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First published in 2014 by Systems Publishing,
Villa Alba, Tara Hill, Gorey, Co. Wexford, Ireland.
Tel. +353 (0) 5394 22294;
www.systemspublishing.com

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ISBN: 978-1905404-20-9 Paperback

ISBN: 978-1-905404-21-6 Hardback

This book was published with the assistance of Artlinks in association with Wexford County Council.

Printed in Spain by Graficas Castuera



Foreword

I am delighted and honoured to have been invited by the author, Megan O’Beirne, to contribute a foreword for this splendid new book, highlighting a garden that is both very dear to me and one which could so easily have been lost. Today there are over 3,200 botanic gardens worldwide, a global network of gardens dedicated to botanical research, living collection management, horticultural excellence, environmental education and plant conservation. Ironically for a garden of such historical importance, Kilmacurragh is amongst a vanguard of new botanic gardens building on early origins to find contemporary roles and relevance for present-day Ireland. Megan O’Beirne is to be congratulated on bringing together so well the story of the garden, beautifully illustrated with hundreds of her excellent photographs, and helping to build an appreciation of Kilmacurragh for diverse new audiences and visitors. The story of Kilmacurragh is one that deserved to be told, where its heroes can be celebrated, from the Acton family founders right up to the present day, when its restoration has been achieved thanks to the vision of the Office of Public Works (OPW) and an army of dedicated staff of the National Botanic Gardens. The author has my admiration and thanks, that we can now enjoy the garden not only by visiting but also by reading her fine book.

My very first visit to Kilmacurragh was in 2005, shortly after my appointment as Director of the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin. I knew very little about the garden then, except that it had come through some desperately difficult times of neglect until its ‘rescue’ by the OPW in 1996 as a satellite garden for the National Botanic Gardens. This was acknowledged as probably its last hope for survival. Growing up as a teenager in County Wicklow, as a family we would often visit some of the other great gardens of the region, particularly Mount Usher and Powerscourt. I had never even

heard of Kilmacurragh. When it was first brought under the care of the Glasnevin Gardens it was in a sorry state of neglect and dereliction. The great historic house, today a ruin and decaying fast, was badly damaged after a series of devastating fires (let us hope that one day it can be restored to become, once again, the heart of this great garden). What remained of the garden, now called ‘Kilmacurragh Arboretum’, was a shadow of its former glory. Anything other than woody plants had long since succumbed under acres and acres of weeds—brambles and laurels and much more besides.

In the ‘new era’ for Kilmacurragh, head gardener Paul Norton transferred down from Glasnevin to begin the ‘rediscovery’. Slowly the secrets were revealed. After several years Paul returned to Glasnevin, many heroic tasks completed. Seamus O’Brien took his place and, together with his small, dedicated, energetic and enthusiastic team, continued the restoration. On every visit I made, Seamus would take justifiable pride in pointing out his latest discovery. One week it might be a lost rhododendron tree revealed from the undergrowth. His research would show that it had been grown from seed collected in the Himalayas by Sir Joseph Hooker of Kew in the 1840s or 1850s. On the next visit it might be a long-lost pathway, some buried steps or a trickling stream or ferny folly. Another time an old story might be told of the connections between the original owners, the Acton family, and their friends and collaborators at Glasnevin, most notably its former director, Sir Frederick Moore. A remarkable range of rare and sometimes unique specimens remained, collected by some of the world’s greatest plant-hunters, their names almost a lexicon of those who created the suite of plants we grow in our temperate gardens today: Frank Kingdon-Ward, William Lobb, Joseph Hooker, E.H. Wilson, Augustine Henry, George Forrest—the list goes on.

As time went on, I became as excited about the garden and its history as Seamus and the team. Seamus would outline plans for ambitious replanting, not only showcasing the botanical treasures that survived but also enhancing them with plants either exchanged with colleagues at other great gardens, such as the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, or collected as seed by the current generation of staff from the National Botanic Gardens, from China, Chile, North America and the Himalayas in particular. I watched as new features were created or restored, such as the restored double borders, species-rich wildflower meadows, geographic plantings, native hedges and, most recently, the old entrance and its new avenue of monkey-puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) plantings. When a small team of expert education staff was put in place and regular events held, open to the public, Kilmacurragh began at last to receive what it deserves: more and more visitors.

In the summer of 2010, it was a proud moment for all of us when hundreds of delegates from around the world attending the 4th Global Botanic Gardens Congress, hosted by the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, travelled down for the day to visit Kilmacurragh. They came to see the garden and its collections, including many species that are rare or endangered in the wild that are being actively conserved at Kilmacurragh. In honour of the occasion, the Minister of State for the OPW, Dr Martin Mansergh, declared that Kilmacurragh Arboretum would henceforth

become and be known as the ‘National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh’. It was truly recognition that Kilmacurragh was ‘back on the map’ and able to hold its head high amongst the great gardens of Ireland—and, indeed, of the world. A garden is never static; some of the ‘champion’ trees of Kilmacurragh will go, as they reach the end of their lives, but we can be cheered that today they will be replaced by worthy successors, ensuring that the garden will continue to be important and live on for future generations.

Often when I visited Kilmacurragh during my tenure at the National Botanic Gardens (2005–10) we would say, ‘There are so many great stories to tell about Kilmacurragh—its history, its plants, the personalities amongst its owners, staff, collaborators and visitors, its dereliction and its restoration’. We would often repeat, ‘Someone needs to write a book about it’. I am thrilled, therefore, that Megan O’Beirne has taken on this task and has created a book that is a delight to read, so full of the stories that will make this great garden come alive for visitors. Her book will help to make this garden better known, too. It is still undiscovered by far too many people in Ireland, many who hurry past on the nearby Dublin to Wexford N11 road, unaware that an oasis of history, biodiversity and heritage lies just a few miles to the west. This book will open the eyes of many to this national treasure.

Peter Wyse Jackson

President, Missouri Botanical Garden, St Louis

December 2014

INTRODUCTION

Retreating to a garden full of trees on a day when ideas jostled and rain spilled, I caught the healing offered by a woodland environment. Odours were more intense, especially that of the eucalyptus trees, my feet crushing their leaves randomly strewn on the sodden woodland floor. The grace and harmony of a Japanese acer fixed my gaze. I discovered, too, that one doesn't walk alone among trees—they are powerful presences that have an enlarging effect on the heart. These giants of natural architecture spread their benign spirit, renew one's sense of purpose in the world, restore happiness, and even engender a sense of ecstasy. The concept of the tree as God's dwelling doesn't seem fanciful.

As I reviewed my photographs, companions to this text, especially those which close in with an almost myopic intensity, I realised my urge to 'scry' nature, to uncover the hidden the better to empathise, to capture form and textures, to plumb new depths for me of the very essence of the natural world. Having set out in Kilmacurragh arboretum with my enquiring lenses, I realise now that my work is as much exploratory as illustrative of a heritage demesne which reveals its many layers slowly, rewarding patience and presence. A single sturdy gatepost, kerbstones peeping through a

grassy walkway, an abandoned driveway overgrown yet still discernible, the lie of a stand of trees—all trigger the imagination and help fill in those blanks where mere facts fall short.

I initially went to Kilmacurragh in 2009 in search of an exhibition site for photographs inspired by the ravages of the bark-beetle on the lodge-pole trees in Canada. I found instead a natural theatre with the remnants of a mansion, luxuriant vegetation and exotic tree collections recently wrested from the stranglehold of briar and laurel. Every twisted branch, angled trunk and grassed-over pathway spoke of a dramatic and complex history.

I was reminded of the words of the then head gardener, Paul Norton, in conversation with garden writer Jane Powers in April 1998, when he was single-handedly using mainly 'mattock, lopper and bushman's saw and spade' to rescue the gardens from the vice-like grip of bramble, holly, cherry, laurel and sycamore after decades of neglect:

'There are a lot of hidden things that people walk past without seeing. As I gradually get rid of the undergrowth you can actually *see*, the original layout of the garden becomes apparent, and you can *see* little vistas that you didn't know were there until you started to clear them.'²

Today we can only applaud his work and that of his successors in their efforts to reclaim this jewel of gardening history.

LEFT A dizzily leaning Hartweg's pine (*Pinus hartwegii*), with to its right the eucalyptus tree (*Eucalyptus pulverulenta*) that succumbed to the storms of February 2014. This eucalyptus tree is native to New South Wales and was brought to Europe in 1819. This tree was 35m tall.

THE NEW ORDER

Seven generations of Kilmacurragh's once-resident landowners, the Actons (an Anglo-Irish family, in Ireland since the 1640s), had a vision for their upland estate in Wicklow, a creative drive to fashion part of it into what ultimately became a world-acclaimed arboretum in the nineteenth century. The meticulous documentation they left behind tells of both their enthusiastic planting of amenity trees and their commercial interest in the timber industry. There are records also of their cooperation with various initiatives promoted by the Dublin Society (RDS) to replace woods that had been exploited to near extinction by both planters and natives over the previous centuries. During their continuous tenure (1697–1944) they planted a wide variety of both native and exotic trees of particular heritage and conservation interest to us today. Their collections include the ginkgo tree, 'a conifer with a fossil history going back 150 million years',³ in the walled garden and varieties of equally ancient magnolias, as well as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century exotics sourced by intrepid plant-hunters. The prized conifer collection

includes pines, spruces, silver firs, cedars, cypresses, hemlocks, redwoods, larch and hundreds of yews. The 'fluted' trunks and sprawling arms of the common yews (*Taxus baccata*)—some of them dating back to monastic times—embrace us from all sides, in particular in the Monk's Walk, where what was once a fashionable yew hedge is now overgrown and arches to form a sombre 'nave'. This is interrupted by the lily pond, a nineteenth-century replacement of two medieval fish-ponds used by the monks. The yews blend with naturalised deciduous trees such as the legendary sycamores and beeches, as well as with more recently introduced exotic conifer additions such as the towering Californian redwoods (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). The dark foliage of the evergreens provides a dramatic backdrop to the precious Hooker tree-rhododendrons, widely acknowledged as the most beautiful woody flowering plants in the world. Hunted in the Himalayas by (Sir) Joseph Hooker in the 1800s, they were successfully nurtured by Thomas Acton (1826–1908).

The Actons left us a magnificent arboreal heritage. Their era is long over, and a new social order prevails. Their impact on the landscape, however, stands as a testimony to their vision and continues to be an inspiration to those currently restoring and developing the arboretum and gardens on behalf of the Irish state.

LEFT A giant sequoia or Sierra redwood (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), one of the world's biggest trees, rises spire-like over the other exotic conifers on the Glade, which drops down to the pond.

In-house garden notes reveal that this giant sequoia was raised from William Lobb's collections in the Yosemite Valley, California.

A photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in fallen leaves and leads through a dense stand of trees. In the foreground, there are patches of purple flowers, likely crocuses, growing along the path. The trees have thick, gnarled trunks and branches, some of which are in the foreground, creating a sense of depth and enclosure. The lighting is soft, suggesting a dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy.

2

— KILMACURRAGH —
A SACRED SITE

A saint's hermitage—
a thirteenth-century church —
a graveyard

3

THE RELUCTANT CROMWELLIAN



THE SEVENTEENTH–EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY



ABOVE Maytime on the entrance driveway.

THE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

William Acton (1711–79), keeper of the writs of the Court of Common Pleas, and his wife, Jane Parsons

William succeeded to the property on the death of his father in 1750. He had entered Trinity College in 1726, qualified as a barrister and rose to become keeper of the writs of the Court of Common Pleas. He was also a member, or sergeant, of the exclusive Order of the Coif, from which until 1839 all judges of the Court of Common Pleas were appointed.⁸⁴ He married Jane Parsons, granddaughter of Sir William Parsons, 2nd Bart, of Birr Castle, on 4 March 1736, and reference in the Kilmacurragh Book to ‘the old high-backed chairs from Parsonstown’ (Birr Castle) teases us into imagining other decorative additions that she would have made to the house, possibly echoing the décor of her family home in Birr.

During William and Jane’s tenure the estate was further embellished with trees. To celebrate their wedding, a wonderfully romantic addition was made to the garden: a two-mile-long Beech

Avenue was planted in that year and splendid specimens of this tree type survive today, leading up to the Walled Garden built by his father in the 1740s. In the 1750s William had the business acumen to buy valuable woods in the Vale of Clara.

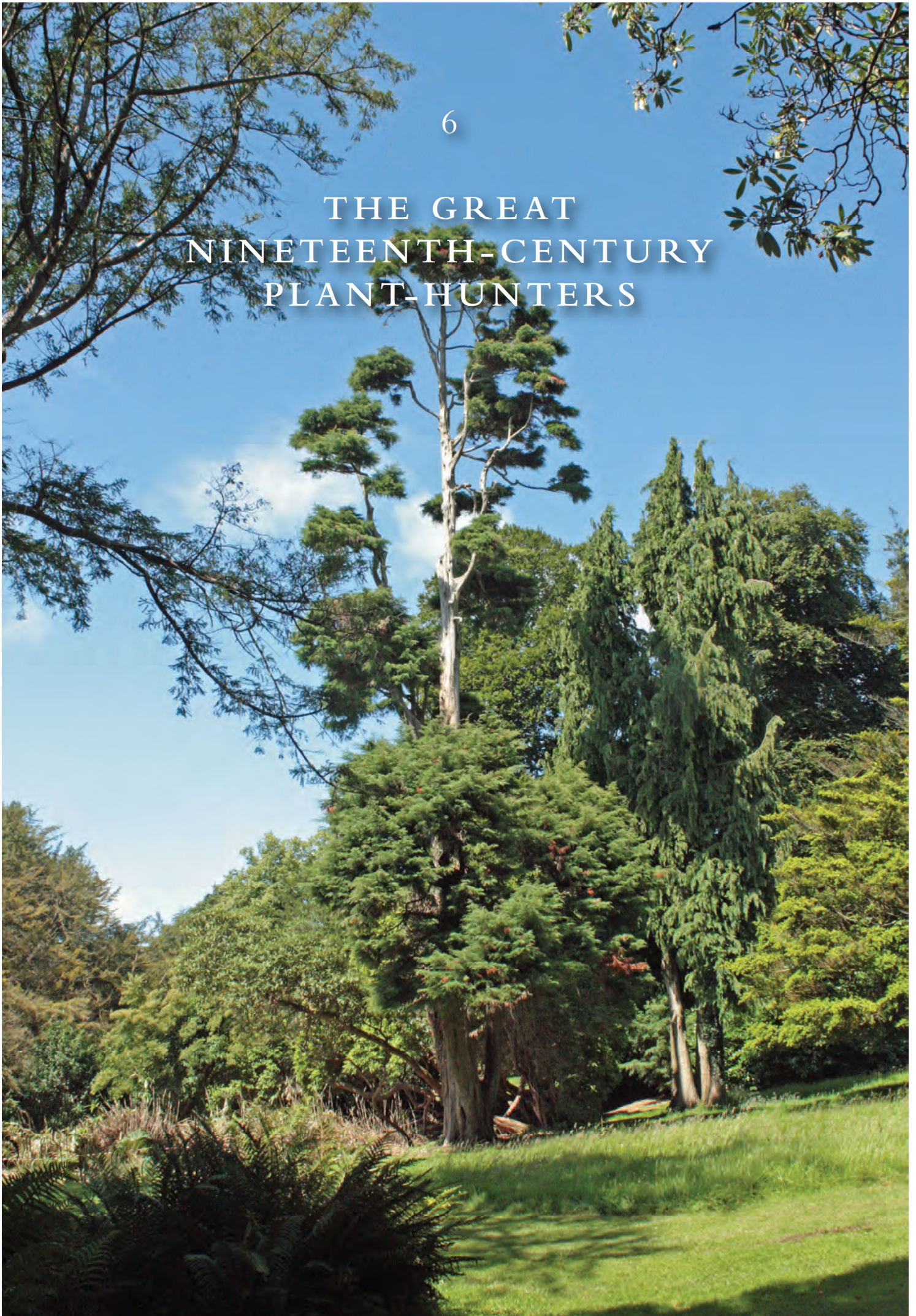
The Acton woods at Clara

The Acton woods at Clara supplied such wood-dependent industries as charcoal-burning ironworks and the many tanneries in County Wicklow dependent on stripped bark, which was more and more in demand at that time. As Eileen McCracken clarifies, the export of live cattle to England was prohibited, consequently boosting the demand for tanned hides from Ireland. The Dublin Society offered a premium of £10 in 1750 to those who tanned the most hides. The domestic supply of bark was inadequate to supply the local demand, with the result that, as Carey⁸⁵ writes, tons of it were imported from Scotland and Wales in the eighteenth century. Woodland business in general and bark production in particular were practised on estates close to Kilmacurragh, including the Meath estate near Rathdrum and the Croneybyrne estate owned by the Byrne family, which included several woods in the Vale of Clara. There were numerous tanneries in County Wicklow at that time—in Wicklow town as well as north of it in Ballinaclash, Croneybyrne (near Rathdrum) and Ballymoneen, west of Avoca village.⁸⁶ Timber was also closely connected with the increasing food-

LEFT One of William’s splendid ‘bridal beeches’ (*Fagus sylvatica*).

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THE GREAT
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
PLANT-HUNTERS



THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Colonel William Acton, high sheriff for County Wicklow (1820), MP for Wicklow (1841–8), and his wife, Caroline Walker

On Thomas's death in 1817 his eldest son, Col. William Acton (1789–1854), high sheriff for County Wicklow in 1820 and MP for Wicklow in 1841–8, succeeded to the property. The Colonel was one of the most dynamic and colourful members of the Acton family. The following brief résumé of his activities, expressed in the continuous present tense, illustrates why: organising the closure of a local road, narrowing another to prevent undesirables from congregating, laying out the Rathnew–Arklow road for want of engineers, launching Famine aid projects, and all the while stocking the garden with exotic trees, earning premiums from the Dublin Society and serving as an MP. The sum of these activities give the measure of the man and his legacy to silviculture—a precious collection of heritage trees, many of them crucial for the perpetuation of their species.

Wicklow—a county of continuing contrasts

Wicklow was one of the better-off counties, with a strong and comparatively wealthy gentry. Of all counties outside Ulster, nineteenth-century Wicklow had the highest proportion of Protestant inhabitants, many of whom belonged to the congregation of Methodists.¹¹⁴ William's daughter, Janet (1824–1906), was a keen follower of Wesley. The greatest concentration of Protestants in Wicklow was around the Acton estate, Westaston, where some townlands were 100% Protestant.¹¹⁵ Many of the larger estates supported strong Protestant communities, usually situated close to the demesne lands. The Actons favoured Protestant tenants, domestic staff and farm labourers, who generally lived in Kilcandra, within easy reach of the demesne. Wicklow was a county of contrasts, where wealthy estates like that of the Actons, supporting their tenants, contrasted with the 28% of families of cottiers, labourers and smallholders (living in Redcross and Arklow, for example) who lived in one-roomed mud cabins. The staple diet of the poor labourers' families normally consisted of potatoes, milk, oatmeal and herrings, when these were available.

William married Caroline Walker, his first cousin, in 1818. They had seven children and, like their forebears, they had a great interest in silviculture and an appreciation for the beauty of nature, which they transmitted to their children. Keen planters of trees, they too were awarded premiums by the Dublin Society. As Myles Reid

OPPOSITE PAGE Budding oaks in a remnant of the old Coach Road (the Oak Avenue), closed by Col. William Acton, viewed from the stile.

SIR JOSEPH DALTON HOOKER (1817–1911)

(Sir) Joseph Dalton Hooker, unlike the self-made William Lobb, had a privileged background, a well-rounded education and a wide range of interests. Early in life he had the opportunity to gratify his great love for geographical botany. The privileged son of botanists, the grandson of an entomologist, a precocious collector of insects and mosses, he began, literally in petticoats, to grub walls in Glasgow for their hidden mossy treasure and to dream of a life of adventure in the footsteps of his

childhood hero, Captain Cook. His connection with Ireland began when he pursued his botanical interests in the west of the country as a young man.

Joseph Hooker's studies focused on the liberal arts and the natural sciences. He graduated MD in 1839 from Glasgow University and participated as a young man in the Antarctic voyage of discovery as assistant surgeon and naturalist to HMS *Erebus* in 1839–43. He spent four years exploring the southern oceans. His trips ashore enabled him to



Trees of *Rhododendron 'altaclerense'* and an Atlantic cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) on the entrance driveway.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE GLORIOUS YEARS

Thomas Acton (1826–1908) and his sister, Janet Acton (1824–1906)

Rhododendrons, herons and dappled fauns—evocative images that feature in one of the most lyrical cameo descriptions of Kilmacurragh at a time when the gardens and arboretum were at the pinnacle of their beauty in the second half of the nineteenth century:

‘Rhododendron Roylei gleaming above the tall grass below . . . in the tallest beech trees, the great grey herons are feeding young ones . . . 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*”.’¹⁴⁴

Thomas Acton IV, William’s eldest son, had been effectively managing West Aston from 1851, owing to his father William’s declining health,¹⁴⁵ before legally inheriting the 5,500-acre estate in 1854.¹⁴⁶ His illustrious tenure would continue for over half a century until his death in 1908, in his 82nd year. During that time he and his sister Janet would make history as a dynamic gardening duo—

a fact acknowledged by visiting luminaries of the gardening world such as Frederick William Burbidge, William Jackson Bean and Augustine Henry,¹⁴⁷ who frequently made them and their arboretum the subject of their articles in horticultural publications such as the *Gardeners’ Chronicle*.

‘Mr Acton’s garden is one of the richest furnished gardens in the country.’¹⁴⁸

To describe Thomas’s tenure as ‘glorious’ is not to exaggerate his contribution to Irish plant heritage. He was a passionate collector of exotica, as demonstrated in his copious garden diaries, where his lists of varieties of oaks and rhododendrons, for example, are breathtaking in their scope. His trialling technique, inspiring gardening practices, insistence on finding the optimum source for his plants and correspondence with learned institutions on botanical matters all add up to an extraordinary commitment to plant life and to the gentlest care of tender species. His arboretum in Kilmacurragh was like a beacon to plantsmen and writers such as William Robinson¹⁴⁹ who have immortalised him.

Childhood: a retiring nature

Thomas was one of seven children, of whom the three eldest daughters, Maria, Sidney and Caroline, had died prematurely in 1834, 1835 and 1841

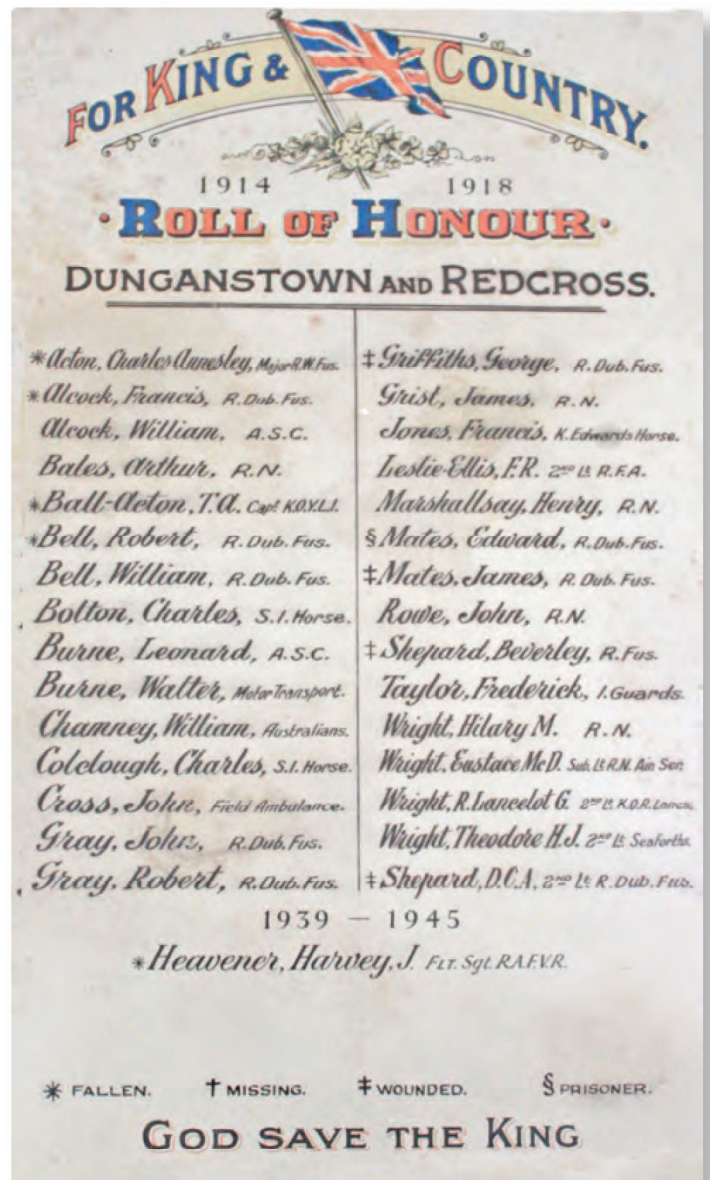
OPPOSITE PAGE Hiba (*Thujaopsis dolabrata*). Brought from Japan in the 1850s, this tree has fourteen stems.

AFTER THOMAS

The grim toll of World War I—the Acton war heroes

As Thomas Acton died a bachelor and his two brothers, William and Charles, had predeceased him, he was succeeded by his nephew, Charles Annesley Acton, the 32-year-old son of his late brother Charles. Like his father and uncle, Charles had been educated at Rugby and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1895. He served in Malta, Crete, Hong Cong, India and Burma. When he succeeded to Kilmacurragh in 1908, Charles resigned his commission in the army and settled down to life as a gentleman farmer and magistrate, serving as both a JP and high sheriff for County Wicklow, as his uncle, Thomas, had done before him. His six-year tenure was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I in August 1914. He immediately applied for a commission in his old regiment and was posted to France. It is understood that many of the gardeners in Kilmacurragh also left for the front. Before the war eleven men and two boys maintained the grounds. The evidence of their sudden departure can still be seen in three cramped ginkgo trees in the Walled Garden, where as saplings they had been temporarily heeled in. No one returned to transplant them.

Tragically, a year later and in keeping with the distinguished army careers of his predecessors, Charles fell mortally wounded at the battle of Loos while helping a wounded man. Kilmacurragh then passed to Charles's only surviving brother, Major



ABOVE Commemorative plaque for local casualties in the Great War, in St Kevin's Church, Dunganstown.

Note the two Acton war casualties: Major Charles Annesley Acton and Captain Reginald Thomas Annesley Ball-Acton.

to the poppies of Flanders with all their tragic symbolism. The walk was planted by Janet herself in the 1870s, with alternating rows of the dark Irish yew (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata')¹⁸⁵ acting as a foil to the hybrid, crimson-flowered *Rhododendron* 'altaclerense'—which she layered herself—and the lower-growing *Rhododendron* 'Cunningham's white'.

OPPOSITE PAGE The plume poppy (*Macleaya cordata*) filtering the light in the Double Borders. Its native habitat is Changyang, in the mountains of central China.

BELOW The Double Borders: purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).



The Double Borders

The great floral attraction in Kilmacurragh is a feature called the Double Borders, immediately accessible from the western side of the car park, where 'stepped' double herbaceous beds make August and September so memorably colourful. The policy there is mostly to grow flowers consistent with an old garden and in keeping with Victorian planting tradition, though some recently acquired exotica give variety and textural interest. During Thomas and Janet's time there were heated glass-houses here, backing onto the warm, south-west-facing wall of the enclosed garden.

F.W. Burbidge transports us to that era:

'The double borders ... It lies on a gentle slope to the sun and drops down every now and then by terraces two or three steps at a time with its rare old roses. On one side is the wall of the great, square kitchen garden, and