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## Forest Perspectives

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### Times Past

Woodland management and resources in Co Fermanagh in the 18th century feature in a recent publication from the Four Courts Press: *Castle Caldwell, County Fermanagh Life on a west Ulster estate, 1750-1800* by Mervyn Busted. The extract reproduced here, by permission of the author, shows that the concept of multi-functional use of forest was understood and practised by at least some estate owners in Ireland during the late eighteenth century.

Sustainable management of forest resources within the estate is a recurring theme, with the use of natural regeneration implicit in a letter to the estate owner, Sir James Caldwell, from one of his tenants ... "I will cut down the woods at Inisheen this winter ... I will not do any prejudice to the young growth that can be possibly be avoided..."

Ed.

#### *Author's preface to extract*

Until the mid sixteenth century Ireland was renowned for the density of its woodlands, but by the early eighteenth century it was one of the least forested countries in Europe. The transformation was due to warfare and colonisation. Throughout the late middle ages Irish chieftains had skilfully exploited woodland cover in their campaigns against the Dublin authorities. The reassertion of central government authority during the sixteenth century led to the steady clearance of woodland strongholds. Subsequently, settlers from Britain completed the process as they felled woodland for building material, cooperage, charcoal and timber exports.

Growing political security from the late seventeenth century encouraged landowners to build unfortified country houses and refashion the landscape of the demesne around the house. By the mid eighteenth century there was a strong trend in favour of open rolling greensward with carefully positioned water bodies and extensive tree plantations. Many landlords took advantage of Ireland's high humidity, lush growth of natural vegetation and frequent juxtaposition of mountain, lough and seashore and adopted the style on their estates. The result was that by the early nineteenth century approximately 6% of the country's land area was taken up in demesne land heavily planted not only with native species but also with exotic trees and shrubs introduced by returning explorers and colonial administrators.

#### *Extract*

A key aspect of improvement was the planting of woodland. It carried multiple significance. It was simultaneously an economic resource, an aesthetic

embellishment, an aid to fox hunting, a gesture of confidence in the family future, a gesture of confidence in the family future, a symbol of permanence and commitment, and if oak were included, a patriotic act in supplying naval timber.<sup>1</sup> In comparison with England, Irish landowners were slow to take up tree planting and visitors frequently remarked on the relative absence of tree cover.<sup>2</sup> Between 1698 and 1791 the Irish parliament passed 17 Acts to encourage tree planting and the Dublin Society offered yearly premiums for planting and nursery stocking from 1740 to 1807. The repetition of the legislation is in itself revealing, but the growing popularity of the new 'parkland' style of demesne layout boosted tree planting since woodland was an integral part of the fashion.

Sir James Caldwell's correspondence shows that he needed no such prompting. From the outset he was a careful steward of the estate woodlands, and the rent toll of 1770 reveals that just over 11 per cent of his estate was wooded (Table 1). He took great care over the planting of trees, writing on one occasion to an employee to specify that new trees should be 60 feet from each other.<sup>3</sup> The felling of timber was carried out with great care. Late in 1768 one of Sir James's employees wrote a reassuring letter 'I will cut down the wood of Inisheen this winter & you may rely on it I will not do any prejudice to the young growth that can be possible avoided & I will give particular directions to take care of it lest it be hurted'.<sup>4</sup> Such decisions could bring to the surface the tension between aesthetic and economic considerations. On at least two occasions there is evidence that they strained family relationships. In early 1745, scarcely a year after he had become head of the family and when he was still in Austria, Sir James was involved in a dispute with his mother about the sale of timber. This led to his relative Sir James Cooke to write that he was about to receive a visit from the formidable Dowager and he hoped to raise the matter: 'I shall in ye most tender manner talk to her about the woods that are sold and hope ye matter shall be in ye most amicable way made up between ye.'<sup>5</sup> Thirty-two years later, when his son John requested money to buy his army commission as lieutenant, Sir James wrote 'Your mother and I have been thinking, how we could raise the money. I could, t is true, sell the ornamental timber in and about this place and in the domain, which would bring in at least a thousand pounds; this would be so much loss to you, and at the same time ruin the beauty of the place'.<sup>6</sup> Just under a year later, when his wife had died and he was encouraging John to come and view the estate,

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Daniels, 'The political iconography of woodland in later Georgian England', in D. Cosgrave and S. Daniels (eds) *The iconography of landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments* (Cambridge 1988), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> T. Reeves-Smyth, 'Demesnes', in *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape*, p.552.

<sup>3</sup> John Johnston to Lady Elizabeth Caldwell, 3 March 1755. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/20/209.

<sup>4</sup> William Hassard to Sir James Caldwell, 16 Nov. 1768. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/20/168.

<sup>5</sup> Sir James Cooke to Sir James Caldwell, 18 Feb. 1745. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/14/26.

<sup>6</sup> Sir James Caldwell to John Caldwell, 9 Nov. 1777. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/113.

he revealed the lengths he would go to preserve the woodlands: 'I have ... preserved most valuable and ornamental woods ... I am determined to run all risks even the seizing of my stock and furniture than to sell from you the beautiful and ornamental woods of Rossmore and Castle Caldwell which would bring a great deal of money'

*Table 1: Land use on the Castle Caldwell estate in 1770.*

<i>Land use</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Arable	49.1
Arable & pasture	17.0
Pasture	8.2
Wood	11.1
Bog	9.3
Moor	3.0
Mountain	2.3

and he declared he would pay any debts 'without touching the woods'.<sup>7</sup>

The request for money and the death of his mother clearly provoked an awkward phase in what seems to have been a close relationship between father and son. Just over a year later John confessed that his absence on the American frontier meant that he had 'very trifling knowledge ... in respect of entitlements, leases or anything else that may regard the right of heritage' but, going to great pains to reassure Sir James, he went on: 'my dear father did ever I give the smallest hints that such great improvements as are carried out at Castle Caldwell, were agreeable to me, because, perhaps, I should one day or other be the possessor of them? No, so long as they pleased you they were pleasing to me.'<sup>8</sup> By late 1782, when there were signs that his father's health was faltering, John was clearly taking a greater interest in the running of the estate. In December he wrote to warn of false economies: 'A gardener was lately recommended ... as a perfect master of his profession and from his discharge [references] an excellent character. He was brought up in England under the care of the great nursery men. He asks 25 pounds a year and says he will not come for less, let me know your determination. In my opinion it is cheaper to give a few pounds more & have a man who can be depended upon.'<sup>9</sup> He too now realised the value of tree planting, to the extent where he was specifying tree types and planting

<sup>7</sup> Sir James Caldwell to John Caldwell, 18 Oct. 1778 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/114.

<sup>8</sup> John Caldwell to Sir James Caldwell, 24 Sept. 1779 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/115.

<sup>9</sup> John Caldwell to Sir James Caldwell, 6 Dec. 1782 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/123.

sites. In early 1783 he wrote: 'I hope all the trees &c. have arrived safe. I beg a piece of ground may be prepared for some timber seeds I will send down, especially of evergreens, which are much wanting around C[astle] C[aldwell] the angle in the bog near J. Mulhearns would answer very well for al finds of ever greens'.<sup>10</sup> Exploration and military service abroad meant that Europeans in the 18th century were encountering new species of plants and trees, and it is quite possible that John's interest in evergreens was sparked by his time in the woodlands of North America.

It is hardly surprising, therefore that wood stealing could ring heavy punishment, a Justice of the Peace having the power to award the victim 'treble damages, also to fine the person any sum not exceeding ten shillings for the poor of the parish'.<sup>11</sup> Sir James clearly acquired some expertise in timber management. In 1779 his relative Lady Coghill wrote:

I must beg a little instruction from you in respect of felling and disposal of trees. We have found out in a few cuttings & corners some old oaks that are beginning to decay to the number of about forty or so. I know you have had some experience of business & can there fore give me your advice about the timber and bark ... will the lesser branches do for charcoal. Sir John is determined not to sell off trees standing, which would certainly be improvident.<sup>12</sup>

The results of these years of care were visible in the extensive woodlands recorded on the demesne in by the Ordnance survey in 1834 (Figure 1). In all, by late 1778 Sir James estimated that on the demesne he had 'laid above sixteen thousand pounds ... so as to make it almost three times as much as what it was'.<sup>13</sup> In his will drawn up two years later he had revalued his improvements at £25,000 and they were still incomplete.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> John Caldwell to Sir James Caldwell, 29 March 1783 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/128.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick French to Sir James Caldwell, 23 Oct. 1750 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/14/138.

<sup>12</sup> Lady Coghill to Sir James Caldwell, 28 Feb. 1779 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/14/26.

<sup>13</sup> Sir James Caldwell to John Caldwell, 18 Oct. 1778 John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Bagshawe Muniments, 3/13/114.

<sup>14</sup> Bagshawe, *Bagshawes of Ford*, p. 349.

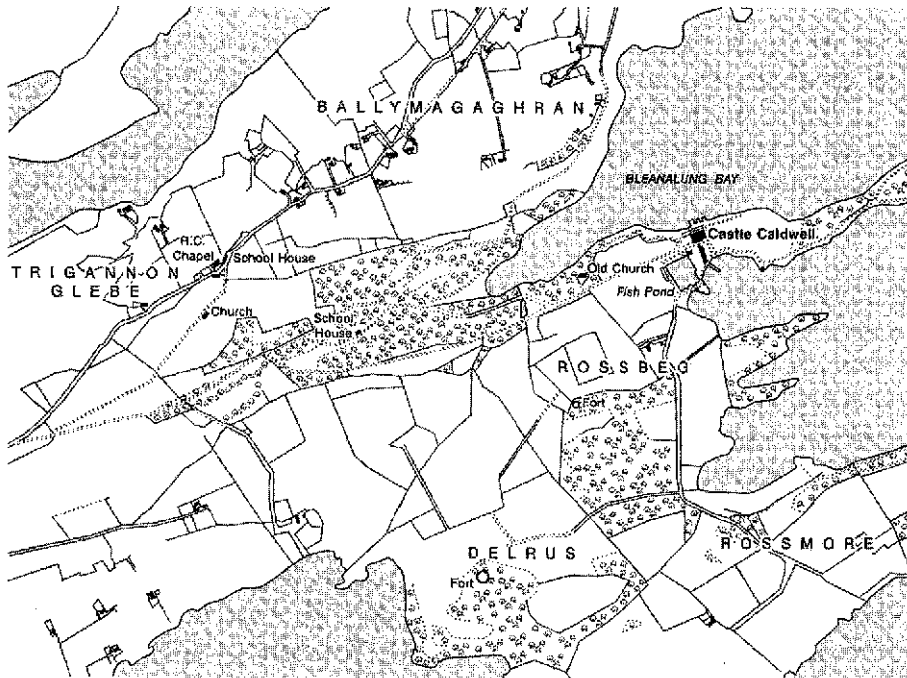


Figure 1: The Castle Caldwell demense in 1834. Adapted from the Six Inch Ordnance Survey for Co Fermanagh, sheet 8. The extensive areas of woodland are notable. (Copied from Castle Caldwell, County Fermanagh. *Life on a west Ulster estate, 1750-1800* by Mervyn Busted. 2006. Four Courts Press Ltd.