**Book Review for Social & Cultural Geography**

**Nuala C Johnson**  
*Nature displaced, Nature displayed: Order and beauty in Botanical Gardens*  

Botanic Gardens are made through a multiplicity of practices, meanings and materials. They must meet many competing demands: at once spaces of scientific knowledge production, circulation, display and training, as well as sites for public education and entertainment. Botanic gardens distil patterns of global life into their patches of earth, while each of their plants has a biography rooted in imperial exchange, personal networks and layered horticultural expertise. Nuala Johnson’s *Nature Displaced, Nature Displayed* is a well-researched and scholarly work that contributes to our knowledge of such institutions and their constitutive networks.

The book is a thematic, comparative history of botanic gardens in Dublin, Cambridge and Belfast, from their inception to the close of the nineteenth century. Following Steven Shapin and work on the geographies of knowledge (Livingstone, 2003), one of the book’s main contributions is to chart the interplay of local context and globalising, universal botanical knowledge in each of the three gardens. Certainly these gardens are well chosen, providing often subtle contrasts, and the author does an excellent job of calibrating their stories: Dublin’s history inflected by agricultural improvement; the Belfast gardens an instrument to enhance the city’s prestige; Cambridge was foremost a scientific garden, its history more closely tied to the growth of botany as an academic discipline than the other two.

The book has themes that stood out for me. Firstly, the author demonstrates the different ways that ‘aesthetic staging’ (p 13) and beauty intermingled with science and education through debates about visual order. This order was unstable, with taxonomy shifting from Linnaean
sexual dimorphism to a ‘natural system’ from the 1820s on, though more slowly in Belfast and Dublin, which also held more dearly to the idea of the garden as embodying God’s order. Contributing to work on Enlightenment science, Johnson argues that the visual was not just a means to present knowledge, but intrinsic to making knowledge through, for instance, training the senses of budding botanists. The second theme is technology and the material and in particular the chapter on glasshouses, perhaps the book’s most novel. Glasshouses became a means to ‘produce the tropics’, or at least a sanitised, vegetable-only version. Here Belfast, a burgeoning industrial city, led the way technologically, building an impressive Palm House in the 1850s to give its citizens a taste of the exotic. Such glasshouses extended botanical order to accommodate tropical and sun-loving plants alongside temperate specimens, though budgets meant universal coverage was impossible: the Cambridge gardens aspired only to be ‘tolerably illustrative’ of tropical plants (p 123). There is, however, less on the plants themselves; work remains to be done on how these non-humans came to form a living archive of botanical knowledge.

Thirdly, the book neatly shows the importance of personal networks of knowledge and patronage. Johnson usefully builds on recent work emphasising the awkward relations between gardens at the centre of Empire, particularly Kew, and those elsewhere (for example Endersby, 2001; Ginn, 2009). *Nature Displaced* contains plenty of stories about individual botanists, from the disastrous Underwood who drank himself out of a job in Dublin, to the dispute between superintendent Ninian Niven and the Dublin Royal Society over a move away from Linnaean taxonomy. The archival record usually leaves little trace of subjugated, Indigenous or lay knowledges, and this theme is not picked up by Johnson, which perhaps misses an opportunity to examine the politics of knowledge in the Irish gardens particularly. Overall, though, the skilfully marshalled evidence demonstrates that how a fertile network of contacts was needed to secure good circulation – both to and from gardens – of seed and thus build the scientific reputation of a garden and his curator.
Finally, *Nature Displayed* passes the 'can I read it on the sofa?' test – it is pleasingly written, the illustrations are excellent, and a well-paced structure makes it easy to follow. Johnson knows her archives – she skilfully arranges the multiple practices, competing impulses, scientific debates and personal politics of three institutions in a genuinely synthetic manner, an admirable achievement not to be underestimated.

**References**


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