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Audiences and influences of Birr Castle's defences: Reply to Luke Harris

Harris offers a thoughtful response to this study of Birr Castle's defence works, raising questions about how they would have been experienced and possible design influences. Discussing the 'double transformation' Harris mentions is tricky as the designs shown in the surviving plans were not fully implemented. I think their meaning would have been understood differently depending on the onlooker, which reflects the multifaceted nature of the designs. Potential agitators would have seen the defences as an obstacle preventing immediate access to Birr Castle. Even today, the front ditch acts as a clear barrier denoting to tourists that, while the rest of the estate is available for them to explore, the area inside these defences is private access only. Peers of the Parsons might have been impressed with the taste and knowledge of the designers. For the family, the defences might have provided a sense of inconspicuous security, as standing in the centre of the front lawn, the militarised design of the space is not immediately apparent due to the sunken nature of the ditch works, softening the position for themselves by lessening the tension between defence and garden.

Regarding the wider public, the defence works as an act of charity and should be understood as a defensive measure as much as the physicality of the designs themselves. To have not embarked on such a relief programme during the Famine would have drawn the family criticism at best, and further legitimised them as targets at worst; these endeavours would have improved the Parsons family's standing within the county. That the family remains at Birr Castle today, particularly after Ireland's revolutionary period during the 1910s and early 1920s when many country estates were destroyed, is likely a testament to their popularity in the area, which would have been generated through acts of care to the broader community like the defence works employment scheme.

As to whether the designs would have been seen as outdated, an element of formality did return in the nineteenth century; for example, parterres saw a resurgence, as did flowers more generally. It is worth remembering that the castle's front face itself is reflective of another revivalism in its neo-Gothic design. However, the defence works would still have been out of place for a country estate. I would suggest the project was less a nod to earlier designs from the century prior, and instead a clear indication of the Parsons family's interest in science and military engineering, which is why security at the estate took such a dramatic form and scale.

Trying to track down possible influences is certainly worth further consideration. Colonial architecture would have taken similar forms, but only genuine military and administrative buildings come to mind as points for comparison rather than the landscaping of other estates within these territories up to now. Richard's service might shed more light, the sights he saw may have inspired him, or maybe military engineering books provided a point of reference. His home, Leasingham Hall, is also of note here. Trees were planted against the property alongside a memorial stone stating they had been taken from Hougoumont, a manorial farm that had been a key defensive position for Wellington's forces at Waterloo. Therefore, it is clear that Richard was well aware that gardens could be used as sites of military commemoration if not military architecture. Leasingham is roughly twenty miles away from Grimsthorpe Hall, which I mentioned in the article used bastions as a means of observing the broader landscape; these stood until at least the 1830s and their relative proximity to Richard's home makes me wonder if he had known about them, though this is speculation. If he did, we have come full circle back to Harris' comments on a self-conscious revival, which now holds much more weight.

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