

Trees Woods and Literature – 37

Launch of “The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland”

National Botanic Gardens, 6th March 2013

The following is a report from the launch of the reprinted version of *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (Figure 1). The President, John Mc Loughlin, welcomed everyone to the book-launch at the National Botanic Gardens and in particular Sir Henry Elwes, great-grandson of Henry John Elwes who together with Augustine Henry co-wrote “The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland” (commonly called *The Trees*). It was originally published privately between 1906 and 1913, a monumental work in seven volumes plus an index. To celebrate its 70th anniversary, the Society of Irish Foresters decided to publish this limited edition reprint of Elwes and Henry’s masterpiece. It is now 100 years since the publication was first completed in 1913. It is also a 100 years since the Faculty of Forestry was established at UCD (then the Royal College of Science), where Augustine Henry became the first Professor of Forestry. The Society plans to celebrate this anniversary later this year.

The Society of Irish Foresters always had an interest in *The Trees*. The first



Figure 1: Sir Henry Elwes (third from left), great grandson of Sir John Henry Elwes, co-author of *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland*, the editorial committee of Donal Magner; John Mc Loughlin, Kevin Hutchinson and Pat O’Sullivan, with Matthew Jebb, Director; National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin at the launch on 6th March.

edition of its technical journal *Irish Forestry*, Vol. 1, No. 1 included an abstract from the book, and the species chosen was *Arbutus*. The Society is delighted to make the book available to a wider audience at a reasonable price; since only 300 copies were printed originally it was always difficult to acquire a copy. It is important to thank the members of the Society's sub-committee, Kevin Hutchinson, Donal Magner and Pat O'Sullivan for ensuring that a high quality publication was delivered on time. Donal Magner was particularly thanked for his attention to detail in arranging the facsimile copies, which resulted in an excellent publication (see Figure 2).

A century after its original publication, the book is as relevant today as when it was first published, the only changes are that taxonomists have altered the scientific names of some trees. One of those, Dr Matthew Jebb, Director of the National Botanic Gardens, was introduced to speak about Augustine Henry. Dr Matthew Jebb, after being thanked warmly and particularly for allowing access to the National Botanic Garden's set of *The Trees* for the scanning process, spoke about Augustine Henry:

Augustine Henry was, by comparison to Henry John Elwes, almost painfully modest and patient. He would be embarrassed with today's activity. He scarcely mentioned the rigours and adventures of his 18 years in China, certainly never in print. A medical man by training, a customs officer by profession and a botanist and forester by wont, sums up Henry's remarkable life. The writing of *The Trees* formed an interlude between his days as a customs official working for the Imperial Maritime Customs Service in China and his later career as the first Professor of Forestry at the College of Science in Dublin.



Figure 2: *The frontispiece from The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland.*

Augustine Henry was of the view that a hereditary wealthy class justified its existence by being a breeding ground of individualists, and no doubt their pre-eminence as collectors of trees. Indeed some of the greatest tree collections in these islands began, and many still remain, in private hands. Trees transcend human generations, and without the permanency of a plot of land, which will remain in the family, such collections cannot begin or survive. The zeal for building a collection of living trees depends not just on land, but also upon an epiphany or defining moment in the arborophile's life.

That moment came for Augustine Henry (1857–1930) towards the end of his years in China when he witnessed the transformation of the frontier region between what was then French Indo-China, currently Vietnam, and the Chinese province of Yunnan. Up until that time he had revelled in the largely untouched forests of central China. He wrote to his long-time correspondent Evelyn Gleeson in 1899 that 'a forest is the finest thing in the world'. It was near the town of Szemao in Yunnan, that he was suddenly shocked by the rate at which the forests had begun to disappear as this frontier was opened up to trade. To that point the forests of central China had seemed as vast as to be immune to destruction. In his last years in China he worked hard to persuade Kew and then Harvard to send plant collectors. In the end it was Thiselton-Dyer of Kew who interested Veitch & Sons, a nursery that had done well out of the Giant Sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum* (Lindl.) J.T.Buchholz) many years earlier, to send a young collector, Ernest Wilson to China. Wilson spent some months with Henry in Yunnan, and was inculcated with the field craft of the plant explorer. It seems probable that Henry felt great comfort in having passed on this mantle of duty towards the Chinese flora, and gave him the resolve to finally resign his post as a Chinese customs official and return to Europe.

The backgrounds and temperaments of Henry and Elwes could hardly have been more different, but their passion for trees was well matched. They both understood that no publisher could appreciate the importance of their mission, and the work would need to be privately printed to ensure their absolute control. The eccentric order of genera is a testament to this remarkable drive for thoroughness – starting with *Fagus*, the first volume veers to *Sophora* by way of *Ailanthus*, and then to *Araucaria* and onwards to *Ginkgo*. Many of the larger genera are visited multiple times throughout the volumes. As Henry explained in the postscript to the work, the want of order was of the greatest service to them, enabling them to leave the more difficult and least known genera till last, by which time they had become better acquainted with them. The scale of the endeavour grew as work progressed, and their initial plan of five volumes soon grew to seven. The all-important index volume gave access to the knowledge that any reader could require.

Their zeal ensured they took pains to visit every estate they could in Britain and Ireland, to see the trees with their own eyes and record on the spot. Elwes never took any evidence second hand, and the two criss-crossed Europe to satisfy themselves on the smallest of points. Elwes famously

claimed that they wore out two motor cars writing *The Trees*. Sir Frederick Moore's obituary of Henry reports two motoring accidents in the short space of time he joined them during one such tour, so fair wear-and-tear may have been the least of their problems. Elwes employed Henry for much of the time the volumes took to reach completion. This was always a difficult point, since Henry was parsimonious in his dealings with money, and he took great care to consult others before entering his contract with Elwes. Elwes on the other hand was wealthy and generous to a fault. The first volume appeared in 1906, three years after their work began, followed at yearly intervals by the next four, while volumes six and seven experienced some delay. But after ten years, the seventh volume appeared in the middle of July 1913, and the great work was complete. It stands today as a wonderful memorial to two very different, but equally inspiring men who have left us a magnificent testament to their industry and insight.

Then Sir Henry Elwes spoke of his great-grandfather:

I am very honoured to have been asked to join you on this occasion and to assist in the launch of this first class reproduction of *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* and to say a few words about my Great-Grandfather.

From the age of 17 until the year before he died, aged 76, Henry John Elwes never spent an unbroken year in England, such was his interest in all about him. He first studied birds, beginning with a visit to the Outer Hebrides at the age of 17 to study wildfowl with naturalist and later brother-in-law, Frederick Godman - quite an excursion in the 1860s! He was hired by Hooker's Journals to look further afield and made his first trip to India and the Himalayas at the age of 23 and followed this by several more trips. He was awarded Fellowship of the Royal Society, one of only two non-academics, at a very young age for his work on the "*Distribution of Asiatic Birds*". He also collected butterflies and 20,000 are now in the Natural History Museum in London and it was his new wife, fed up with a house full of bird skins, who persuaded him to look at plants!

An early find was the first large snowdrop ever collected, in 1874, and now bears his name *Galanthus elwesii*. At Colesbourne Park (Gloucestershire) we now have one of the biggest collections of snowdrops in the United Kingdom with 250 varieties. Henry John's collection of bulbous plants was said to be the largest private collection in the world and he provided more than 100 specimens for description in the *Botanical Magazine*. It was said that if Kew couldn't recognise a plant it was sent to "old Mr Elwes because he had probably seen it in the wild, somewhere in the world".

But as well as all this he was a responsible landlord and looked after his tenants well. He was a visionary farmer himself, he served as a magistrate and he liked nothing better than a good day's foxhunting over the Cotswold Hills. He also hunted big game all through his life. He planted around 850 acres of new woods and created a very special arboretum at Colesbourne

Park. I still have his pocket book recording 470 trees, detailing where he collected them from and where he planted them! An example is a *Cryptomeria japonica* seedling collected and brought home on the Trans-Siberian Railway (a three week journey) and then planted '20 yards from ice-house'. It is still growing there! In fact, it was trees that took up the last 20 years of his life. He was inspired after an 8,000 mile trip through Eastern America, then Mexico where Frederick Godman guided him through the forests of Southern Mexico, and finally up the west coast of America ending up in Wyoming.

In the 1880s England was facing a bad agricultural depression and Henry John Elwes was forced to lay out rabbit warrens and let the shooting rights for £10/- an acre when farm tenants could not afford any rent and were allowed to remain in their farmhouses free of charge. He then hit upon the idea of forestry as a better alternative use of land but, finding no book on the subject apart from Evelyn's *Sylva* of 1776 and Loudon's 1838 work mostly copied from others, he decided to write one himself, based on his own personal study and observation. He was not a botanist and so invited Thistleton-Dyer, Director of Kew, to suggest someone to help and the name of Augustine Henry, a customs officer and ardent botanist, who had just returned from many years in China, came up.

Henry John Elwes was described as a massive framed man with a handsome dark beard, a boyish love of adventure and astonishing powers of observation and memory. Here were two complete opposites who worked together for 12 years with virtually no disagreement. This must have been a challenge because Henry John Elwes was described by others as 'someone who had little knowledge of the art of compromise'! I wonder, was Augustine wholly acquiescent? I doubt it, but he had exact botanical science on his side, and this could hardly be challenged by a mere observer! After much travel and the wearing out of several cars this unusual partnership produced an incredible book: informative, accurate, and totally readable and of enduring value.

Henry John Elwes came down to breakfast one day and said to his wife Margaret, "Will you get the ham rolled up for me because I must go and see the Chile pine growing in its natural habitat for the book and I will be back in about three months"! The fact that *The Trees* has now been re-published after 100 years and with no amendments is testament to the astonishing achievement of 12 years' intense study. The authors would be proud of this occasion as indeed you all are of your premier Irish plants-man, Augustine Henry, and I am of my great-grandfather Henry John Elwes.

I thank your Society for inviting me to be with you today and I am delighted now to launch this book and to congratulate you on a magnificent undertaking and I wish you every success with the production.

The President thanked the speakers and made a presentation on behalf of the Society. All were then invited for light refreshment.

John McLoughlin and Pat OSullivan