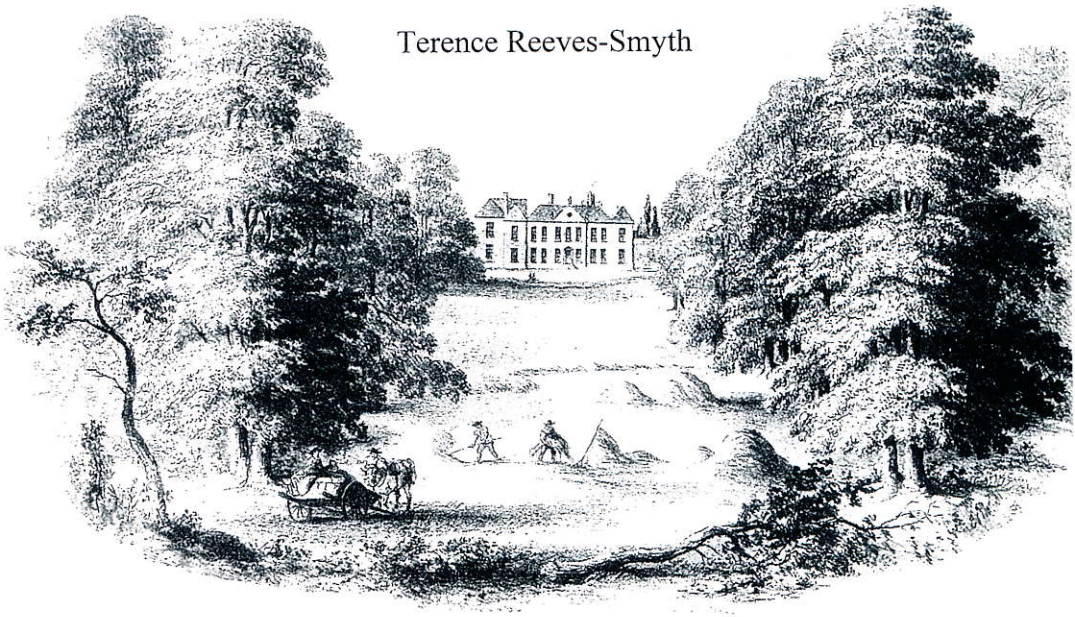
NORTHERN IRELAND HERITAGE GARDENS COMMITTEE

LANDSCAPE PARKS IN IRELAND

AN INTRODUCTION

by

Terence Reeves-Smyth



Rockingham, County Roscommon (OS Map 1840)

Text 1996

Background

By the middle of the eighteenth century, a new conception of man's place in nature began to radically transform Ireland's demesnes. The old formal geometric layouts, which sought to prove that man could subdue nature, now made way for 'naturalised' parklands, whose planting and layout reflected a new appreciation that 'natural' features, such as woods, streams and hills, were beautiful in themselves and indeed good for the soul. It now pleased the optimistic spirit of the age to create pastoral Arcadian parkscapes of 'untouched' nature, secluded from the outside world by encircling walls and belts of trees that enclosed the mansion at its heart. Flowers, fruit and vegetables were banished to walled gardens away from the house and formal features, such as parterres, avenues and canals, were replaced with an idealised conception of 'natural' landscapes that owed much to the portrayal of idyllic Italian scenery in the paintings of Poussin and Claude Lorraine. The ideal was now one of smooth open meadows dotted with clumps of oak or beech, sweeping lakes in which the house and park were flatteringly mirrored, and tree-lined glades with animals grazing peacefully in the shadow of romantic temples and ruins.

The fashion for landscaping in the natural style was first promoted by Dean Swift, Dr.Delany and their circle during the 1730s, but early examples were small in scale and confined to only a handful of innovators. Onwards from 1760, the style was widely and enthusiastically adopted and by the end of the century had become a ubiquitous feature of the Irish countryside. Even modest houses, such as vicarages and town villas, had areas of parkland around them and though landscape parks continued to be created throughout the nineteenth century, the vast majority were constructed by the 1840s. Such was their popularity that nearly four per cent of the country, or around 320,000 hectares, was emparked with over 7,000 houses featuring associated parks of ten acres (4.05ha) or more. Many of the smaller and medium-sized examples were clustered around the urban centres, but in rural areas their distribution reflected the large estates, with fewer parks occurring where small freehold farms flourished.

Although the creation of landscape parks involved working with, rather than against, nature their construction was not achieved without considerable skill and effort. Earth had to be moved, hedges grubbed-up, public roads diverted, streams widened, settlements relocated and great numbers of trees planted. Across the country hundreds of lakes were dug, sometimes re-utilising old canals, and in many cases the mansion itself was rebuilt in a new location to take full advantage of the terrain. Patrons demanded their new parks to have an aged appearance from the outset, so great versatility was required in utilising existing trees from woods, avenues and field boundaries, and sometimes in transplanting mature trees with special machines. While many parks were laid out by their owners in conjunction with the head gardener, professional designers were widely commissioned. The most celebrated of these was John Sutherland (1745-1826), who specialised in the sweeping 'Brownian' parklands, and James Fraser (1793-1863), a leading exponent of the early nineteenth century 'Picturesque' style, characterised by its emphasis on variety and ruggedness in landscape design (Lamb and Bowe, 1995).

With the emergence of the new 'natural' landscapes, most of the agricultural and industrial activities associated with the demesne were relocated beyond the parkland perimeter to the tree-lined fields of the home farm. The kitchen gardens, invariably walled enclosures, were isolated away from the house and usually sited near the stable-yard, where there was a ready supply of manure. According to the importance of the house, these could be anything from about half an acre (0.2ha) to six acres (2.4ha) in extent and generally contained perimeter and cross paths, a pond, glasshouses and potting sheds. Rectangular plans were standard during the Victorian era, but eighteenth-century walled gardens tended to be more experimental in design, with the frequent adoption of irregular plans to provide as much south-facing walling as possible. Their bounding walls, usually about three and a half to four metres high, were often internally lined with bricks to retain the heat of the sun, while shelter belts outside gave added protection from the winds.

Landscape parks were typically embellished with a range of decorative buildings and eye-catchers (Howley, 1993). Some were purely whimsical, intended to add interest to their 'natural' surroundings, notably sham ruins, shell houses, grottoes and hermitages, but others, such as temples, gazebos, summer houses and prospect towers, had a more practical value as retreats, tea houses or places to shelter from the weather. A new genre of distinctive estate architecture also emerged, encouraged by a

sentimental attitude to rural life and a prevailing utilitarian philosophy. Estate cottages, dairies and hitherto humble farm buildings became worthy of architectural attention, while new model farm buildings were erected, often on the junction between park and home farm. Undoubtedly, the most abiding image of all parkland buildings continue to be the lodges at the park entrances. These were normally treated in an ornamental manner, often in the style of the big house, and announced to the visitor and passer-by the grandeur of the demesne park and the taste of its owner (Dean, 1994).

The process of parkland construction was undoubtedly facilitated by the abundance of cheap labour during this period and by a need to provide local employment in times of hardship. The gentry had greater wealth at their disposal, due to rising agricultural prices and higher rents, while the new parklands had the attraction of being comparatively cheap to maintain and well suited to the rolling Irish countryside. It was the multi-functional nature of the parks, however, which contributed most to their popularity. Although ostensibly created as ornamental landscapes, they were utilised with profit in mind; the woodland timber was exploited over the medium and longer term, while money was made from the grazing of herds and flocks on the open grasslands. Parklands also proved to be superbly suited to the rearing and shooting of game birds, and were ideal for riding and exercising horses. But the parks also helped to reinforce the social divisions of Irish society by enabling their owners to cushion themselves from the economic realities that sustained them, whilst helping to convey the comforting notion that their social order was somehow natural, unchanging and inevitable

Ballyfin, County Leix (Queen's County)

TO NOBLEMEN AND GENTLEMEN WHO WISH
TO IMPROVE THEIR ESTATES

PLANTING & ORNAMMENTAL GROUND WORK

A Perfon who is duly qualified in the various branches of Horticulture and Agriculture, agreeable to the modern ftile practifed throughout Great Britain and Ireland, his modes of planting Demefnes, Wilderneffes, &c. are the moft Pretty and advantageous: Likewise Improving Land and Water according to the picturefque Landscape in its beautiful and sublime order: Plans of Gardens, Greenhoufes, Summer houfes, Chinefe Temples, &c. on the moft moderate terms, and approved conftruction by a faving of from twenty to thirty per cent.

Gentlemen will find, by his recommendations, he had the honour of ferving fome of the first Noblemen of innate rafle and extenfive works, &c. giving fatisfaction in evetry particular, by his moderate term, by the day, week, or contraft for the whole. He likewife constructs Peach and Grapehoufes, on fuch plans as need no flues for fire, that is annually expensfive, and often detrimmmental to the permanency of the Trees. If Peaches and Grapes are required early, he recommends the Steam Engines, which, from their obvious and falurary effects are proved preferable to flues. The regular and profeffional courfe of his experience in Great Britain, and in particular in fome of the firft Botanical Gardens about London, has led him to adopt nothing formal, or devious to rural fimplicity of Nature's flowery haunts, but obferving the golden rule - confult the genius of the place in all.

Letters (poft paid) for J.C. at Mr. Bullen's Seedsman, or at Mr. Warrin's Circulating Library, Belfaft, will be duly attended to.

From a Belfast newspaper November 17, 1794.

The Decline of the Landscape Park

In the years following the Great Famine (1845-48) the fortunes of the Irish ascendancy went into recession. Confronted with drastically reduced rental incomes, hundreds had to sell their inheritance, some of them compulsorily through the Encumbered Estates Court set up in 1849. Shortages of money and labour resulted in new parkland schemes being largely confined to the richer families, while demesne developments were dominated by horticultural and agricultural advances that took place within an existing landscape structure.

The eclipse of the landscape park was accompanied by a popular enthusiasm for plant collecting, sustained by the great influx of seeds, cuttings and rooted plants from abroad and by the improved design and construction of greenhouses. The introduction of numerous exotic tree species led to the creation of pineta and arboreta within the park, while formal avenues were also introduced as a means of displaying new tree varieties. New shrubs were accommodated in magnolia gardens, American gardens and other specially created shrubbery's or pleasure grounds, often located near the house. Other specialist areas, such as rose gardens and rock gardens, were also developed, together with areas devoted to particular plant themes, such as evergreen or aquatic plants. Formal parterres were reintroduced around the mansion, sometimes with balustrated terracing, and these were filled with the vast number of new annual and tender plants that were now raised in the heated glasshouses of the walled gardens.

The process of land redistribution, begun with the Encumbered Estates Act of 1849, was greatly accelerated by a succession of land acts (1870,1881,1891,1903,1909), all of which encouraged agricultural tenants to buy out their farms using funds provided by the Treasury. By 1919, about five million hectares, or more than half the country, had been affected by these measures. The effects of these sales on parklands was disastrous, for without the rental income from their estates, most demesnes had to survive as self-

supporting units. Many became neglected and were subsequently sold, often to people interested only in the land; as a result, houses were invariably demolished and the trees felled.

The destruction of Ireland's parklands was boosted considerably by the 1923 Land Act, which empowered the Land Commission to acquire demesne-land through compulsory purchase. Over one hundred and twenty thousand hectares of parkland were subsequently devastated and their lands either sub-divided into farmland or covered with a blanket of spruce. Some big houses survived as schools, hospitals, convents, hotels and government buildings, but many more were demolished or became the latest generation of ruins of the countryside. The sad process of destruction has slowed down considerably since the 1970s, as more people now appreciate the demesne's unique historical, architectural and botanical importance in the Irish landscape. Many houses and their demesnes now receive state support and are open to the public; some now belong to the Office of Public Works and in Northern Ireland a number of important demesnes are owned by the National Trust. But many pressures still remain, particularly from such sterile developments as housing estates and golf courses. Consequently, the demesnes of Ireland face a mixed future as they struggle to adopt new roles in the evolution of the landscape.

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