

Finola O’Kane *

‘Mixing foreign trees with the natives’: The form and ideology of Irish botanic gardens and arboreta

IRELAND’S NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDEN was founded in 1732, by the Dublin Society, a group of gentlemen amateurs in science and letters. Comprised predominantly of the landed gentry, who were principally concerned with improving farming on their own estates, the Society purchased a site for the garden in 1795. Initially somewhat reminiscent of a suburban villa landscape, one its founders was the astute politician Speaker Foster, who helped to gain funding for the garden from the Irish House of Commons and possessed a notable arboretum of his own at Collon, Co. Louth. As with many of Ireland’s great nineteenth-century institutions, Dublin’s Botanic Garden came to be modelled on that of London. The order of plants became a reflection of the order of empire.

Ancient Irish mythology had an order of trees, which predated the arrival of the Normans. With the flowering of the Irish Arts and Crafts and Irish nationalism in the early twentieth century, this order of plants became a vehicle of nationalist expression. Many political figures were commemorated with arboreta: Charles Stewart Parnell at Avondale Arboretum, Co. Wicklow and Patrick Pearse in an arboretum of ‘native trees’ at St. Enda’s Rathfarmham. New empires of influence and emigration saw the creation of an arboretum to the memory of John F. Kennedy in Co. Wexford in the 1960s.

Ireland’s botanic gardens and arboreta are of interest in the European context for two reasons. Firstly, Ireland was a colonial European country, where many British experiments in empire were first carried out. Colonial institutions, and their planning and management, were developed in Ireland and then disseminated to colonies further afield. Secondly, in the postcolonial environment, such institutions have had to blend their identities with contemporary nationalism and independence. Modern patterns of interpretation and design manipulate and distort the imperial vision, and the professionalism, which created these institutions, is also questioned and interrogated by political and cultural schism.

This paper will examine the history and form of the Irish Botanic Garden and Arboretum. The role of the amateur scientist and designer in its early design and management will be contrasted with that of the later professional institution. The political and cultural resonance of the idea of a botanic collection will be explored with reference to Ireland’s past, present and future.

* University College Dublin, School of Architecture, Landscape and Civil Engineering, Dublin, Ireland;
email: finola.okane@ucd.ie.