodland that customarily formed part of a landscape's planting. By 1831 he claimed to have engagements in every part of the country.¹¹

Travelling extensively in pursuit of his busy career as a landscape gardener, Fraser began to collect materials for his *Guide through Ireland*, published in 1838.¹² The book is framed as a series of journeys from one place to another across the country. Although it includes relatively condensed accounts of cities and towns and more expansive descriptions of the country's natural beauties, it generally reflected Fraser's personal interest in the many gentlemen's seats to be observed along the way. Loudon again sought to promote him in *The Gardener's Magazine*: '...as far as we are aware there is scarcely any other person who could have drawn it up so well as Mr. Fraser who, for the last twelve years, has been incessantly travelling from one point to another in the exercise of his profession as landscape gardener, drainer, road engineer etc.'¹³ Fraser's *Guide* was a success, and in 1844 was expanded and republished as *A Handbook for travellers in Ireland*. Further editions were published up to 1859 (Plate 2). In the same period, condensed editions that focused on the scenic and touristic areas of the country, such as *Guide to the*

2 – James Fraser, *HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN IRELAND* (4th ed., 1854)

3 – 25 Westland Row, Dublin
this c.1840 terraced house was
James Fraser's home and office
(photo by Donough Cahill)

opposite 4 – Terenure House,
Dublin
(*DUBLIN PENNY JOURNAL*, I, no. 6,
4 August 1832)





County of Wicklow (1842), *A Handbook for the Lakes of Killarney* (1849) and *Handbook for Dublin and its Environs* (1853), were published. He also authored travelling maps.¹⁴ To what extent these publications helped to establish his reputation as a landscape designer is difficult to assess, but they certainly brought his name to the attention of a wider reading public and, further, to a potential future clientele.

Fraser, who had initially trained as a horticulturalist, took on assistants who were proficient at surveying, drawing and the implementation of drawn-up plans.¹⁵ In about 1850 he took on Maurice Armor as a partner, who in turn would continue the business after Fraser's death.¹⁶ In 1830 his address was 4 Whitworth Road, on the banks of the Royal Canal in Drumcondra. By 1839 he had moved closer to centre of the city to Dorset Street Lower. From 1853 it was south of the river, at 25 Westland Row (Plate 3).¹⁷

Among his first major projects was the re-creation of an abandoned park at Saundercourt, county Wexford (Plates 1, 5). In 1844 he was able to describe its renewal: 'Already the growths of natural copses adorn the glens, and already the young plantations mark out the long and flowing boundary lines; and even to the passer-by, the commencement of that character is apparent which this extensive place is about to receive.'¹⁸ His remarks confirm that his initial style of long, flowing lines of woodland, both along a park's boundaries and in its interior, interspersed with broad acres of pasture was based on what had been popular for much of the late eighteenth century. Similarly long and flowing lines of planting characterised the as-yet-incomplete plantations at Gowran Park, county Kilkenny (Plate 7). Fraser wrote in 1844:



5 – Saunderscourt, Crossabeg,
Co Wexford

triumphal arch with gate lodges on
either side, possibly designed by
Waterford architect John Roberts
(1712-1796) in late 1700s
(photo courtesy Robert O'Byrne /
The Irish Aesthete)

6 – Castlemartyr House,
Co Cork

(photo: Alamy)

opposite

7 – Gowran Park, Co Kilkenny

designed by Kilkenny architect
William Robertson (1770-1850),
completed in 1819
(from John Neale, *VIEWS OF THE SEATS
OF NOBLEMEN AND GENTLEMEN*, 1826)





The demesne of Gowran, the seat of Viscount Clifden, adjoins the town, and may be said to be in a transition state, having, till of late years, been neglected as a residence. But, even now, in the incipient state of improvements, the outlines of the young plantations, enclosing a large extent of the beautiful grounds to the south of the house, can be traced.¹⁹

A similarly incomplete, and today just discernable, boundary planting marked his park around the newly built Castle Oliver in county Limerick, which has been commissioned as a famine-relief project by its owners, the Misses Gascoigne.²⁰ But Fraser's style was evolving. In his 1846 report on the plantations at Castle Coole, county Fermanagh, he recommended thickening the existing plantations, in one instance up to ten times, to produce broken, irregular, rather than flowing, lines, believing them to be more 'natural'. Further, he called for the plantations to be fenced to encourage a natural undergrowth rather than leaving them open for grazing, as heretofore. Lastly, he was concerned to vary the park's foliage colour, which had been limited to that of hardwoods, and suggested adding conifers such as larch, spruce and Scots pine to improve the palette and profile. In these recommendations, he was aligning himself with the new 'picturesque' movement in landscape design that aimed to achieve a more 'natural' effect.²¹ A subsequent report on the woodlands at Castlemorris, county Kilkenny, reveals a similar set of concerns.²²

Fraser's reputation rested not only, it seems, on his skill in laying out plantations, but also on his ability to create ornamental water features. His early work at Castlemartyr,



8 – *Clondeboye House, Co Down*
designed by Robert Woodgate,
completed in 1804
(photo: www.clondeboye.co.uk)

9 – *Caledon, Co Tyrone*
An intricate system of waterways,
separated by a multiplicity of half-
wooded islands, was proposed by
James Fraser and his partner,
Maurice Armor in this undated plan.
(courtesy PRONI)



10 – *Caledon*
designed by John Nash, completed in
1811
(© National Library of Ireland /
Lawrence Collection)

opposite

11 – *Adare Manor, Co Limerick*
designed by James Pain, Augustus
Pugin and others, started 1832,
completed in 1860s
(from *A SERIES OF PICTURESQUE VIEWS
OF SEATS OF THE NOBLEMEN AND
GENTLEMEN OF GREAT BRITAIN AND
IRELAND*, vol. IV, ed. F.O. Morris,
c.1880)

overleaf

12 – *Clondeboye House*
Intricacy became one of the criteria
of excellence in the mid-19th century.
It is shown here in the many bays and
promontories of every size not only of
the lake but also of the woodland
plantings.
(Colin Williams Photography)





county Cork, included the development within the demesne of what he described as a ‘fine artificial river, of ample breadth meandering for two miles through it’.²³ The surface of the demesne being flat, the river assumed a smooth, serpentine line (Plate 6). Fraser also wrote of the alterations he made to the River Maigne that flows through the park at Adare Manor, county Limerick: ‘...by a succession of slight artificial dams it has been successfully changed from a still muddy stream to a clear lively river’.²⁴ The resultant clear water acted as a mirror to the newly built house as well as to the multiple late medieval ruins that ornamented the park (Plate 11). As with his plantations, simplicity was gradually replaced by intricacy in his designs for artificial sheets of water. Having been consulted during the 1850s by the Blackwoods at Clandeboye House, county Down, a lake layout of consummate intricacy emerged, its many bays and promontories of every size offering a very complex circumambulation (Plates 8, 12).²⁵ Similarly, Fraser and his partner Maurice Armor proposed an intricate system of waterways, separated by a multiplicity of half-wooded islands, for a lake at Caledon House, county Tyrone (Plates 9, 10), though it was not executed.²⁶ Intricacy had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become characteristic of the layout of many landscape parks.²⁷ Particular attention was usually paid to the alignment of ‘the approach’ or entrance drive, since it was the area of a park most frequently experienced. In the late 1850s Fraser was asked to realign the drive at Old Conna Hill, county Wicklow, which was considered unsatisfactory.²⁸

Fraser was also concerned with the layout and planting of smaller parklands. In 1856 he was advising on the formation of an entirely new demesne at Farragh House,







13 – Loughton House, Monegall, Co Offaly
(1777; later alterations by James and George Pain, 1835)
(photo: www.loughtonhouse.com)

opposite 14 – Fota, Co Cork
Fraser advised on the arrangement of the arboretum,
its complex silhouette being reflected on the surface of a
winding lake. (photo: Alamy)

county Longford.²⁹ His work at Ballyhyland in Wexford seems to have been comprehensive according to one record: ‘In laying off the grounds, the late Mr. Fraser was employed and that gentleman’s well-known taste is visible in the manner in which the plantations have been arranged.’³⁰ He was also employed on the extension or improvement of existing demesnes such as that at Loughton, county Offaly (Plate 13).³¹ Fraser’s dedication as his ‘humble and dedicated servant’ to Charles King O’Hara of Annaghmore, county Sligo, in his *Guide through Ireland* strongly suggests that he had been of service to him, likely in O’Hara’s admired extension of his planting beyond his specific demesne into the surrounding countryside as far as the Ox Mountains in a scheme of large-scale environmental improvement.³²

Within a landscape park, there was a growing tendency to lay out smaller, isolated gardens, often characterised by specialised planting. On the layout of an arboretum of exotic trees at Fota, county Cork, Fraser was consulted, being named as he ‘to whom Mr Smith Barry has confided the improvement now being effected with much taste and judgement’ (Plate 14).³³ Likewise, in Blandsfort, county Laois, his work was concentrated on the ornamental parts of the grounds.³⁴ Such ornamental plantings were often experimental, testing grounds for the survival of exotic plants in the mild Irish climate. Fraser recommended an ‘American Garden’ for Castle Coole, that is, a shrubbery devoted mainly to the rhododendrons and azaleas being introduced from North America. The mild climate at Adare Manor encouraged such introductions as *Yucca aloifolia*, a native of south-eastern coastal United States, illustrated in *The Gardener’s Magazine* in 1836 (Plate 15). Of like horticultural significance were the extensive pleasure grounds at Castlemartyr comprising a number of independently conceived areas, one with a collection of magnolias and camellias growing outside, the latter claimed by Fraser to be ‘the finest outdoors in the united kingdom [*sic*]’.³⁵



A renewed enthusiasm for history led to the retention of ancient picturesque ruins occurring in parkland, such as that laid out by Fraser at Adare Manor where the ruins of a ringfort, a thirteenth-century Desmond Castle and a fifteenth-century Franciscan friary all acted as important focal points (Plate 16).³⁶ The ruined fifteenth-century castle prominent in the grounds of Castlemartyr House and the fifteenth-century tower house incorporated in the park of Drishane Castle are further significant examples.³⁷ The enthusiasm for the past also led to a re-examination of earlier styles of garden layout, which prompted a taste for formal or geometric designs. Early in his career, Fraser decried the use of geometry in garden design and planting, praising its abandonment by Fredrick Bourne in the garden of Terenure House (Plate 4): ‘He was among the first to break down the barriers which had so long hemmed the villa gardener within the parallel beds of tulips and elliptical figures of roses...’³⁸ However, as the nineteenth century progressed, the propriety of using a formal plan near the house was increasingly accepted, as, for example, in Fraser’s spacious, yet uncompleted geometric layout of terraces and broad walks around the house at Curraghmore, county Waterford (Plate 17).³⁹ The difficulty encountered in its completion was relayed in a local newspaper:

The ground on three sides of the mansion house is laid out in three spacious terraces, designed by Mr. Fraser, and terminating in a fine sheet of water. The principal terrace was originally intended to be pannelled but it was found that, owing to the position of the lake, those panels would become full of water, their design



15 – Adare Manor, Co Limerick

The mild climate encouraged the trial of many exotic plants from abroad, as is illustrated by the Yucca aloifolia, a native of south-eastern coastal United States, at Adare Manor, illustrated in Loudon's THE GARDENER'S MAGAZINE in 1836.

16 – Adare Manor

From the mid-19th century, a renewed enthusiasm for history led to the retention in parkland of ancient picturesque ruins like the 13th-century Desmond Castle. (photo: Alamy)

opposite

17 – Curraghmore House, Co Waterford

A formal garden around the house, its geometric arrangement of walks around a central fountain leading to a semi-formal lake, was superimposed on an informal 18th-century park and forest landscape. (photo: www.curraghmorehouse.ie)





was abandoned and the whole area of the terrace is, therefore, level. It unfortunately happens that from the exposed nature of the ground, the uniformity of the surface cannot be relieved by flower beds and for this reason looks somewhat bleak, that is when viewed from the upper terrace or from the extreme end next the lake. This bleakness however is not so observable when a person stands at the house because in that case the eye is insensibly carried beyond the foreground, over the lake, with its clumps of shrubs, on the other side, the more remote lawns and woods, until it rests finally on the Comeragh mountains in the distance, and Mr. Fraser has done all in his power to take away the heaviness of a great stretch of closely shaven grass without anything to relieve it by the arrangement of the walks, their breadth, etc. A very pretty oval flower garden surrounded with fine woods, and containing a beautifully fitted-up shell-house, opens from the upper terrace and we can well believe that this lovely spot has always been a favourite resort.⁴⁰

Later in life, Fraser acquired a house at Delaford, Templeogue, county Dublin, amounting to fourteen apartments, besides servants' quarters (Plate 18). It was surrounded by forty acres, and contained a farmyard and stabling for seven horses and a large walled garden with a grapery. There Fraser spent £1,000 on draining, fencing and other works.⁴¹ He died in his Westland Row house in 1863 and is buried in Mount Jerome cemetery, Dublin, beside his old colleague from when he first came to Dublin, J.T. Mackay, who had died the previous year.⁴² The writer of his obituary thought him among the most successful landscape gardeners and land improvers in Ireland, his influence to be seen all over the country, as well as in England and Scotland.⁴³

Fraser's long career of approximately thirty-five years was marked by a period of transition in landscape garden layout. His early designs, such as those for Saunderscourt, were marked by the influence of an earlier pioneering generation of landscape gardeners such as Peter Shanley, Thomas Leggett and John Sutherland who had practiced in the style of the influential English garden designer, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Through



18 – Delaford, Templeogue,
Co Dublin

This was Fraser's country house.
Around its forty acres, he undertook
his own project of land improvement.
(photo courtesy South Dublin County
Libraries)

his wide circle of colleagues, especially through the Scottish encyclopaedist of gardening, J.C. Loudon, and through the developing tastes of his clients, he was able to keep abreast of developments in garden style. First, he transitioned from the Brownian style to the more naturalistic or 'picturesque' style. Then, Fraser's growing interest in the smaller specialist garden within the larger landscape park is, for example, evidenced in the layout of the arboretum at Fota. Finally, his design at Curraghmore signalled his acceptance of the formality of design in that part of a garden directly around the house which was to become a byword of the high Victorian garden as was seen in the designs of his successor in Ireland, Ninian Niven (1799-1879). Through his extensive practice of land improvement as well as landscape gardening, and through his many books, Fraser had an immense influence on the Irish landscape garden and on the wider rural environment.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Patrick Bowe, 'The landscape gardens of John Sutherland (c 1755-1826)', in F. O'Kane and R. O'Byrne (eds), *Digging New Ground: the Irish country house garden, 1650-1900* (Dublin, 2022) 92-105.
- ² For earlier, shorter accounts of Fraser's career, see E. Malins and P. Bowe, *Irish Gardens and Demesnes from 1830* (London, 1980) 21-22, 27-29; P. Bowe, 'Some Irish landscape gardeners', in Gervase Jackson-Stops (ed.), *National Trust Studies, 1981* (London, 1981) 7-16; K. Lamb

and P. Bowe, *A History of Gardening in Ireland* (Dublin, 1995) 107-10.

- ³ Trinity College Dublin muniments, MUN/P/2/228, tender documents, 1815. Fraser submitted a tender for £950 for unspecified work at the garden. This being a considerable sum at that time, it suggests his involvement in the garden was more than that of a simple gardener. See also Laura Johnstone, 'The Advent of iron and glass for the Victorian country house garden', in O'Kane and O'Byrne (eds), *Digging New Ground*, 122-39.
- ⁴ Fraser's letters to Loudon's *The Gardener's*

- Magazine*, I, 1826, are written from Dartfield.
- 5 James Fraser, *A Handbook for travellers in Ireland* (Dublin, 1844) 533, and *idem*, 'On the present state of Gardening in Ireland', in J.C. Loudon, *The Gardener's Magazine*, I, 1826, 263.
 - 6 John d'Alton, *The History of the County of Dublin* (Dublin, 1838) 775.
 - 7 Loudon, *The Gardener's Magazine*, I, 262. See also *The Dublin Penny Journal*, I, no. 6, 4th Aug 1832.
 - 8 *Dublin Evening Post*, 21st Aug 1828. For a list of McLeish's works, see Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (London, 1824), 1,094; Kevin V. Mulligan, *The Buildings of Ireland: South Ulster* (New Haven and London, 2013) 327, 573-75. For his involvement at Castle Hamilton, county Cavan, see letter in the Irish Architectural Archive, DIA, 2006/136.
 - 9 Loudon, *The Gardener's Magazine*, V, 1829, 84.
 - 10 *ibid.*, IV, 1826, 216-17.
 - 11 *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, 18th Aug 1831.
 - 12 James Fraser, *Guide through Ireland* (Dublin, 1838).
 - 13 Loudon, *The Gardener's Magazine*, IV, 1838, 53.
 - 14 J. Fraser, *Map of Dublin and Suburbs* (1855).
 - 15 *Longford Journal*, 27th March 1858; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 13th August 1863.
 - 16 Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D2433/A/13/19, Plan of proposed lake at Caledon by James Fraser and Maurice Armor, c.1850; *Irish Times*, 7th August 1863.
 - 17 See Thoms and Post Office Directories for the relevant dates.
 - 18 Fraser, *Handbook*, 202.
 - 19 *ibid.*, 162.
 - 20 *North British Agriculturalist*, 28th Feb 1859, 132.
 - 21 Belmore MSS, Castle Coole, Enniskillen.
 - 22 Wright MSS in the collection of Mrs De Montmorency Wright, Burnchurch House, Bennetsbridge, Co. Kilkenny.
 - 23 Fraser, *Handbook*, 291. See also Finola O'Kane, *Ireland and the Picturesque* (New Haven and London, 2013).
 - 24 Fraser, *Handbook*, 137.
 - 25 Andrew Gailey, *The Lost Imperialist: Lord Dufferin, memory and mythmaking in an age of celebrity* (London, 2015) 44, 371 n.29.
 - 26 PRONI, D2433/A/13/19, Plan of proposed lake at Caledon by James Fraser and Maurice Armor, c.1850.
 - 27 Brent Elliott, *Victorian Gardens* (London, 1986) 23.
 - 28 Rob Goodbody, 'Old Conna Hill, the building of a Victorian mansion', *The Journal of the Rathmichael Historical Society*, 2002, 3-5, quoting from the diaries of the builder, Phineas Riall.
 - 29 *Irish Farmer's Gazette and Journal of Practical Horticulture*, XV, no. 30, 1856, 398.
 - 30 *ibid.*, XXIV, no. 45, 1865, 45.
 - 31 A.P.W. Malcomson (ed.), *The Clements Archive* (Dublin, 2010) 391. A visit by Fraser to Paradise Hill, county Clare, is recorded, though it is not known if a commission to carry out work was forthcoming. See *Clare Journal and Ennis Advertiser*, 13th October 1856.
 - 32 Fraser, *Handbook*, 444.
 - 33 *Irish Farmer's Gazette and Journal of Practical Horticulture*, XV, no. 26, 28th June 1856, 341.
 - 34 *ibid.*, XXII, no. 10, 1863, 92.
 - 35 Fraser, *Handbook*, 291.
 - 36 Elliott, *Victorian Gardens*, 55.
 - 37 *Irish Farmer's Gazette and Journal of Practical Horticulture*, XIX, no. 2, 1860, 239.
 - 38 Fraser, *Handbook*, 533; *idem*, 'On the present state of gardening in Ireland', 263.
 - 39 For an account of the difficulties encountered when carrying out this plan, see *Waterford News*, 28th Nov 1862.
 - 40 *ibid.*
 - 41 *Saunders's Newsletter*, 6th June 1866.
 - 42 The grave is numbered 3089 in the cemetery index. Much of the lettering on both stones is eroded. An advertisement for the sale of his library was published later that year, though it is not specified whether the books were technical books concerning his landscape gardening or his travel writing, but J.C. Loudon described him in 1824 as 'an excellent botanist and gardener and a man of general information'. See *Saunders's Newsletter*, 15th Dec 1863, and J.C. Loudon, *An Encyclopedia of Gardening* (London, 1824) 1,095.
 - 43 *Irish Farmer's Gazette and Journal of Practical Horticulture*, XXII, 29, 1863, 250. Although this obituary was unsigned, it was likely written by the editor, Edmund Murphy, himself a professional landscape gardener. The identification of the English and Scottish estates on which Fraser worked has yet to be made, though they likely include those of his clients in Ireland, such as that of the Misses Gascoigne at Lotherton Hall near Leeds.