

Trees, Woods and Literature – 43

Lady Gregory’s “Tree Planting”

Anna Pilz

Reading through Lady Augusta Gregory’s journals one is struck by the abundance of references to the planting of saplings of ash, beech, birch, larch, lime, oak, spruce, sycamore and yew.¹ A keen amateur planter, she held a life-long interest in forestry alongside an appreciation of the cultural value of the arboreal landscape. This dual regard is articulated in an article “Tree planting”, one of her early works that was published in the *Irish Homestead* of February 1898.² By that time, she had taken charge of her marital home at Coole Park in County Galway with an eye to protecting and developing the family’s legacy after the death of her husband, Sir William Gregory, in 1892. As custodian of the estate for her son Robert (1881-1918), Lady Gregory understood environmental stewardship as an integral part of estate management, spending both time and a significant proportion of her income on the upkeep of Coole’s woodland.

While landownership and silviculture were considered a man’s prerogative, Gregory crossed these gender boundaries as custodian and planter. In her perception of nature as both a material reality and a conceptual space, she engaged with and shaped the environs of the country house. In the 1890s, the family seat with its garden, greenhouses, orchard, and woods became the centre of her life. It was the arboreal landscape in particular that fostered an increasing attachment to place; as she remarked in her autobiography, “that love [for Coole] has grown through the long years of widowed life, when the woods especially became my occupation and delight.”³ For her 1898 article, she drew on her own experience alongside bookish knowledge of horticultural texts and treatise on husbandry, and she combined those with autobiography, reflections on improvement, class relations, and cautious political commentary.

Gregory’s deeply felt connection to the arboreal landscape is articulated in what is

For an extended version of this article see Anna Pilz, “Lasting Monuments: Lady Gregory’s Domesticated Landscape and Forestry”, 2018. In Terence Dooley, Maeve O’Riordan and Christopher Ridgway (eds), *Women and the Country House in Ireland and Britain*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp. 170-185. Thanks to Four Courts Press for permission to reprint an excerpt; minor adjustments have been made. Thanks to Colin Smythe for allowing the reproduction of the photograph of Lady Gregory sitting under the catalpa tree at Coole Park.

¹See, for instance, Niall O’Carroll, 2011. Cultivation of Trees at Coole Park – Extracts from Lady Gregory’s Diaries and Journals. *Irish Forestry* 68: 55-73.

²Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 94-8. Originally, the article appeared on 12th and 19th February 1898 of the *Irish Homestead*, pp. 141-2 and p. 164, respectively.

³Lady Gregory, 1974. *Seventy Years*, ed. Colin Smythe. New York: Macmillan, pp. 25-6.

perhaps the most expressive passage in “Tree planting”. She evokes a familiar bond with trees and woods in romantic terms but with clear cultural and political connotations:

we find the little seedlings we had put down in faith are over our heads, and acting as our protectors. And even if we do not live to sit under their shade, yet none the less ‘they will grow while we are sleeping’ that long sleep in which we may so easily be forgotten, and we are not likely to have more lasting monuments put over us, and we cannot have more gracious ones than the living, rustling trees that we had planted and that we had loved.⁴

The politics of this passage can be understood via her three central metaphors: trees as “protectors” of status and power; trees as “lasting monuments” of tradition and family legacy, a living inheritance; and “gracious” trees as the aesthetic value of a place. Gregory implies that it is through her continuance of the family tradition of tree planting and through the works and writings of the Revivalists that the Gregory name will be forever linked to the woods of Coole (Figure 1). Thereby, Gregory’s legacy transcends the confines of the domesticated landscape of the demesne to encompass both the literary and the natural landscape, the private and the public.

In “Tree planting”, Gregory offered a cultural conceptualisation of the arboreal world that was wedded to its material reality. “[I]f woods, like friendships, are not kept in constant repair,’ she warned her readers, ‘the day will come when they will be but a memory.’⁵ She recalled that “Ireland, more than other countries, ought to be a country of trees, for the very letters of her alphabet are named after them.” Here, she was explicitly gesturing toward the Gaelic League in musing, “Perhaps with the revival of her old language they will be better called to mind.”⁶ Appearing in the pages of the *Irish Homestead*, a weekly paper associated with Horace Plunkett’s Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), her article demonstrates her progressive views on agriculture. By linking Plunkett’s self-help movement with Hyde’s Gaelic League, Gregory proposed that re-afforestation and language revival went hand in hand. And she directly assisted the self-help movement by sharing her knowledge of silviculture and her thoughts on the present and future state of Irish forestry.

Rather than elaborating in a passive and observant manner on the aesthetic benefits of trees and woods as would have been expected from a female author, her article was instructive, practical, and ideological. While it was common for a woman to take part in horticultural pursuits, with gardening magazines and advice books by and for women

⁴ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 94.

⁵ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 94.

⁶ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 94.



Figure 1: *Lady Gregory under the catalpa tree at Coole, 1927 (courtesy of Colin Smythe).*

proliferating during the Victorian era, literature about and the practice of silviculture were very male dominated.⁷ Gregory entered the arboreal discourse with a remarkably confident tone and she aimed to educate by offering guidance on the best times for planting, what species were most suitable for what purposes, and alerted her readers to trees' needs with regards to different soil types. Her early diaries shed light on her planting activity at Coole, that was driven by a commitment to sustainable woodland management, and that she raised her son Gregory to be aware of the responsibilities of environmental stewardship. This is, for instance, apparent in her diary entry for January 1898 when she recorded the joint activity of mother and son: "Arranging tree planting – R. & I having marked 30 spruce for the people, & to leave gaps for the shooting, I am ordering 300 spruce, 300 larch, 100 silvers to take their place."⁸

A few weeks later, she sent off her article "to the Homestead".⁹ Gregory approvingly opened "Tree planting" with reference to an earlier article from the *Irish Homestead* that reported on the fact that "the number of trees planted in Ireland last year was considerably larger than the number of trees cut down." Giving a brief list of timber use for building materials and roofing as well as for fuel, she cautioned that such harvesting would result in a fast depletion of woodland if not carefully managed. She recounted that when Robert cut down a tree as a young boy, she promptly "told him that he must never cut one down without planting two in its place."¹⁰

She also quickly reminded her readers that the beautification of the country as well as its environmental stewardship should be spearheaded by the landed class: "We can't all have woods," she notes at one point, "nor is it to be wished that pasture or tillage fields should be turned into forests."¹¹ Through the use of this inclusive "we", Lady Gregory places her own husbandry within a familiar and, until that point, patrimonial ascendancy tradition that had started with Robert Gregory in the eighteenth century. As evidence that she was aware of this tradition and the importance of continuing it, she noted in her journals that Arthur Young, who toured Ireland in the 1770s, complimented her husband's ancestors' "noble nursery, the plantations for which would change the face of the district", adding proudly that "those woods still remain."¹²

With "Tree planting" Gregory contributed to a long tradition of practical literature on

⁷Sarah Bilston, 2008. Queens of the garden: Victorian women gardeners and the rise of the gardening advice text. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36(1): 1-19; Finola O'Kane, 2015. John Walker's "A Short Dissertation on Planting" for Lady Louisa Connolly. *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* XVIII: 152-160.

⁸Entry for 30 January 1898, in James Pethica (ed.), *Lady Gregory's Diaries 1892-1902* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), p. 165. Similarly, in April 1903, she noted that "2,500 little trees just arrived to supplement those we have cut." Lady Gregory, 1974. *Seventy Years*, ed. Colin Smythe. New York: Macmillan, p. 428.

⁹Entry for 10 February 1898, *Lady Gregory's Diaries*, p. 166.

¹⁰Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 95.

¹¹Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 95.

¹²Entry for 23 April 1920, Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals: Volume One, Books 1-29, 10 October 1916-24 February 1925*, ed. Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978), p. 148.

husbandry and silviculture that was, however, predominantly written by and for men. At Coole, she had access to a number of classic texts on the topic from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The holdings in the library gave testimony to the Gregorys' interest in landscape design, gardening, and forestry across generations, with titles from Richard Payne Knight, Humphrey Repton, John Claudius Loudon and William Pontey.¹³ When given the choice of six books from the library of her marital home, Gregory counted John Evelyn's *Silva* to be one of them, 'with its beautiful coloured plates of larch and "Silver fir"'.¹⁴ First published in 1664 under the auspices of the Royal Society, Evelyn's *Silva* is one of the most influential books on forestry. Gregory's reference is to the 1786 edition, edited with extensive notes by A. Hunter and featuring forty coloured plates.¹⁵ Considering that Gregory held this book in such high regard, we can surmise that it was likely a constant companion, frequently consulted and re-read.

For Gregory, it was the inclusion of the story of Ulysses in Evelyn's *Silva* that prompted her to recognize how planting trees was a means of connecting past, present, and future as well as a way to insert herself within the family's legacy. She quotes from Evelyn's book:

When Ulysses, after a ten years' absence, was returned from Troy, and coming home found his aged father in the field planting of trees, he asked him, 'Why, being now so advanced in years, he would put himself to the fatigue and labour of planting that of which he was never likely to enjoy the fruits?' The old man, taking him for a stranger, gently replied, 'I plant against my son Ulysses comes home'.¹⁶

As the passage indicates, the educational task of environmental stewardship was traditionally framed along paternal lines. Yet Gregory clearly associated herself in imaginative and practical terms with the father planting for his son's return and, irrespective of her gender, she considered it to be perfectly natural to take on that role. With subtlety, she draws on Evelyn's authority to argue for woman's equal (if not superior) role in environmental stewardship. "'Men seldom plant trees till they begin to be wise', says Evelyn"; having drawn attention to her conscientious tree planting and role as educator; Gregory – with the insertion of this quotation – was, in effect,

¹³ *Catalogue of Printed Books Formerly in the Library at Coole* (London, 1972). Dates given are in reference to the respective edition held at Coole.

¹⁴ Lady Gregory, 1971. *Coole*. ed. Colin Smythe, Dolmen Press, Dublin, p. 20.

¹⁵ *Catalogue of printed books*.

¹⁶ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 95. For the direct quotation see John Evelyn, 1801. *Silva: or, a Discourse of Forest-trees, and the Propagation of Timber in his Majesty's Dominions*, with notes by A. Hunter, 3rd ed., in two volumes, vol. I, York, p. 32.

proclaiming her own wisdom.¹⁷ In confirming her intellectual and practical abilities, she simultaneously asserted her right to take on the duties expected of the landed class.

Like Evelyn's, Gregory's argument is situated within a national framework. She called for a nation-wide revolution of tree planting that would unite the oppositional groups of those who supported Ireland's constitutional status as per the Act of Union of 1800 and those who campaigned for either Home Rule or separation. In the very year in which Irish nationalists were marking the centenary of their most noteworthy attempt at staging a rebellion against British rule, she overtly expressed her wish "that every Nationalist would plant at least one tree in this year of '98, and every Unionist in 1900, and every waverer or indifferent person in the year that separates them".¹⁸ For Gregory, environmental stewardship and ecological thought had thus the power to sidestep political division.

Whereas trees and woods enabled Gregory's entry into the established order, they equally offered the opportunity to negotiate class boundaries. After all, tree planting was a collaborative enterprise. Gregory acknowledged in *Coole* that she had not managed the woods on her own: "my companion and best helper an old man, now passed away. ... He was an old master of the business, had loved it through his lifetime."¹⁹ The old man was Gregory's wood-cutter, John Farrell. Having worked on the Coole estate for Sir William previously, Farrell was intimately acquainted with the demesne woods. He was listed as a "farm servant" on the census for 1901, aged seventy-nine at that time.²⁰ Gregory's description of Farrell proposes an ambivalent cross-class relation. Yet woodland management was not their only collaborative work.

In addition to looking after Coole's woods, Farrell also contributed to their mythologisation. He offered up folklore to both Gregory and W.B. Yeats, being, as he was, witness to "an unearthly sight in the woods."²¹ This vision occurred to him while cutting timber in Inchy Wood at Coole; he thus channelled both the natural and supernatural of the arboreal environment. His stories were included in Yeats' and Gregory's publications, including an essay on "The Enchanted Woods" and *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*.²² But despite his service to woodland management at Coole and to the Literary Revival through his folklore of the "Seven Woods", his name is not inscribed in the bark of the famous "autograph tree"; nor is any tree planted in his memory. His name does not cling to the arboreal landscape as do the names of others.

¹⁷ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 96.

¹⁸ Lady Gregory, 1976. Tree Planting. *Irish Forestry* 33(2): 95.

¹⁹ Lady Gregory, 1971. *Coole*. ed. Colin Smythe, Dolmen Press, Dublin, p. 94.

²⁰ Available at http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Galway/Kiltartan/Coole_Demesne/1384414/. [Accessed September 2016].

²¹ W.B. Yeats, 1902. *The Celtic Twilight*. London: A.H. Bullen, p. 103.

²² Lady Gregory, 1920. *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland Collected and Arranged by Lady Gregory: with Two Essays and Notes by W.B. Yeats*. New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons; W.B. Yeats, 1902. *The Celtic Twilight*. London: A.H. Bullen, pp. 101-3. I wish to express my warmest thanks to John Farrell's great-great granddaughter, Louise Stone, for drawing my attention to John's life and work.

Today's visitors continue to marvel at the autograph tree. The presence of the woods, with their associated names and stories, form a counterpart to the absence of the house. Here Gregory had inaugurated a literary landscape, and fostered and protected what is now a nature reserve. She regarded the demesne's trees and woods as a space where human intervention imbued nature with meaning, and in which gender distinctions could be negotiated and class boundaries fortified. While she was part of a tradition of landed women who actively shaped the landscape of the country house, her public contribution to the discourse of the country's re-forestation via a piece of practical literature on silviculture was a more unusual if not to say bold endeavour for a woman. Her planting practice and conceptualisation of it highlight the interplay of private and public landscapes. With the house gone, the woods remain as her "lasting monument". Dating from 1927, the photograph in Figure 1 captures the imposing catalpa tree within the walled garden at Coole Park. Lady Gregory, in her mid-seventies at the time, sits under its protective shade, looking out over the wooden fence. This Indian bean tree was most likely planted in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the Irish-born politician Robert Gregory returned from his service in the East India Company and acquired the estate. Although the specifics as to how this particular sapling took root in the soil at Coole are unknown, it is likely that it travelled all the way to County Galway via imperial networks. Indeed, it "was said to have been planted as a sapling in Coole, having been transported over desert on a camel's back wrapped in a hemp sack."²³

Growing over more than a century to its mature magnificence, the catalpa became a well-loved tree in the grounds at Coole. Not only was it one of Lady Gregory's favourite trees, but it was acknowledged by later visitors as a significant touchstone in the natural and cultural landscape. Having fallen victim to a storm and further weakened after another, the tree was removed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service to ensure the safety of visitors in 2008.²⁴ A local of Gort wrote to the *Irish Times* in outrage at such a "wanton act of vandalism."²⁵ "The unconventional beauty of Coole has been violated", argued Mark Coen, "as has the notion that ordinary people might be stakeholders in our natural heritage."²⁶ Yet the stump of the catalpa tree was left as a reminder of that heritage,²⁷ and a new one had already been planted in 1995 by Lady Gregory's grand-daughters in her memory (Figure 2).

²³ Available at <https://www.coolepark.ie/history/walled-garden/> [Accessed June 2019].

²⁴ Tim O'Connell, "Catalpa tree at Coole Park", *Irish Times* (12 June 2008). Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/catalpa-tree-at-coole-park-1.1218300> [Accessed June 2019].

²⁵ Mark Coen, "Coole Park's Catalpa tree", *Irish Times* (2 June 2008). Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/coole-park-s-catalpa-tree-1.1265860> [Accessed June 2019].

²⁶ Mark Coen, "Coole Park's Catalpa tree", *Irish Times* (2 June 2008). Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/coole-park-s-catalpa-tree-1.1265860> [Accessed June 2019].

²⁷ "Catalpa bignonioides", Tree Register, Tree Council of Ireland, <https://treecouncil.ie/treeregisterofireland/392.htm> [Accessed June 2019].



Figure 2: *In 1995, Lady Gregory's granddaughters planted another catalpa tree to replace the earlier specimen. Photograph courtesy of Audrey Robitaille.*

Anna Pilz
Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society,
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität

(a.pilz@outlook.com)