

# THE PUBLICATION DATE OF THE FIRST IRISH FLORA: CALEB THRELKELD'S SYNOPSIS STIRPIUM HIBERNICARUM, 1726.

**E. CHARLES NELSON**

National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin 9, Ireland.

*Glasra* 2: 37–42.

publication date 5. v. 1978

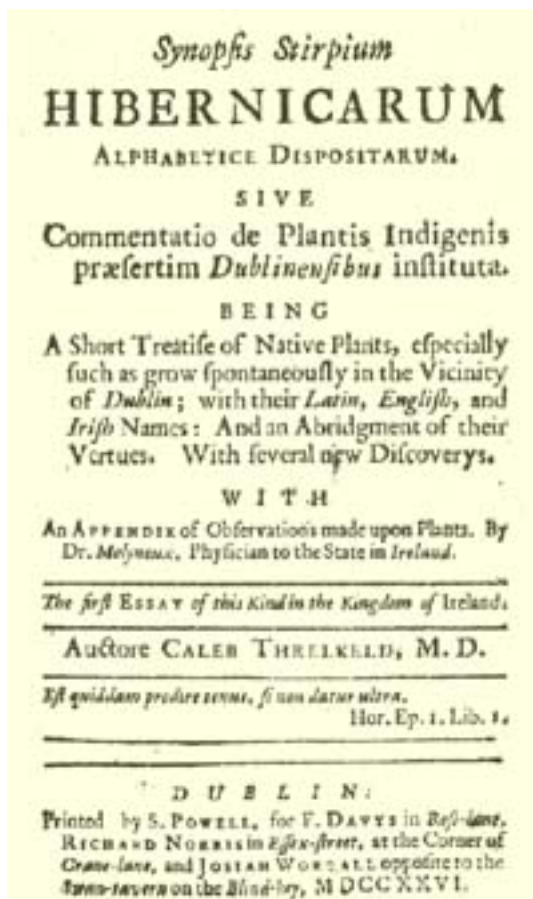
## ABSTRACT

The date of publication of Caleb Threlkeld's book *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum* usually is given as 1727, but study of contemporary newspapers indicates that the work appeared on Thursday 27 October 1726. Threlkeld's book is rightly regarded as the first attempt to document the flora of Ireland.

## INTRODUCTION

The first publication to deal exclusively with the flora of Ireland was compiled and written by Rev. Dr. Caleb Threlkeld (1676-1728), a dissenting cleric and physic. The work, printed in Dublin by S. Powell, was titled *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum Dispositarum sive Commentatio de Plantis Indigenis praesertim Dublinensibus instituta* and was described further as “*A Short Treatise of Native Plants, especially such as grow spontaneously in the Vicinity of Dublin; with their Latin, English, and Irish Names: And an Abridgment of their Vertues. With several new Discoverys.*” Threlkeld (1726) noted that the book was “The first ESSAY of this Kind in the Kingdom of Ireland”, and there was added to the main text “An APPENDIX” based on botanical notes made by Dr. Thomas Molyneux, the Physician to the State in Ireland, Although it did not attempt to cover the flora of the whole island, the book may rightly be regarded as the first “Irish flora”.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the correct date of publication of *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum*; three editions of the Work are known, differing from each other in their title-pages. These editions will be described and discussed elsewhere (Nelson, in press) as well as Threlkeld's life, background and his contribution to Irish botany.



An examination of bibliographic texts and the bibliographies contained in works on Irish botany and its history, reveals confusion about the date of the publication of *Synopsis*. The most commonly cited date is 1727, which can be traced back to a letter by Richard Pulteney published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1777. Subsequent authors seem to have uncritically followed Pulteney (1777, 1790) giving 1727 as the publication date (e.g. Pritzel 1872, Jackson 1881, Simpson 1960, Britten & Bou1ger 1893. Colgan 1904, Scannell & Synnott 1972). In a paper critically analysing Threlkeld's work, Mitchell (1974) gave the publication date as 1727, but he mentioned (in footnote no 4, p.1) the existence of a copy dated 1726 in the National Library of Ireland (see figure). In her exhaustive study of British (including Irish) botanical and horticultural literature published prior to 1800, Henrey (1975) listed two "issues" of *Synopsis* dated 1727 but not the edition, noted by Mitchell, dated 1726.

While the majority of authors seem to have accepted that the book was published in 1727, Moore & More (1866) cited the date 1726, and this earlier date was accepted by Scully (1916) and by Praeger (1901, 1934, 1949, 1950) though the latter cited 1727 in at least one of his works (Praeger 1937).

As already noted there is a copy of *Synopsis* dated 1726 – MCCXXVI – in the National Library of Ireland and another is held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; as far as can be determined the copies are identical. Despite extensive enquiries, I have been unable to locate any other copies with 1726 on the title-page. Two copies whose title-pages have been removed and replaced by handwritten "title-pages" with 1726 inscribed are known but these cannot be considered authentic.

Stearn (1966) cautioned that title-pages can be misleading. The date of publication of a book is considered to be the date on which the work was made available to the public by

sale or distribution (Stearn 1966) -this definition is of considerable significance for post-Linnaean publications under the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. Stearn (1966) indicated that he liked to have three independent pieces of evidence leading to the same conclusion in order to establish the publication date of critical botanical texts. The same criteria may be applied to any publication.

## PUBLICATION DATE OF SYNOPSIS

Stearn (1966) noted that the acceptance by taxonomists of the Linnaean binomial system of nomenclature rendered obsolete the phrase names used in botanical work published before 1753; Threlkeld used phrase names in Synopsis. Thus the flora published by Threlkeld is not of any taxonomic significance, but it does contain many "first- records" of Irish plants, some with precise localities attached and a few with dates of collection (or sighting). The book's importance is historical. In addition, Synopsis contains a very large number of vernacular Irish synonyms for native plants (see Mitchell 1974) which adds to its importance in Irish botany.

Extant copies of Synopsis do not in themselves provide convincing evidence that the date of publication was 1726, as an overwhelming majority of extant copies (at least those known to this author) are dated 1727. Thus the title-page should not be considered conclusive; it is apparent that previous authors have not regarded it so (e.g. Mitchell 1974) although some certainly were ignorant of the existence of any copy dated 1726.

The internal evidence in the text is not very helpful. Threlkeld dated his Preface "July 8 1726" (p.22) which may be assumed to be the date on which he completed the draft of the book. However, within the Preface (p.18) he noted that he had seen plants of *Teucrium scorodonia* L. (Wood Sage) at "Tallow . . . July 13. this year (1726)". Thus Threlkeld added to the text, of the Preface at least, perhaps at proof stage. All that can be deduced from the text is that publication took place after July 13 1726.

In order to find independent evidence of the date of publication contemporary Dublin newspapers were examined; complete sets of these newspapers are not extant so that only one could be found that was of use.

In The Dublin Weekly Journal dated Saturday October 22 1726 an advertisement appeared which read :

"On Thursday next will be published, Dr. Threlkeld's *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum*. The subscribers may apply themselves to F. Davys . . . Richard Norris . . . and Josiah Worrall . . ." (Dublin Weekly Journal, no. LXXXII, p.320).

In the next number of this newspaper, dated Saturday October' 29 1726, the advertisement was amended to read:

"Last week was publish'd Dr. Threlkeld's *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum* . . ." (Dublin Weekly Journal, no. LXXXIII, p.324).

It is certain that the book, was, published as a letter appeared in the same journal on Saturday November 26 1726 which referred to the book (Nelson, in press). Unfortunately there does not appear to be any other source available to corroborate this information. This evidence indicates that the book was published in Dublin on Thursday 27 October 1726, and was being sold by at least three book-sellers as indicated on its title-page. The advertisements ceased to appear in November 1726, but reappeared in The Dublin

Weekly Journal in late April 1727 when the book was advertised as “Lately published”. The editions dated 1727 will be discussed in detail elsewhere (Nelson, in press).

It is of historical and bibliographic interest to note that on Saturday November 26 1726, The Dublin Weekly Journal announced that a book titled *Travels into several Remote Nations of the World . . . by Lemuel Gulliver* was “in press and to be published next week” – Jonathan Swift's classic satire was first published in London by Benjamin Motte on Friday October 28 1726 (McKelvie 1976) and appeared in Dublin between November 26 and December 3 1726.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to the staff of the National Library of Ireland and the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for their assistance.

## **REFERENCES**

**BRITTEN, J. & BOULGER, G. S. 1893.** A Biographical Index of British and Irish Botanists. West, Newman & Co., London.

**COLGAN, N. 1904.** Flora of the County Dublin. Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin.

**HENREY, B. 1975.** British Botanical and horticultural literature before 1800. University Press, Oxford.

**JACKSON, B. D. 1881.** Guide to the Literature of Botany. Index Society, London.

**MCKELVIE, C. 1976.** Introduction. Gulliver's Travels 1726-1976, in Swift, J., “Gulliver's Travels” (ed. C. McKelvie) Appletree Press, Belfast.

**MITCHELL, M. E. 1974.** The sources of Threlkeld's Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum; Proc. Roy. Irish Acad., 74 B: 1-6.

**MOORE, D. M. & MORE, A. G. 1866.** Cybele Hibernica, Hodges, Smith & Co., Dublin.

**NELSON, E. C. in press.** In the Contemplation of Vegetables – Caleb Threlkeld, his life, background and contribution to Irish Botany.

**PRAEGER, R. LI. 1901.** Irish Topographical Botany: Proc. Roy. Irish Acad., 7 (ser. 3).

**PRAEGER, R. LI. 1934.** The Botanist in Ireland. Hodges, Figgis & Co.. Dublin.

**PRAEGER, R. LI. 1937.** The Way that I Went. Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin.

**PRAEGER, R. LI. 1949.** Some Irish Naturalists. Dundalgan Press, Dundalk.

**PRAEGER, R. LI. 1950.** Natural History of Ireland. Collins, London.

**PRITZEL, B. A. 1872.** Thesaurus Literaturae Botanicae. Brockhaus, Leipzig.

**PULTENEY, R. 1777.** Memoirs relating to Dr .Threlkeld; The Gentleman's Magazine (February), 47: 63-64.

**PULTENEY, R. 1790.** Historical and Biographical Sketches of The Progress of Botany in England, 2 vols T.Cadell. London.

**SCANNELL, M. J. P. & SYNNOTT, D. M. 1972.** Census Catalogue of the Flora of Ireland. Dept. of Agriculture & Fisheries, Dublin.

**SCULLY, R. W. 1916.** Flora of County Kerry. Hodges, Figgis & Co.;, Dublin.

**SIMPSON, N. D. 1960.** A Bibliographic Index to the British Flora. Private publ.

**STEARNS, W. T. 1966.** The Use of Bibliography in Natural History; in Bibliography and Natural History (ed. Buckman, T. R.). pp. 1-26. Univ. of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence.

**THRELKELD, C. 1726.** Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum Dispositarum sive Commentatio de Plantis Indigenis praesertim Dublinensibus inti tuta. F. Davys, R. Norris and J. Worrall, Dublin.