Tresco Abbey Gardens, Scilly Isles

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XXIV.—TRESCO ABBEY GARDENS, SCILLY ISLES.

One of the functions of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, as is well known, is to grow as far as possible the plants representative not only of the British Empire, but also of the world. For the most part these plants have to be grown under glass, and though even under these conditions many exhibit fairly well their natural peculiarities of form and their general characteristics, especially when they come from the tropical regions, yet the plants from the subtropical countries, which are not hardy in the open, cannot as a rule be cultivated to show their true value and beauty under glass.

It is the incomparable advantage of botanists and gardeners of Great Britain that they are able to study such plants, native of South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and South America in the two famous gardens of Tresco Abbey in the Scilly Isles and La Mortola in the Riviera.

These two splendid collections of plants, formed by the enterprise and enthusiasm of two remarkable Englishmen, Augustus Smith and Sir Thomas Hanbury, are perhaps not sufficiently known to the botanists and gardeners of the present generation.

British botanists tend to be concerned so much with problems of structure and function that they have but little leisure or inclination to investigate the interesting general features of the vegetation of the Empire, while those whose function it is to deal with the systematic side of the science are so fully occupied that they have but little time left to study as living organisms the plants with which they are so familiar as dried specimens in the herbarium.

This, however, is an omission that is not wholly their own fault, and it would be highly desirable if arrangements could be made so that systematic botanists, more particularly, should pay visits to these two magnificent collections, from time to time, in order to study in the living condition the plants with which their sphere of work has made them familiar, though only as inanimate objects.

A twofold benefit could not fail to be realised by such visits, for, in the first place, the knowledge of the plants as living organisms growing in the open under conditions closely comparable to those of their native countries would teach much of their structure and functions, and possibly also of their powers of variation and adaptation, while in the second place these experts in botanical nomenclature would be able to assist the owners of the collections in maintaining and ensuring the correct naming of their plants. In addition they would without doubt be able to suggest new and interesting subjects for experimental cultivation.

So extensive are the collections both at Tresco Abbey and in the gardens at La Mortola that they offer abundant scope for a permanent botanist and a botanical laboratory, but such a counsel of perfection is obviously beyond the range of a private individual, who has to be busied with the cares of maintenance of his collection in addition to his other duties, and it should rather be considered a duty of the State to provide funds for visiting botanists,

who might be on the staff of the National Botanical Institution at Kew, or the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, for the purposes of making careful studies of the collections at Tresco Abbey and La Mortola at different times of the year.

In the case of both these institutions, which may be truly styled Botanic Gardens, a complete and accurately named garden herbarium is required, and also as far as possible drawings and studies should be made of the rare and interesting plants as they come into flower.

At La Mortola, we believe, something has already been done in the direction of making a representative collection, but at Tresco, beyond the fact that valuable additions have been made from time to time to enrich the national herbaria at Kew and at Edinburgh, a local garden herbarium has not yet been established.

Tresco, however, is fortunate in possessing a remarkable collection of drawings of a large number of the interesting plants which have flowered in the gardens. The collection was commenced by Mrs. Le Marchant, sister of Mr. Augustus Smith, and a most beautiful and faithful book of her paintings is carefully preserved at the Abbey.

These drawings were made about the middle of the last century, and represent the plants introduced to Tresco by Mr. Augustus Smith. Many of these plants were sent to him from Kew, while for others he was indebted to correspondents in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. His remarkable botanical enterprise and keen interest in gardening was continued by his nephew, whom he made his heir, Mr. Thomas Algernon Dorrien-Smith. He succeeded to the Lordship of the Islands in 1872, and before then had taken no particular interest in plants or gardens, but he succeeded by determined effort to acquire a full knowledge of the collections and developed a very keen interest in and genuine love of his plants. On his lamented death in 1918 (*K.B.*, 1918, p. 242), he was succeeded by his son, Major A. A. Dorrien-Smith. He has not only inherited his father's and great uncle's botanical tastes and interests, but has done even more signal service to the science of botany in making expeditions to New Zealand and the Chatham Islands, and to Australia in search of seed and plants for the enrichment of the collections at Tresco. In addition, during his service in the South African War he found odd moments for collecting, and sent home many interesting seeds of *Aloes*, *Gladioli*, and other plants for the Tresco Gardens.

Just as the mantle of the uncle has descended on nephew and great-nephew so has the mantle of Mrs. Le Marchant fallen on her great-nieces, and the collection of flower studies which she initiated has been skilfully and beautifully continued by the Misses Dorrien-Smith, the sisters of the present Lord Proprietor. Though much has been done by these ladies, many plants still remain to be figured to complete the record of a botanical garden which comprises so remarkable and unique a collection.

The *Mesembryanthemums* which grow here with all the vigour that they exhibit in their native country have nearly all been faithfully painted, as has also the extensive collection of *Pelargoniums*, most of which flourish here in the open and flower almost

throughout the entire year. One species indeed, *P. tomentosum*, grows with such remarkable vigour that it even kills out the common bramble by suffocation!

Something must now be said of the Abbey Gardens as they are at the present day. Augustus Smith was quick to realise that without shelter it was possible to grow very little of interest on a wind-swept spot like Tresco, and when he became Lord Proprietor in the year 1833 he started the planting up of shelter belts of *Pinus insignis*, *P. Pinaster*, *Cupressus macrocarpa*, and *Quercus Ilex*, which soon resulted in the formation of sheltered nooks and corners where choicer subjects could be planted. Thanks to this shelter from the frequent gales, exotic trees such as *Hakea oleifolia*, *Cinnamomum camphora*, *Banksias*, *Metrosideros tomentosa*, *M. robusta*, and many others are now fine and stately specimens 30–40 feet high and covered each year with a profusion of bloom.

In addition to the shelter belts and plantations of wind-resisting trees an extensive rock garden was built up and formed partly out of the natural granite rock of the island and in the sheltered bays many a plant unknown to our Northern Hemisphere has found a home and developed with extraordinary vigour.

In such places may be found a great variety of Aloes which bloom each year, such as *A. arborescens* and several other species enumerated in the Tresco plant list, numerous Agaves and a host of Crassulas, Sedums, and Mesembryanthemums, which, indeed, revel in the chinks and crannies of the exposed rocks. Even in March and April the garden is brilliant with masses of *Mesembryanthemum aurantiacum*, *M. Zeyheri*, *M. productum*, and cushions of the beautiful soft pink *M. crassum*, with magnificent spires of *Aloe Salm-Dyckiana* rising above them.

Of shrubs, some of the more noticeable at the time of my visit in April were *Olearia Gunnii*, and *O. stellulata*, *Agonis flexuosa*, *Echium Callithyrsum* from the Canary Islands, *Isopogon latifolius* from Australia with its great head of dull pink flowers, *Dryandra formosa*, bearing numerous golden "cones" of flowers, *Halleria lucida* some 30 ft. high covered with flowers and *Brachyglottis repanda* with large trusses of white flowers. This forms a large shrub, and though the leaves with their silvery lower surface are exposed to the full force of the wind they do not appear to suffer to any extent, and give a fine effect as a bold evergreen shrub. Other interesting trees that deserve notice are *Cinnamomum camphora*, some 30 ft. high, *Clethra arborea*, *Ficus macrophylla*, some 20 ft. high, grown from seed brought home by Major Dorrien-Smith, and several Acacias, of which *A. longifolia* was being cut in considerable quantities for the London market. Nor must *Olearia semidentata* be forgotten, which with *O. chathamica* was just coming into blossom.

Four species of *Coprosma*, *C. lucida*, *C. Baueri*, *C. grandiflora* and *C. robusta* make interesting evergreen trees. They were in full flower, and trees of both sexes of some of the species are to be found in the collection. *C. Baueri* sets seed regularly which germinate freely where they fall.

Some of the most successful hedge plants at Tresco are *Escalonia macrantha* and Veronicas, *Eugenia apiculata*, Correas and various species of *Pittosporum*, and the low hedges made by the first-mentioned shrubs enable more tender plants to be grown in small sheltered enclosures.

The Tresco Abbey Gardens and plantations fall into three very distinct sections:—

1. The garden proper, which includes the rock garden with a southern aspect. Here are considerable outcrops of granite rock, and it becomes very hot and dry during the summer months. It is in this part of the garden that the Mesembryanthemums, Crassulas and Pelargoniums flourish as in their native home, and in addition, Pimelias, Diosmas, Aloes, Cactoid Euphorbias and Puyas grow without trouble, while such bulbous plants as Sparaxis and Freesias become veritable weeds.

2. Then there is all the higher ground above the garden densely planted with *Cupressus macrocarpa* and *Pinus insignis*, amongst which are numerous sheltered bays and enclosures. Here among the predominant gorse and heather are planted the Acacias—several species, including *A. Baileyana*, *A. longifolia*, and *A. verticillata*, growing and flowering in luxuriance, their only enemy being the wind. Several species of *Melaleuca*, *Leptospermum* and *Hakea* are also making fine bushes. Trees of particular interest which have been planted in these sheltered hollows and are doing well are *Leucadendron argenteum*, the Cape Silver tree, some 10 ft. high, surrounded by gorse, which probably affords it good protection against the wind and also keeps the soil moist, *Widringtonia Whytei*, the Mlanje Cedar, from Nyasaland, *Callitris Sullivani*, from Australia, *Juniperus bermudiana*, the pencil cedar, *Dacrydium cupressoides* and several species of *Podocarpus* and other interesting exotic conifers. Here also an avenue of the Norfolk Island Pine, *Araucaria excelsa*, has been made. On the shady side of the grass drive these trees are making fine growth, but on the more exposed and sunny side they are not a success.

3. The third section of the grounds embraces the northern slope of the central hill, and on this side in bays and clearings among the trees a considerable collection of Himalayan and Chinese Rhododendrons has been brought together. There are several fine specimens of *R. arboreum* and *R. Aucklandii*, but the most striking and interesting species is *R. Veitchianum*, a splendid bush some 7 ft. high and 7 or 8 ft. through, bearing a profusion of its magnificent sweetly-scented white flowers in mid-April. *R. ponticum* occurs throughout this part of the grounds as an undergrowth and makes an excellent wind break near the ground. It has, however, one drawback, since it seeds so freely that its seedlings tend to cover the ground and choke the smaller species unless constant attention is paid to weeding them out.

A word may be said as to other weeds which are prevalent in the Tresco Gardens. In addition to Freesias, Cinerarias come up everywhere, and Bluebells, several species of *Oxalis*, *Allium triquetrum* and *Nothoscordium* are pests with which it is almost impossible to cope effectively. The latter plant introduced by some

lover of plants as an interesting addition has proved to be a curse from which the gardens can hardly hope ever to be freed.

It is not necessary now to allude to the Scilly Island industries, such as the Daffodils (*K.B.*, 1913, p. 171) and Potato growing for the English and French markets which have been so successfully initiated and fostered by the successive Lord Proprietors, but reference may be made in conclusion to the possibilities of growing New Zealand Flax as a crop for the production of Fibre, not only on Tresco, but in suitable spots on some of the other islands. Phormium is growing remarkably well on Tresco without any particular attention being paid to it, and though there would not be very many acres available for its cultivation in the Scilly Isles it would appear possible to set up a Flax industry in co-operation with growers in Cornwall, and provide a sufficient quantity of leaves to keep a Cornish Flax mill working throughout the year.

As an example of the suitability of the Scillies for Phormium it is of interest to find that plants of *P. Colensoi*, a species, however, which is not of much value for Flax production, has established itself at the foot of the Western Cliffs on St. Martin's just above the reach of the waves. Two large plants may now be seen which have apparently grown from chance seeds and they are fully exposed to the salt spray. They flower profusely and ripen seeds, and young seedlings are springing up in crevices in the granite cliffs above and around the original plants. This naturalization of *P. Colensoi* serves to show that though at first sight the Islands might not be thought suitable for Phormium, owing to the somewhat dry granitic soil, yet the climatic conditions so much resemble those of New Zealand that the cultivation would appear to offer every prospect of success.

It is not the purpose of this brief article on the remarkable collections in the Tresco Abbey Gardens to enumerate the various plants in detail, its object rather is to point out that in the Scilly Islands, thanks to the enterprise and love of plants displayed by the successive Lord Proprietors, we have within the bounds of Great Britain a Botanic Garden of singular importance and value. For in this favoured spot may be studied the principal features, not only of the temperate regions of New Zealand and her outlying islands, of Australia and of South America, but also a vast number of the characteristic features of the subtropical vegetation of South Africa.

The Tresco Gardens have therefore an exceptional claim to be regarded as an Imperial asset of great importance to the botanists of this country whose work lies with the botanical resources of the British Empire, and it is to be hoped that some provision may be made for linking them more closely in the future with the scientific centre maintained by public funds for the purpose of co-ordinating the work of applying botanical knowledge to practical ends.

A. W. HILL.