
Thomas Acton – a centennial celebration at Kilmacurragh

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On the 25 August 1908, Thomas Acton died in his 82nd year. His will (in the archives at Kilmacurragh) makes interesting reading. He left the Kilmacurragh Estate to his nephew, Captain Charles Annesley Ball-Acton, of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Sir Frederick Moore was also remembered and received the rather large sum of £300. Mrs Moore of Addison Lodge (presumably Sir Frederick's mother) was left £100, while his sister, Helen Moore, received a matching amount. He further stipulated that £3 a year be paid to each of the men in the garden as he had done every year and he desired to be buried in the Deer Park next to a tree of *Pinus ponderosa*.

Thomas, it seems, had fallen out with the local rector at Dunganstown and both he and his sister Janet (1824-1906), refused to be buried in the family plot within the grounds of Dunganstown Church. Instead their final resting place was to be beneath a group of Californian redwoods in the old Deer Park a short distance from their beloved arboretum.

Thomas Acton was one of the most remarkable plantsmen to have gardened in Ireland during the nineteenth century. Born on 25 February 1826, he was the eldest son of Lt. Col. William Acton (1789-1855), a resident, improving landlord who is still fondly remembered in the area for his charitable works during the Great Famine. His wife, Thomas' mother, was Caroline Walker from Tykillen, County Wexford. Caroline was said to have had a 'terrific enthusiasm for the beauty of nature and the study of flowers and insects' and she passed this passion onto her children.

The Actons were a well-established Wicklow family. Thomas Acton's great, great, great grandfather, Thomas Acton I (d. 1671), came to Ireland as part of Oliver Cromwell's bloody conquest of Ireland. In lieu of wages he was granted a substantial parcel of land beside the medieval Dublin to Wexford road, including the ruins of Saint Mochorog's Abbey. The foundations of the old abbey still exist and lie beneath the present Chinese garden east of the Pond Vista with the monastery orchard on the site of the present walled garden.

His son, Thomas Acton II (1655-1750), had the old abbey buildings torn down in 1697 and from the stone salvaged, he built a fine, perfectly proportioned Queen Anne style house to the design of the noted architect, Sir William Robinson (1643-1712), who's best-known work is the Royal Hospital Kilmainham. The five-bay mansion was one of the first unfortified houses of the time in County Wicklow and is one of the few remaining (albeit in a ruinous state) early panelled houses in Ireland.

Kilmacurragh House was immediately surrounded by a formal Dutch style landscape park, following the fashions of the period, and elements of

this, such as the remains of canals, great avenues and sweeping vistas, survive in the present garden. Thomas Acton II was also responsible for the Deer Park, an area of 40 acres, completely surrounded by a 6 feet deep ha-ha. His wife Elinor (née Kempston), was once reading to her children in the drawing room at Kilmacurragh House when Jonathan Swift walked in saying "Is that woman pretending to teach?" Her reply was "Yes sir, tis a very foolish book lately published called 'Gulliver's Travels'."

Their eldest son, William Acton (1711-1799) married Jane Parsons of Birr Castle in 1736 and during their tenure the estate was further embellished. To celebrate their wedding, a two-mile long beech avenue was planted in 1736 and fragments of this survive today. And in the 1740s, to provide for his young family, he built the walled garden, with its orangery (the latter still existed till the early twentieth century) and the old paddock walls that now surround the visitor car-park. In 1750, his wife received a premium of £10 from the Royal Dublin Society for the planting of 'foreign trees' and in the following decades trees were planted within the demesne in tens of thousands. The old stable yard, first built in 1703, was substantially altered in 1762 to create the present courtyard with its fine coach houses.

William and Jane Acton had six children and their second son, Thomas Acton III (1742-1817) inherited the estate in 1779. His wife Sidney earned premia from the Dublin Society for growing small plantations and with this money she bought rare and exotic trees.

Her eldest son was Lt Col. William Acton (1789-1855) and he was Thomas Acton's IV father. William Acton planted many new exotic trees on the estate and during the 1820s he planted Kilmacurragh's famous yew walk (known locally as the Monk's Walk) along an old road that served as a pilgrims route from the abbey at Kilmacurragh to nearby Glendalough. His choice of tree must have been inspired by one still extant yew tree estimated to be at least half a millennium old. This route is perfectly aligned with the spring and autumn equinox and thus it may have druidic origins and could be part of a pre-Christian settlement.

Many of the exotic trees planted by William Acton were supplied by Edward Hodgins, who founded his famous nursery in nearby Dunganstown in 1780. A number of trees supplied to the estate by this nursery between 1820 and 1840 still exist including the Madeiran holly, *Ilex perado*, a weeping cedar of Goa, *Cupressus lusitanica* 'Glaucia Pendula', the unaccountably rare olive relative *Picconia excelsa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Monstrosa'. The latter is mentioned by Charles Nelson in *A Heritage of Beauty* (page 91) as the cockscomb ash, though he makes no mention of a cultivar name. Nothing is known about the origin of *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Monstrosa'. The cultivar was not named until 1872, though the Kilmacurragh tree was 1 foot tall in 1840 (30cm) and was 10 feet 9 inches tall (3.25m) in 1877. It is now a substantial tree and grows on the Double Border lawn near the walled garden. Is this an Irish cultivar? We will



Rhododendron 'Altaclerense', a hybrid between *R. arboreum* and a *R. catawbiense*/*R. ponticum* cross, produced by the second Earl of Carnarvon at Highclere in the early part of the nineteenth century with araucarias near the main estate gates.

probably never know.

When Thomas Acton inherited the Kilmacurragh Estate in 1854 the house and gardens were already over 150 years old. By then the landscape park at Kilmacurragh, with its quaint Dutch ponds, canals, avenue and vistas must have been very mature, though by that period it was also seen as old fashioned and quite colourless. Thomas and his sister Janet swept away many eighteenth century features while incorporating others into a new, much enlarged garden. One of Kilmacurragh's best-loved features, the Broad Walk to the rear of the house was laid out at this time. Typically Victorian, broad walks survive in several Irish gardens and examples are found at Glanleam, Fernhill and Kilmacurragh. All are impressively wide walks lined with equally impressive trees and shrubs. Kilmacurragh's broad walk was planted with alternating rows of Irish yew, *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata', the crimson flowered *Rhododendron* 'Altaclerense' and the lower-growing *Rhododendron* 'Cunningham's White'. The rhododendrons were layered by Janet Acton herself and the walk was planted in the early 1870s. Today this walk is one of the garden's most magical features, especially in April when the fallen blossoms of towering rhododendrons transform the walk below into a scarlet carpet underfoot.

Thomas and Janet were their own gardeners and while their great, great, great grandfather employed skilled Dutch gardeners to lay the original park,



The Broad Walk: **right**, in 1870 soon after it was planted – note the alternating rows of Irish yews (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata') and the lower growing shrubs among which is *Rhododendron* 'Altaclerense' and **above**, in 2007 – 140 years on with towering yews and rhododendron.



the new garden at Kilmacurragh was their vision and that of Dr David Moore, curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin.

Moore began advising the Actons in the early 1850s and from then on a remarkable collection of mostly wild origin plants was assembled at Kilmacurragh. Through Moore the Himalayan collections of Sir Joseph Hooker (1849) came here and formed the basis of what was to become Europe's most complete collection of rhododendrons from Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. The gardens became an unofficial annex of Glasnevin, growing plants that could not cope with the cold climate and the shallow, heavily alkaline conditions of that Dublin garden. In March 1867 Moore could write to Hooker that he saw 11 kinds of his (Hooker's) rhododendrons growing happily at Kilmacurragh including the blood red *R. thompsonii*, *R. edgeworthii*, *R. wallichii*, *R. barbatum* and the magnificent *R. falconeri* which is in flower here as I write.

Another source of plants was Messrs. Veitch of Chelsea. Over their near 200-year history, this famous nursery sent 22 plant hunters all over the globe.

The first of these, William Lobb, a Cornish man, travelled to South America during the 1840s, paying particular emphasis on the flora of central and southern Chile and in the 1850s he travelled to California. Acton was keen to take advantage of his garden's almost frost-free climate and was among the first to grow Lobb's new introductions.

Many of these survive including magnificent specimens of the monkey puzzle *Araucaria araucana*, *Crinodendron hookerianum*, *Drimys winteri* var. *chilensis*, *Podocarpus nubigenus*, *Luma apiculata*, the rare Prince Albert yew, *Saxegothaea conspicua*, the Patagonian cypress, *Fitzroya cupressoides* and the Chilean fire bush, *Embothrium coccineum*. The garden soon became famous for these trees and in his famous work, *The English Flower Garden*, William Robinson mentions several of Thomas Acton's plants including the Chilean fire bush of which he stated "*It thrives near the coast in Southern Ireland and in Wicklow near Mr. Acton's, but soon perishes in less favoured places.*"

On the Pond Vista, that great glade between the old ballroom and the pond, a mammoth Californian redwood, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, dominates the area and this tree was raised from Lobb's Californian collections in the Yosemite Valley. Another of Veitch's plant hunters was Richard Pearce and one of his collections, the rather slow-growing *Eucryphia glutinosa*, dating from 1859, still grows to the rear of Kilmacurragh House.

Tom Acton had a rule of thumb to plant three of every important tree or shrub. One was planted where visiting plantsmen told him it would thrive, another where he thought it would survive, and the last where it would unquestionably not survive. Examples of the latter may be seen on the brow of Westaston Hill that overlooks the house and estate. To this day, a line of exotics, like Himalayan rhododendrons, mighty North American conifers and Chilean trees, all planted by Tom Acton's gardeners, still grow on this wind swept site. Most are in ragged order and battered because of their exposed positions—except for two fine monkey-puzzles. This tree inhabits the high Andes of Chile where it is exposed to the same raging winds. In this case, a tree planted in a situation where he was told it would positively not grow, did survive, indeed it thrived.

Tom Acton ran Kilmacurragh like a private botanic garden and kept detailed records of his experiments. He trialed many, many plants for hardiness and the results of his successes and failures are noted in his trial notes. He certainly understood the needs of his plants, on one of his surviving hand-written lists dating from July 1893 he wrote of *Protea cynaroides*, "I think (it) may do well under (a) wall, keep him dry." Following this tip the king protea has recently been planted at Kilmacurragh in a relatively dry spot near the walled garden. During his time at Kilmacurragh several trees were cultivated in the open air for the very first time in the British Isles and Ireland, most notably *Ceratonia siliqua*, the magnificent *Laureliopsis philippiana* from Chile and *Nothofagus moorei*, one of the most beautiful of the southern

beeches. Tom Acton got his plant of the latter from Kew from where it had been introduced from its native eastern Australia in 1892. Augustine Henry noted in *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* that it was 18 feet high (5.4m) in 1906. This rare southern beech was named for David Moore's brother, Charles, who, following an early career at the Trinity College Botanic Garden, became Director of Sydney Botanic Gardens. He discovered the tree in New South Wales and, no doubt, Sir Frederick Moore was pleased to see it established at Kilmacurragh. Alas, it no longer grows here, though there are fine trees in nearby Mount Usher.

Two cultivars were selected at Kilmacurragh while Thomas and Janet gardened here. The best known of these, *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Kilmacurragh', is a slim, fastigiate tree with a habit resembling the Italian cypress. An enormous specimen (perhaps the original) grows along the old estate entrance avenue in a double-sided avenue of monkey-puzzles. The second, a cockscomb Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Kilmacurragh' forms a domed-shaped bush with fasciated juvenile foliage. The original tree grows in the Victorian Double Borders and both Kilmacurragh cultivars originated before 1900.

Thomas and Janet Acton were passionate gardeners and saw many exotic plants in their natural habitats, particularly those from North America. At a time when the Irish aristocracy and gentry took 'Grand Tours' to study art and architecture, the Actons departed from the norm and spent their time looking at trees and shrubs in their native haunts. By the 1860s, Tom and Janet had travelled the world. The highlight of their tour was when they trekked on pony back through the Yosemite Valley in California where they had the opportunity to study trees like the giant redwoods and the western yellow pine, *Pinus ponderosa*.

While William Lobb was Veitch's first collector, their last was E. H. Wilson and Thomas Acton purchased several of his discoveries from Veitch's Coombe Wood nursery. Wilson's plants raised from his expeditions for the Arnold Arboretum were sent later from the nursery at Glasnevin. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew became another major supplier. On an old list of rhododendrons, dated 31 March 1898 (in Thomas Acton's handwriting), the following are listed as having come from Kew, *Rhododendron decorum*, *R. arboreum* subsp. *delavayi* and *Rhododendron rex* subsp. *ficтолacteum*, (mentioned by William Robinson in *The English Flower Garden* as *R. lacteum*). These were raised in 1884 by Maurice de Vilmorin in his nursery near Paris, from seeds collected on the Cangshan Range in Yunnan province in western China by the French missionary and plant collector, Père Jean-Marie Delavay. Maurice de Vilmorin had plants sent to Kew and the duplicates were forwarded to Thomas Acton. In 1904 the first recorded flowering of *Rhododendron arboreum* subsp. *delavayi* occurred at Kilmacurragh and that old Delavay plant continues to thrive here and has recently been propagated.

photograph © National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh



The oak avenue, Ireland's finest, lies on the medieval Dublin-Wexford Road.



Peter Acton, the current heir, planting an Italian oak, *Quercus dalechampii*, on 9 June 2008, near Kilmacurragh House.

Following his father's death in June 1879, Sir Frederick Moore took up the role of garden advisor at Kilmacurragh. He was generous with his time and plants and as the late Charles Acton was to relate (in volume 9 of *Moorea*), 'when his father or he himself at Glasnevin received seeds or plants of calcifuge species from botanical explorers, they took them to Kilmacurragh...' Together Thomas Acton and Frederick Moore created the finest private plant collection on the island of Ireland. The gardens became a place of pilgrimage for visiting plantsmen. Successive curators of Kew were taken to visit Kilmacurragh by Sir Frederick Moore (or Freddie as Tom Acton called him). The first, George Nicholson, curator between 1886 and 1901, was particularly interested in the old orangery and the grapefruit varieties grown there. These apparently were difficult to come by and one of his letters to Tom Acton concerning these rare varieties survives in our archives. William Watson, curator from 1901 to 1922, visited Kilmacurragh in June 1905 and stated that Tom Acton's garden was 'the most interesting in Ireland'. There was very little evidence of keep but there was much judgement in planting. William Jackson Bean (Assistant curator from 1900, Curator from 1922 to 1929) also knew Kilmacurragh very well and was equally impressed with the quality and vigour of the gardens rare, southern hemisphere conifers and flowering trees.

In 1891 Acton and Moore sent exhibits of conifer specimens from Kilmacurragh to the Royal Horticultural Society's International Conifer Conference, Thomas Acton was awarded the Sir Joseph Banks Medal for the

largest collection of conifers held in private hands. The Bank's medal was won again 40 years later by specimens submitted from Kilmacurragh by Sir Frederick Moore and Charles Acton (Tom's grand nephew).

Rhododendron 'Thomas Acton' was raised at Glasnevin during the 1880s by crossing white forms of *R. arboreum* × *R. campanulatum*. It flowered in April and was said to have leaves intermediate between the parents and bore white flowers, spotted crimson. Hybrids and cultivars were rare in the Kilmacurragh rhododendron collection however and according to Charles Acton, the family tended to look down on the Mount Usher collection, which contained many cultivars, whereas the Kilmacurragh collection was based on species acquired through Kew and Glasnevin.

The Moores were not the only staff members from Glasnevin to advise the Acton family. William Parnell was appointed outdoor foreman at Glasnevin in 1868 and his name appears from time to time in the Acton family diaries. Charles Frederick Ball also knew the garden well and left published accounts.

On 21 September 1891, the same diaries mention the visits of Robinson and Burbidge—William Robinson and Frederick Burbidge. William Robinson was a frequent visitor, he loved the wildness and informality of Tom Acton's garden and it was through visiting wild Irish gardens like Kilmacurragh that he gleaned ideas for his revolutionary publication *The English Flower Garden* (published several times between 1883-1934). His writings went on to popularise natural gardening the world over and the style of course became known as Robinsonian gardening. Kilmacurragh is often described as a Robinsonian garden, though Thomas Acton was practising this wild, romantic style long before Robinson ever set foot in County Wicklow.

The second visitor, Frederick William Burbidge, was another of the Veitch plant hunters and from the hot steamy jungles of Borneo he introduced the enormous insectivorous pitcher plant, *Nepenthes rajah*. Burbidge later became Curator of the Trinity College Botanic Gardens in Ballsbridge and contributed articles on Irish gardens to various publications. In 1893 he penned a lengthy piece on Kilmacurragh and had it published in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. Burbidge wrote well, almost poetically, and his article on Kilmacurragh makes good reading even today. Like Robinson he delighted in the wild beauty of Thomas Acton's garden and rebelled against the strict, formal styles of the Victorian period and the wasteful excesses of annual bedding:

"After seeing and enjoying many gardens in many lands, there is one delightful old pleasaunce – Kilmacurragh, in County Wicklow – that ever and anon rises up before me as being an ideal garden in many ways... It is an old garden to begin with, and its site is a fertile and sheltered vale not far from the sea... On three sides of the square-built grey mansion the lawns of greenest grass stretch away under the trees, and you get on fine clear days just a distant peep at the sea as it rolls in on the Wicklow shore.

The Rhododendrons would alone make the reputation of any one good garden, and they include one of the most complete series of the Sikkim and Bhutan (sic.) and Nepalese species that is known... Look where one may in this delightful paradise, one meets with rare and beautiful plants at every turn, every nook and corner is sacred to some little gem, and like all good gardens it is a changing kaleidoscope, never quite alike on any two days of the year. In March I have seen the snowdrop here 16 inches high, with grass-like Narcissus leaves, but even earlier there had been a glowing carpet of Crocus on the grassy lawn before the drawing-room windows, and later on again there was a blaze of tulips and of daffodils...

After seeing a broad a beautiful old garden and domain of this kind, one feels an exaltation of the mind, and a consciousness of it being a something more pleasant and satisfying than a jam tart-like garden of the carpet beds, or crowded flower show... To thus see the cool lush grass, and the flowers, and the noble trees against the sky, and to see the great herons wheeling slowly overhead laden with fish dinners for their nestlings, and to catch just one last glance at the dappled fawns and their young ones in the bracken, is to feel that Pan is not yet dead, and to be assured in one's heart that there is something Arcadian left to us in the world after all."

Thomas Acton died on 25 August 1908 following almost six decades of managing the family estate and having created one of Ireland's most famous gardens. His 32 year-old nephew, Captain Charles Annesley Acton then succeeded to Kilmacurragh. Born in Peshwar, India in 1876, he was educated following family tradition at Rugby and the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. Many of the Actons led military careers and Charles followed this route. In 1896 he joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and served with the regiment in Malta, Crete, Hong Kong, India and Burma. In 1900 he was involved in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in Beijing.

Following his uncle's death Charles resigned his commission and settled for a gentleman's life on the family estate. He continued to develop the estate and arboretum and his closest friends included Augustine Henry and Sir Frederick Moore. Moore continued to advise at Kilmacurragh and supplied many newly introduced plants from the nursery at Glasnevin.

Alas, those happy days were short lived. With the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, Charles and many of the gardeners at Kilmacurragh headed for the battlefields on the French Front. On 25 September 1915, Charles Acton, while trying to assist a fellow soldier, was mortally wounded by an explosion at Loos. He was only 39.

Kilmacurragh then passed to his only surviving brother, Major Reginald Thomas Ball-Acton, father of the late Charles Acton (music critic for the *Irish Times*). On 22 May 1916, just eight months after his brother's death at Loos, Reginald was killed in action at Ypres. Few of the gardeners came home from

the war. Thus, in eight years Kilmacurragh had three consecutive owners inflicting death duties amounting to 120% of the value of the estate. This placed enormous financial pressures on the family and, after two centuries, the Actons left Kilmacurragh House.

The Great War had a devastating effect on the arboretum. Before the war 11 men and two boys maintained the grounds, following the death of Charles and Reginald, the gardens were maintained single-handedly by the old Head Gardener. Writing in 1929, Lady Moore was saddened by the flight of the Actons from Kilmacurragh and the slow demise of the arboretum, 'the toll of the Great War, followed by the unhappy period from 1919 to 1923, closed many a garden as well as demesne gates... Few plants have been added to the collection since 1914. The old ones are cared for by the same old man for 40 years. When one blooms he sends a post card – *Let yez come soon, rosydandry falconyera or lowther is an admiration*. The summons is obeyed and his verdict proved true'.

Both *Rhododendron falconeri* and *Rhododendron Loderi* Group are in bloom here as I write, a reminder of a dedicated predecessor who carried the arboretum through its most difficult years. There are other reminders of this sad period at Kilmacurragh. In the walled garden grow a line of mature maidenhair trees, *Ginkgo biloba*, planted just over a metre apart. Tradition has it that this was a nursery bed and since the garden staff believed that the war would last only a few weeks, the young trees were left *in-situ* with the thought that they would be placed in their permanent positions when staff returned that autumn. No one came home from those bloody battlefields and the maidenhair trees still grow in their nursery positions. Kilmacurragh's tragic history is well known and the fallen crimson blossoms of the ancient rhododendrons on the Broad Walk have been said by one visitor to be as symbolic as the Flanders poppies.

After 300 years of family ownership, Charles Acton sold the House and Demesne in 1944. His mother, with the aid of Sir Frederick Moore, made several attempts to have Kilmacurragh purchased as a satellite garden of Glasnevin. They were almost successful on several occasions until a recession, the emergency or a change of government dashed their plans. Charles was delighted therefore when in 1996 Kilmacurragh became a sister garden to Glasnevin and thus became part of the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland. No doubt his grand-uncle Thomas would be delighted to know that his garden is now being replanted by Glasnevin and is safely in State care with the Office of Public Works. On 9 June, the current family heir, Peter Acton planted a rare Italian oak, *Quercus dalechampii* in the arboretum at Kilmacurragh as part of the centennial celebrations at Kilmacurragh. His wife Sarah, very kindly planted a fine young wollemi pine.

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