

SPIRANTHES ROMANZOFFIANA, IRISH LADY'S TRESSES: (MAINLY) A GARDEN HISTORY

Orchids have a precarious relationship with gardeners. An unknown number of tropical species have been hunted to extinction so that they could grace, at least temporarily, the tropical conservatories and grandiose glasshouses of wealthy garden owners. A few Irish gardeners participated in the mania for tropical orchids including the remarkable John Charles Lyons (1792–1874) of Ladiston, Mullingar, and the famous collection at the Royal (now National) Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, was built largely from the discarded small-flowered species that were not spectacular enough for wealthy connoisseurs: “This is not an Orchid which is likely to find favour with lovers of Orchids for their decorative value only ...”, wrote F. W. Burbidge¹, about the present subject. Indeed, *Spiranthes romanzoffiana*, Irish lady’s tresses, is not a flamboyant orchid nor an inhabitant of a tropical jungle, rather it is a demure, often inconspicuous plant, albeit an uncommon and unusual one. Irish lady’s tresses occur in scattered habitats throughout the island, and is recorded at present in 10 vice-counties. Today, being a protected plant in both jurisdictions in Ireland, *S. romanzoffiana* cannot be disturbed, picked or uprooted, but in previous centuries it had no protection under law so there was “open season” for collectors.

The first person to report Irish lady’s tresses in Europe – indeed from Ireland – was the Scottish plantsman James Drummond (c. 1786–1863) who was curator of the newly established botanic garden of the Royal Cork Institution at Evergreen in Cork. He encountered the orchid during his exploration of the western extremities of counties Cork and Kerry in the summer of 1810. Drummond had travelled to Bantry and thence Ballylickey where he visited Miss Ellen Hutchins (1785–1815), who was well known in contemporary botanical circles. Hutchins reported that Drummond left Ballylickey “a day or two” before 24 July 1810, but, contrary to what Dr Frank Horsman² supposed, he did not travel direct from Ballylickey to Castletown Berehaven by boat. In fact, according to a transcript of his 1810 journal³, Drummond took a deliberately circuitous land route which certainly included Waterville and Derrynane (where he stayed as a guest of Daniel O’Connell’s family) at the western extremity of the Iveragh Peninsula in County Kerry, and consequently crossed Kenmare Bay from the vicinity of Derrynane to the Beara Peninsula.

July 30. Left Watteville [*sic*] in the morning, and came to Mr. O’Connell’s of Derrinane [*sic*].

July 31. Left Mr. O’Connell’s early in the morning and proceeded along the river Kenmare for four or five miles, when I got a boat which took me across the river to Berehaven. I landed nearly opposite Glenboy [*sic*, Glenbeg], where there is a very fine lake surrounded by high mountains covered with very long heath, and a few trees of different kinds growing out of the clefts of the rocks. I crossed the mountain from that to Castletown, where I had not the least appearance of a road, but knowing the direction I easily found it out.

Aug. 1. In the morning I set out for the Durseys’. When I had got five miles on the road very heavy rain came on, which obliged me to return without having found anything to repay me for my trouble.

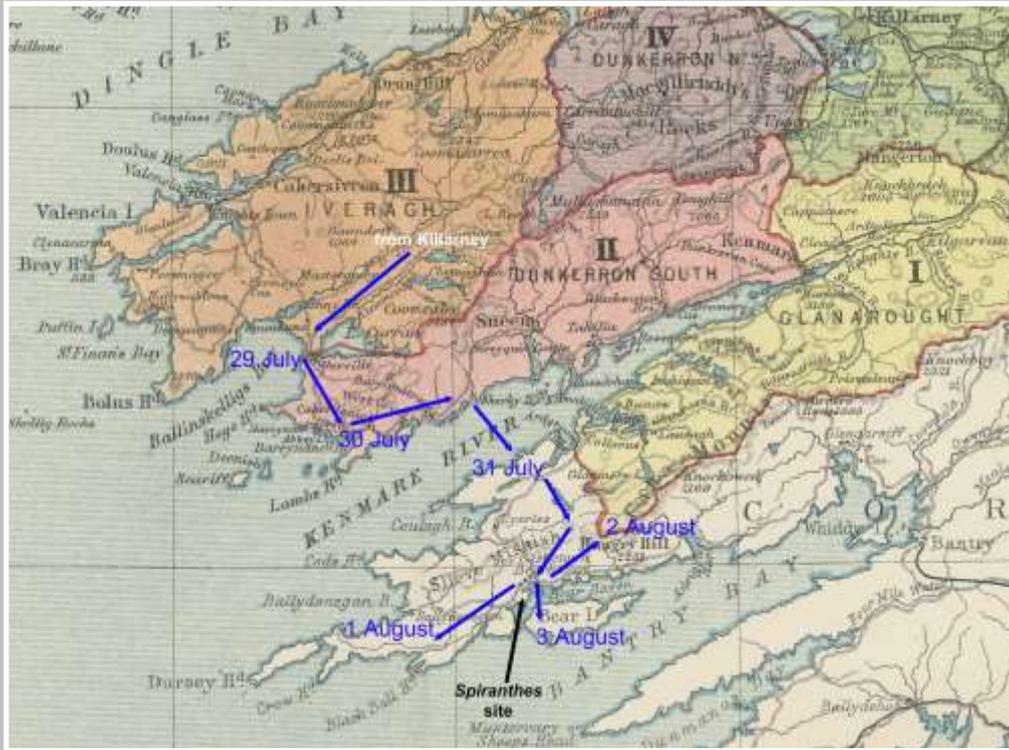
Aug. 2. The following day I set out for Hingy [*sic*, Hungry] Hill [Cnoc Daod, Beara Peninsula], and though the day was very unfavourable I reached the top of it. The only plant that I found upon it which does not grow on the neighbouring mountains was *Rhodiola rosea*. I found *Spergula saginoides* upon it, but that grows abundantly upon Bear Island, near the western signal tower.

Aug. 3. The following day I spent on Bear Island. I found nothing new upon it, but a very curious species of Ophrys, which I believe to be new, upon the main land, opposite the western redoubt, growing in a salt marsh near the shore. It was in very small quantity. I found only two [*sic*] specimens.

Fifteen years passed. On 7 June 1825, Drummond responded to an enquiry from the Reverend Dr Hincks (most probably Thomas Dix Hincks⁴, 1767–1857), writing³:

The plant you write about is the one I found at Bearhaven in the autumn of 1810. The only specimen[s] preserved of it were the one you sent to Sir James Edward Smith, and a small mutilated one I sent to the late Mr. [James] Dickson. It is a genuine species of *Neottia*, very distinct from *spiralis*, and every other species I have ever seen described. Only five plants were found in 1810. In went again to the place in 1812, and could not procure a single specimen. It grows in a small marshy spot, on the shore of the main land, exactly opposite the western redoubt on Bear Island.

Back in the summer of 1810, Drummond had followed the long-established practice of botany and collected specimens of the unfamiliar orchid for the record as well as for identification. Some he pressed and dried, and he also “sent home [to Cork] several plants hoping to propagate it but rats destroyed the roots”. To have pressed two specimens as well as bringing a living plant to Cork, makes his later count of five plants the more credible. He also made a sketch but this, like his journal, cannot now be traced.



James Drummond's route (blue line) in the summer of 1810. He reached Waterville from Killarney and then, on 30 July, went to O'Connell's at Derrynane. His exact crossing point from the north side of the Kenmare River to the south side is not known, but on 31 August he landed near Glenbeg Lough, perhaps in Ardgroom Harbour, and then walked over the mountains to Castletown Berehaven. On 1 August he walked west towards Dursey, and on 2 August walked east towards Hungry Hill. On 3 August, Drummond botanized on Bere Island, and most probably crossed back to the mainland from near the western redoubt. He found *Spiranthes* "opposite to the western redoubt, growing ... near the shore".

Map by E. C. Nelson based on the botanical map of County Kerry published in R. W. Scully, 1916. *Flora of County Kerry*.



Spiranthes romanzoffiana

Frederick William Burbidge (1847–1905), a Leicestershire man, had been employed as an orchid hunter in Borneo during the late 1870s just before he became the curator of the College Botanic Garden at Ballsbridge in Dublin. Burbidge knew orchids very well and like his near-contemporary Frederick Moore (1857–1949) at Glasnevin grew them to perfection. At Ballsbridge, Burbidge cultivated Irish lady's tresses. He was an expert botanical artist too, so when the little orchid bloomed in the College Botanic Garden during the summer of 1881 he drew it for *The Gardeners' Chronicle*: "Our figure was kindly furnished by Mr Burbidge, under whose care the plant has been successfully cultivated for the last two years ... having originally been collected by the Professor of Botany, Dr. [Edward] Perceval Wright [1834–1910]."¹

There can be little doubt Wright dug the orchid up from "a wet meadow, near Bantry Bay, Co. Cork" because that was then its only known habitat in Europe. Therefore, *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* still existed close to Castletownbere in 1879! Seven years later, in 1886, the orchid's extinction was being predicted by none other than the extraordinary gardener William Edward Gumbleton (1840–1911), of Belgrove near Cobh. "I think it may interest you to hear", he wrote⁵ on 1 September 1886 to Angus Duncan Webster (1855–1931), then living at Llandegai in north Wales,

and perhaps add to the value of the plants I sent you last year, that in all probability *Spiranthes Romanzoviana* will very soon become extinct, and no longer be obtainable in the one locality in Europe—in the neighbourhood of Castletown, Burhaven [*sic*]—to which it has hitherto been indigenous, for on writing recently to my agent, Mr. Barrett, who sent you the plants, to ask him to obtain a flowering specimen ... for Mr. Burbidge to draw, he sent me, a few days afterwards, a letter from his friend Dr. Armstrong, who had collected the plants sent to you, stating that on going to the little boggy field where he had hitherto seen it he found the little plot ploughed and planted with Potatoes; and on going to the only other locality where he had ever found it—a narrow headland skirting a small wood—he found it turned up and bearing a crop of Oats.

Webster had boasted a few months earlier that "Thanks to Mr. Gumbleton, I ... [possess] healthy, well-flowered specimens". The half dozen plants had been "planted out in their original sod of earth, and in a dampish, shady part of my garden, and where long may they remain as a living memento of a now almost extinct Orchid ...".⁶

The rarity of this orchid was its doom. While botanists debated whether the Cork plant was identical with an orchid known from North America, from Newfoundland to the Aleutian Islands, it was often treated as if it wasn't, and thus was regarded as "very rare". The Cambridge botanist Charles Cardale Babington (1808–1895) even pronounced that the Bantry Bay orchid was "one of the rarest [plants] in the world."⁷ Such a tag meant it was also highly desirable: keen gardeners wanted one and would employ almost any method to acquire one. So the Berehaven colony of Irish lady's tresses had to withstand repeated pillage.

For thirty-odd years after its original discovery by Drummond, no one could find the orchid; Drummond himself could not detect it in 1812 on his second visit to the locality. Dr Edmond Patrick Sharkey (c. 1806–1897), then the physician attached to the Allihies copper mine, is credited with its rediscovery in 1841⁷, making it possible in mid-August 1843 for "two fine plants in flower" to appear the British Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting in Cork.⁸ Dr Philip Andrew Armstrong (c. 1800–1892), Medical Officer of the Dispensary District of Castletownbere, and Sharkey's colleague and friend, provided that pair of orchids. The BAAS meeting attracted quite a few botanists to Cork, including Babington and James Edward Winterbottom (1803–1854). They made the uncomfortable journey to Castletownbere, meeting Armstrong who, on 30 August 1843, brought them to find the orchid. They saw "about twelve specimens, several of which had been destroyed by cattle, and all were in rather an advanced state of flowering."⁹ This did not deter Babington and Winterbottom from collecting examples which they pressed for their herbaria. Others were afoot collecting that summer: "I possess", wrote Lindley, "two authentic specimens, for which I am indebted to the kindness of Lord Berehaven, the present Earl of Bandon, on whose estate, near Castletown, the species occurs. Both were gathered at the end of August 1843."¹⁰

The records of plants donated to the Glasnevin Botanic Gardens indicate that two living plants of *Neottia gemmipara* (the name Babington had assigned to the species) were received in August 1845 from Dr Armstrong. The previous year Armstrong had written to David Moore (1808–1879), Curator of the Royal Dublin Society's Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, apologizing that he was not aware "of your desire to get the "rarity of rarities" ...". Had he known he could have sent a couple of plants "alive & growing in their sod" earlier in the season. In exchange Moore sent Armstrong a selection of garden plants, and in 1846 received at least one more living orchid from Bantry Bay. In his remarkable letter to Moore dated 30 August 1844, Philip Armstrong wrote¹¹:

There is yet one of these lovely plants in full bloom which I really don't want to disturb as they are become extremely scarce in consequence of the field which I found them in plentifully & was their principal habitat has been dug up & actually burned so as to make it fit to put potatoes in it.

This has given me great disappointment as I w^d have gladly paid more rent than the field was worth in order to afford me the gratification of giving these plants to those interested in the Science.

David Moore was to report this in a melancholy note a few years later (about 1852) – after late blight had devastated the Irish potato crop and famine had ensued. "I have not heard that *Spiranthes [romanzoffiana]* has been seen in its Irish habitat for several years. The last information was from Dr Armstrong, who told me the ground where it grew had been ploughed up and sown with oats." Adding "*Sic transit, &c.*", this seemed like the obituary of Irish lady's tresses.¹²

However, the orchid was not extinct, yet it was not "left in undisturbed occupation". Visitors to Castletownbere who had botanical interests undoubtedly made contact with Philip Armstrong. A trio of botanists, including Professor George J. Allman (1812–1898), were in the area at the end of June 1855 and called on Armstrong, who brought them to the orchid's habitats. "We were too early for it", but they still managed to find plants which they dug up. "Mr Allman writes to me", recorded the architect and amateur botanist Joseph Woods (1776–1864), "that it has flowered beautifully in his garden."¹³ In October 1861 *Curtis's botanical magazine* contained a fine hand-coloured plate of the "Drooping-flowered *Spiranthes* ... drawn from a living plant from Ireland", but who collected it was not recorded.¹⁴ In 1871, Alexander Goodman More (1830–1895) gathered Irish lady's tresses near Castletownbere on 15 July when "it was in full flower". He exhibited "some living specimens" at the BAAS's meeting in Edinburgh, calling attention to "their delicious perfume". More made some interesting comments: "It grows in grassy meadows, and also in rather boggy ground bordering on the sea, and is found in so many different fields that there is no present fear of its becoming extinct."¹⁵

Keeping Irish lady's tresses in captivity in gardens was what proved difficult, even for the best plantsmen, but this did not deter them from trying. As long as the plant could be located in the wild and dug out, a sod could be transferred to a garden and for a while the orchid would grow, apparently happy and healthy. Keeping it going was what defeated everyone, even Burbidge and, no doubt, Webster too. It is unlikely that David Moore was any more successful, and there is no record of its cultivation at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, under his son, Sir Frederick Moore.¹⁶ ■

CHARLES NELSON

NOTES & SOURCES

1. *The Gardeners' Chronicle* **16**: 465 (1881).
2. *Irish Naturalists' Journal* **32**: 19–25 (2013).
3. *The Gardeners' Chronicle* **1841**: 341 (reproduced in facsimile in *The Irish Garden* **26** (May 2017): 55. See note 16 below).
4. Identified as William Hincks (1794–1871) by John Lindley, but in the context it was more probably his father.
5. A. D. Webster, *British Orchids* (1898), pp 95–96.
6. *The Garden* **30**: 138 (1886).
7. *The Phytologist* **1**: 750 (1843).
8. J. Fraser, *A Hand Book for Travellers in Ireland* (1844), p. 702.
9. *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* **19**: 261–263 (1845).
10. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society* **1**: 168–170 (1857).
11. P. A. Armstrong to [D. Moore], 30 August 1844: original manuscript in National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin.
12. *The Phytologist* **4**: 726 (1852).
13. *The Phytologist* **1**: 156–157 (1855).
14. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* **87**: tab. 5277 (1861).
15. *Report of the 41st meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; held at Edinburgh ...*: 129 (1872).
16. This is an expanded version of E. C. Nelson, "Irish Lady's Tresses: a garden history." *The Irish Garden* **26** (May 2017): 54–56.

