

Practical science and religious politics: the Glasnevin botanic gardens' Sunday opening controversy, 1861

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The opening of the Glasnevin botanical gardens on Sunday, 18 August 1861 marked the end of a hard-fought battle between advocates of public education and sabbatarians. This conflict between the aims of practical science and religious practice in Ireland echoed similar developments in England and Scotland and was part of a much wider controversy which preoccupied much of the political discourse relating to scientific and educational institutions during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The behaviour and education of the working classes would, it was said, be greatly improved by the opening of public gardens, museums and picture galleries.¹ The nineteenth-century city was dirty, over-populated and disease-ridden. The fashionable city squares were closed to the Dublin public and there was little for workers to do apart from visiting public houses, which moved one writer to note: 'In the continental cities where public institutions are far more freely thrown open than with us, no traveller has his feelings outraged by the scenes of filthy brutal drunkenness on a Sunday, so common in those regions of stricter and bitter observance'. In contrast to the 'educated man', who could spend the day at home in quiet contemplation with his books, 'the uneducated cannot remain at home; he must go somewhere to recreate and enjoy himself. He finds the public house alone open'.²

The Victorians believed that clean air and open spaces were health giving. In Dublin, houses close to open spaces could be sold or let at a premium.³ There was a moral imperative to keeping the working classes busy at all times and the provision of places of recreation was seen as a way to improve both their mental and physical health and moral conduct. As George Woods Maunsell put it, 'Places reserved for the amusement of the humbler classes would assist in weaning them off the low and debasing pleasures such as drinking houses, dog fights and boxing matches they enjoyed theretofore'.⁴ Following a report in 1826 on the state of London's royal parks, George IV instructed that 'the whole range and extent of the parks should be thrown

1 *Daily News*, 8 Feb. 1856. 2 *Irish Builder*, 4:7 (Nov 15 1862), p. 295. 3 72 St Stephen's Green was described as 'a most convenient and healthful habitation for a respectable family', *FJ*, 3 May 1820. Mountjoy Square and Gardens were a draw for houses on Gardiner Street, *FJ*, 26 Apr. 1816. 4 G.W. Maunsell, *Reasons for opening St Stephen's Green and converting it into a public park* (Dublin, 1859), p. 5.

open for the gratification and enjoyment of the public'.⁵ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Sunday access was became a more pressing issue.

Developments in Dublin sparked the English movement for Sunday access to scientific and educational institutions. In 1841, the Dublin Zoological Gardens in the Phoenix Park was the first of the scientific institutions in Ireland or Britain to open its doors to the public on Sundays.⁶ Sir Dominic Corrigan, giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Art and Science said

I can hardly give you an idea of the obloquy and opposition we incurred from that; and for that I think we deserve very much credit, for we were the first public body in the United Kingdom that opened the institution under its control to the public on Sundays.⁷

Corrigan stated that opening on Sundays had the welcome effect of 'withdrawing the people from public-houses, and bringing them into the open air . . . making them well-tempered and civil'.⁸

When the Crystal Palace opened in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851 it was planned that it would always be open to the public after one o'clock on Sundays.⁹ When attempts were made to renege on this promise, the problem was overcome by the issue of shares to the public which granted an automatic right of entry, as a member of the company, to the gardens on a Sunday. The *Belfast Newsletter* was of the opinion that the Crystal Palace's Sunday opening policy was a 'blow struck at the sanctity of the English Sabbath', in which 'mammon worship carried the day'.¹⁰ Following Dublin's example set at the Zoological Garden, Kew Gardens opened to the public on Sundays in 1853. The *Gardener's Magazine* reported that 'the experiment of opening the gardens at Kew to the public had been an unqualified success' – in 1858 the number of visits was 404,090 and in 1859–60 was 384,698¹¹ – while *The Times* noted the 'vast benefits to the people of the artisan class resulting from the opening of Kew Gardens'.¹² Hampton Court Palace gardens followed suit shortly afterwards. In 1855, the Manchester Botanical Gardens voted to open their gardens to the public on Sundays by a vote of 265 to 234, but as the requisite two-thirds majority was not reached, the motion was not carried.¹³ Undeterred, the pro-Sunday opening movement gathered support.

5 S. Lasdun, *The English park, royal, private & public* (London, 1991), p. 130. 6 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 Apr. 1869. 7 *Ibid.* 8 *Ibid.* 9 *Leeds Mercury*, 28 Aug. 1852. 10 *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Dec. 1857. 11 *Gardener's Weekly Magazine*, Jan.–June 1860, p. 229. 12 *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1869. 13 *Manchester Times*, 7 Mar. 1855.

THE BOTANIC GARDENS AT GLASNEVIN

The Royal Dublin Society opened the botanic gardens at Glasnevin in 1795. The Gardens' functions were primarily practical and educational and included agricultural trial plots and a large herb garden for medicinal purposes. The gardens were initially open to the public on weekdays and remained so until 1801, when the RDS decided to admit only those with cards.¹⁴ After Ninian Niven's appointment as curator in 1834, the agricultural purpose of the gardens had been overtaken by the pursuit of botanical knowledge. This was facilitated by the arrival of plants from around the world and by continuing contact and dialogue with the botanical gardens of Kew and Edinburgh. Since their establishment in Glasnevin, the gardens had been a boon to the area; adverts for houses for sale boasted that 'the goodness of the air, and its vicinity to the botanic garden make it a desirable residence'.¹⁵

Glasnevin was part of a wider recreational interest in practical botany in mid-Victorian Dublin. Summer schools on botany were held by Dr Wright at Dr Steven's Hospital.¹⁶ Royal Horticultural Society shows were regarded as highlights of the social calendar, attracting huge crowds to view exotics such as orchids and azaleas. The viceregal lodge sent peaches and hyacinths grown for the lord lieutenant, while nurseries sent their best flowers for display in large marquees set out on the lawns of the Rotunda. The spring show of April 1861 was reported to have had such a great and illustrious turnout that 'Cavendish Row and its neighbours were filled with carriages waiting to get in'.¹⁷

THE PRO-SUNDAY-OPENING MOVEMENT IN DUBLIN

In the 1850s, a pressure group campaigning for Sunday opening of public facilities was established in England. The object of the National Sunday League, founded in the 1850s, was 'to obtain the opening of the public museums, libraries and gardens on Sunday, in London and in the towns of England, Ireland and Scotland for the instruction, recreation and innocent amusement of the working classes'.¹⁸ Sir Joshua Walmsley MP, an advocate of non-sectarian education, was the first president of the league.¹⁹ In 1856, Walmsley laid a motion for the relaxation of the law to allow the British Museum and the National Gallery and other institutions to open on Sundays. The motion was defeated by 376 votes to 48.²⁰ The English group may have prompted the establishment of a similar movement in Dublin. Following the establishment of the National Sunday League, a campaigning organization to re-open St Stephen's Green as a people's park was founded. This it was said would be 'of great

¹⁴ *IT*, 6 Apr. 1861. ¹⁵ *EJ*, 16 May 1816. ¹⁶ *IT*, 22 Apr. 1861. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 Apr. 1861. ¹⁸ *Manchester Times*, 23 Feb. 1856. ¹⁹ C.W. Sutton, rev. M. Lee, 'Sir Joshua Walmsley (1794–1871)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online ed., accessed 29 Oct. 2010. ²⁰ *Manchester Times*, 23 Feb. 1856.

public advantage and conducive to the health and enjoyment of the inhabitants' of the city.²¹

The idea of opening the botanical gardens in Glasnevin to the public on Sundays was tied into debates about public opening in general. Sunday opening had first been mooted in 1854. The RDS committee of botany opposed this on the grounds 'that without greatly increasing the staff of assistants, for which there are no adequate funds, or depriving those now employed of their only day of rest' the garden could not be opened on Sundays.²² However, it was the society's council rather than the botany committee that objected to opening the garden to the public. In 1858, Dr Frazer suggested that the gardens be opened for public promenade once a month during the summer but was forced to withdraw the motion after opposition from the council.²³ In June of that year, the botany committee recommended that the gardens be opened to the public, free of charge on Saturdays from 2 to 6 o'clock during the summer months.²⁴ This measure automatically excluded members of the working classes who worked in trade or in service whose only day of rest was on Sundays.²⁵

THE IRISH PRO-SUNDAY OPENING COMMITTEE

In January 1861, the Committee for Science and Education of the English privy council received a letter from Sir Thomas Larcom enclosing a pamphlet by the pro-opening committee. The privy council in England declared that it had 'no hesitation in expressing [the] opinion that these gardens should be freely opened to the public as the Kew Gardens are', but before issuing instructions to the Royal Dublin Society, it canvassed the opinion of the lord lieutenant, who was clearly in favour of Sunday opening.²⁶ In January 1861, a 'Conference of Friends' of the movement to open the botanical garden was held in the Prince of Wales Hotel in Dublin. It was proposed that the garden be opened after divine service at 2pm. The chairman of the group, James Houghton, and other members of the RDS noted that Sunday opening had been proposed at council three times already and at each time had been outvoted.²⁷ The main argument of the pro-opening movement was that the garden was publicly maintained and that as such should be available to all. Sunday opening had been successfully tried in London and on the continent and should be extended to all classes of the people in Dublin.²⁸ As it stood, the garden was 'practically inaccessible to the mass of the population of Dublin under the present system of admission'.²⁹

Prominent among the group lobbying to open the gardens were members of the Roman Catholic and Jewish faiths. The editor of the *Catholic Telegraph* said 'religious objection was an insult to the people of this country as it asserted that the people of

21 Maunsell, *Reasons for opening*, p. 7. 22 RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 27 Mar. 1861. All RDS manuscripts referred to are found in the Royal Dublin Society's library, Ballsbridge, Dublin. 23 *Ibid.*, 3 May 1858, 7 June 1858. 24 *Ibid.*, 7 June 1858. 25 *Ibid.*, 31 Oct. 1859. 26 TNA; PRO ED 28/12/153, 22 Jan. 1861. 27 *IT*, 31 Jan. 1861. 28 *Ibid.* 29 *Ibid.*

Ireland were unfit for what was freely granted elsewhere on the continent and in England'. The Jewish representative, Maurice Solomons, said the Irish people wanted equality with England and 'to have no brand placed on them of inequality of race, or creed or class'.³⁰

Leading members of the RDS attached themselves to the campaign and accusations of sectarianism soon emerged.³¹ An influential minority was convinced that religious bigotry was behind the society's determination to keep the botanic garden closed on Sundays. Lord Talbot de Malahide said he would and could not believe that the Society's governing council's refusal to open the garden was not based on religious considerations.³² Testimony in support of the Sunday opening movement was also provided by some larger landlords who had traditionally allowed their estates on Sundays. At the January 1861 meeting, J.R. Barry stated the 'beneficial effects of affording the peasantry the opportunities for healthful, innocent recreation on a Sunday evening' on his own estate.³³ Lord Cloncurry, a strong supporter of Sunday opening, who opened his gardens on Sundays to his 'humble neighbours' said that no injury had been caused to his plants.³⁴

Trades unions and guilds in Dublin took an interest in the developing debate and many allied themselves to the Sunday opening movement. Trades associations were active in organizing petitions and it was hoped to canvas every house in the city, which one trade unionist said was 'a labour of love and goodwill'.³⁵ For example, the secretary of the Operative Painter's Society had, with the help of a brother operative, obtained signatures of 132 householders in favour of Sunday opening.³⁶ However, some unions took a more submissive view. For example, a meeting of the Society of Plasterers advocated the opening of places of exercise and amusement for the working classes, but felt that Sunday opening of the Botanical Gardens was a matter for the RDS, 'the proper guardians of the place'.³⁷

Support for the pro-opening committee had increased when it met again the following month. This time, the meeting was composed of members of the RDS, including 'several MPs and professors, men of the first eminence, merchants, traders and representatives from several trades'.³⁸ The pro-opening committee argued that its manifesto was 'greatly benevolent in character', seeking merely to provide a fit recreational outlet for the working class:

it is in accordance with the good spirit of our times, which would freely open up to our toiling classes such innocent and civilizing enjoyments of a visit to our beautiful garden . . . on their only day of leisure.³⁹

Despite the pleas of the pro-opening committee, the RDS council claimed that it had 'no power to comply with their suggestions'.⁴⁰

30 *Ibid.*; RDS Minute Books, 19 Mar. 1861. **31** *IT*, 31 Jan. 1861. **32** RDS Minute Books, 27 May 1861. **33** *IT*, 31 Jan. 1861. **34** RDS Minute Books, 27 May 1861. **35** *IT*, 22 Feb. 1861; *IT*, 15 Feb. 1861. **36** *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1861. **37** *Ibid.*, 22 Feb. 1861. **38** *Ibid.* **39** *Ibid.* **40** RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857-77, 28 Feb. 1861.

A formidable counter-movement opposed the Sunday opening movement throughout the United Kingdom. When a partial opening of the Leeds Botanical Gardens was proposed for Sundays,⁴¹ the *Leeds Mercury* in 1851 editorialized vehemently that

Mr Hume and his associates have long been urging on the legislature to open the British Museum and National Gallery on Sundays, which would mean that 'the popish festival will at once supersede [the Sabbath] – a mass in the forenoon; – then the park, the picture gallery, or the ballroom for the rest of the day ... it is ten times more alarming than was that papal aggression of 1850'.⁴²

This fear of a continental-style Sunday was foremost in the minds of the anti-Sunday movement in Leeds, who were of the view that if the council were to sanction the opening of the gardens that it would give a sense of 'authority' to the 'continental idea of the Sabbath day', which 'may be expected to lead to a similar practice ... in the conduct of various establishments'.⁴³

Sentiments in Scotland ran high: not only did Scottish sabbatarians want to keep all gardens and scientific or educational establishments closed, but petitions were sent to Queen Victoria pleading with her 'to put a stop to the assemblage of the higher classes in their equipages in the parks on Sunday'.⁴⁴ The Sabbath Observance Committee of the Established Church Assembly of Scotland protested that opening the Edinburgh gardens on a Sunday would lead to Sabbath desecration elsewhere and that, if this was sanctioned by the legislature, it would 'convert a local violation of the Sabbath law into a national sin'.⁴⁵ In addition to this national sin, opening on Sundays 'would have the effect of violating the consciences of most of the men employed in the garden, and either depriving them of their Sabbath's rest, or removing them from their situations on behalf of others less trustworthy'.⁴⁶

As pressure from the Committee for Sunday Opening of the Dublin garden mounted, those determined to keep the gates firmly closed to the public rallied and in April 1861 the opponents of Sunday opening met in the Metropolitan Hall to discuss tactics.⁴⁷ Support for the opposition came mostly from the Protestant and non-conformist churches, with the synod of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Sabbath Alliance in Edinburgh sending letters of approbation to the opposition committee.⁴⁸ Although non-conformist support was strong, the anti-opening committee was composed overwhelmingly of prominent members of the Church of Ireland. Clerics including the dean of St Patrick's Cathedral were heavily involved. The movement's argument was framed in sabbatarian terms. The stated aim of the

⁴¹ *Leeds Mercury*, 14 Aug. 1841. ⁴² *Ibid.*, 22 Jan. 1853. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28 Aug. 1852. ⁴⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Oct. 1856. ⁴⁵ *The Times*, 8 June 1863. ⁴⁶ H.R. Fields and W.H. Brown (eds), *The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 1670–1970* (London, 1970). ⁴⁷ *IT*, 30 Apr. 1861. ⁴⁸ RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 23 May 1861.

group was to fight against the proposed 'desecration of the Lord's Day'. It was horrified at the attempts to 'Parisiennize' the city. Sunday opening of gardens was merely the first point in a process that would ultimately end in the scandalous opening of theatres and ballrooms on the Sabbath. It concluded with a dire warning that 'all things go by slow degrees – if the botanical gardens opened, then the college gardens and Portobello etc. would follow!'⁴⁹

Aided by the *Irish Times*, the anti-opening committee began a 'dirty tricks' campaign; an editorial in the paper alleged that the pro-opening committee's meetings were unruly and that the atmosphere 'was aggressive and [that there was] threatening conduct and that nobody could talk'. Other slurs included accusations that the leaders of the pro-opening committee were guilty of 'agitation' and 'luring little boys into signing the petition'.⁵⁰

THE PRIVY COUNCIL AND THE RDS

The sabbatarian movement had failed to attract governmental or political support. In fact, both the privy council and the treasury were in favour of Sunday opening. In January 1861, the privy council Committee for Science and Education received a letter from the under secretary, Sir Thomas Larcom, enclosing a pamphlet by the pro-opening committee. The privy council declared that it had 'no hesitation in expressing its opinion that these gardens should be freely opened to the public as the Kew gardens are'.⁵¹ The treasury increased the pressure on the RDS open the garden on Sundays by threatening to withdraw grants. The secretary of the treasury wrote of the difficulties involved 'with respect to the grants of public money ... in the case of an institution, which, though mainly supported by parliamentary grants, claim the privileges of a private society' and informed the privy council of his intention to bring the matter to the notice of the House of Commons prior to the next vote on financial allocations to the RDS.⁵²

From this point on, the argument escalated and there was a flurry of correspondence between Dublin and London and a number of council meetings were convened to urgently put an end to the matter. The privy council recommended that the RDS open the gardens to the public on Sundays forthwith as, in its opinion, 'the people of Ireland seem to be well entitled to this boon from the RDS'.⁵³ The privy council reminded the society that in 1836 the government had suspended the vote of the society until it was fully and unequivocally admitted that the property of the society was held 'for the public use of the institution only so that the public shall be entitled to the full and entire use thereof'.⁵⁴ The council further argued that it

⁴⁹ *IT*, 30 Apr. 1861. ⁵⁰ RDS Minute Books, 27 May 1861. ⁵¹ TNA:PRO ED 28/12/153, 22 Jan. 1861. ⁵² TNA:PRO ED 28/13/12/121, 2 May 1861. ⁵³ TNA:PRO ED 28/13/41, 15 Mar. 1861. ⁵⁴ TNA:PRO ED 28/13/12/83, 30 Mar. 1861. To underline that this was the case, they reminded the society that over a period of six years from 1854 to 1860 subscriptions from individual members averaged on £1,336, while the annual grant

was its duty to 'render public grants as conducive as possible to the improvement of the habits and tastes of the people and to affording them the means of healthful recreation' and said that the RDS should deal with this subject not from the view of a private society, but as a public institution who would 'afford to the working classes of Dublin all the facilities for visiting the Glasnevin gardens they can'.⁵⁵ It is clear from committee minutes and correspondence that the privy council felt that the reluctance of the RDS to open the gardens on Sundays was motivated by a combination of sectarianism and elitism.

The RDS decided to defy the threats being issued by the privy council, arguing that the council had no right to interfere in the workings of a private society whose majority consistently voted against Sunday opening.⁵⁶ The RDS convened a special meeting to discuss their predicament on 27 March 1861.⁵⁷ At the meeting, a reply was drafted to the privy council, referring the council 'to their former report on this subject presented at the meeting of the society held on December 7th 1854; and to state that the committee see no reason now to depart from the opinion expressed therein'. They also stressed that 'composed as this society is of all denominations and classes, may be considered a fair representation of the opinion of the educated portion of the citizens on this question'.⁵⁸ In a further response two months later, the RDS denied that it rested its objection to Sunday opening, on the basis of its being a private organization unaccountable for the support it received. Instead, it protested vaguely that there were myriad other reasons, mainly that they represented public opinion, for which

there [were] reasons of local and special application in connexion with the peculiar situation of the botanical gardens of Glasnevin, which present cogent reasons why the society should view the opening on Sundays with grave apprehension.⁵⁹

In subsequent a letter, it argued that opening the gardens on Sundays would prove prohibitively expensive.

London, however, was not convinced by the society's arguments. The privy council dispensed with the society's financial claim and argued that the public opening of Hampton Court and Kew gardens cost just £150 extra a year.⁶⁰ On 1 June 1861, a final and firm communication was made to the RDS by the English

besides special grants from the state averaged upwards of £6,000, excluding extra grants for the erection of conservatories and general maintenance and an average of £1,180 per annum raised by cattle shows. **55** TNA:PRO ED 28/13/12/83, 30 Mar. 1861. **56** RDS Minute Books, 27 May 1861. **57** RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes 1857–77, 21 Mar. 1861. **58** *Ibid.*, 27 Mar. 1861. **59** Letter from the RDS dated 18 May 1861 to Norman MacLeod; TNA:PRO ED 28/13/12/121, 2 May 1861. **60** RDS Minute Books, 27 May 1861. The elitist motives of the RDS are underlined by the fact that the honorary secretary George Woods Maunsell who was anti-Sunday opening was a leading proponent of the campaign to re-open St Stephen's Green to the public.

privy council stating that 'Parliamentary motions will be made to oppose votes submitted on behalf of the RDS for funds and the question will be raised how far a society largely assisted by public funds is at liberty to claim independence of the control of the government'.⁶¹

THE GLASNEVIN SUNDAY-OPENING DEBATE IN PARLIAMENT

When the RDS' council learned that the issue of Sunday opening was to be raised in parliament, they sought representation at the debate. The council resolved to send the secretary and assistant secretary to London forthwith, authorizing them to

take such steps as may appear to them to be necessary, as will explain fully to the members of parliament and the government, the true state of the circumstances bearing on the question now at issue between this society and the Science and Art Department.⁶²

Steele appears to have had little influence on the direction of the debate. The liberal politician Lord Granville wrote to Lord Carlisle, the lord lieutenant, outlining the events:

You will read in today's papers an abridged report of an interesting discussion in the House of Lords on the subject of the opening of the Glasnevin Gardens on a Sunday. Lord Clancarty introduced the question in a moderate speech, and was supported by the bishop of Carlisle, who spoke on the general principle of not opening any places of recreation to the public on a Sunday. Lords Eglington, Donoughmore, Monteagle, Talbot de Malahide, and the bishop of Down and Connor all regretted the decision to which the Royal Society of Dublin have come – the feeling appeared to be general (if not unanimous) in the house. At the same time, all the speakers deprecated 'a collision in the House of Commons, as the loss of the grant which might ensue, would be of great disadvantage to the Irish public'.⁶³

The council of the Royal Dublin Society had begun to grasp the hopelessness of their position. Meeting after the parliamentary debate, the council stated that the society 'fully recognized the authority of parliament to impose any conditions they may think beneficial to the public' and expressed the readiness of the Royal Dublin Society to defer to such authority; however, as the question was now pending in the

⁶¹ TNA:PRO ED 28/13/12/, 1 June 1861; RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 11 June 1861. ⁶² RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 11 June 1861, 13 June 1861. ⁶³ Letter dated 28 June 1861, RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 4 July 1861.

House of Commons, it was inappropriate to ask the society to reconsider a deliberate decision so recently arrived at by a very large majority of its members.⁶⁴ At a special meeting of the Royal Dublin Society convened on 11 July, Steele reported on his trip to London, where he had sent a circular to MPs he felt favourable to the society's view, soliciting their attendance in the house and support of the society's estimates.⁶⁵ He reported that the debates had gone badly, however. In the House of Commons, the view of MPs was unequivocal – all sides were in favour of Sunday opening. The secretary reported that it appeared to him that 'if a division had taken place on the matter, the number in its favour would not be less than 3 to 1'.⁶⁶ The house had voted the annual subsidy of £6,000 on the condition that it should not be distributed until the society had opened its botanic garden to the public on Sundays.⁶⁷

On 14 July, the council of the society finally capitulated, but not without considerable resistance. It resolved with reluctance to recommend the opening of the garden on Sundays.⁶⁸ Before implementing the decision, however, it decided to convene a special general meeting to discuss the matter, which allowed opponents of the opening a final chance to make their arguments. The society's membership appears to have split according to party and ideological lines, with the Tories and militant Protestants urging that the RDS should refuse the treasury grant and continue with its course of Sabbath observance, while supporters of the Liberal party and Catholics applauded the privy council's decision. Lord Clancarty, a strict sabbatarian, declared that he 'approached the subject with very great distaste and reluctance, as it was a most unpleasant one to handle'. He underlined the society's view that it was the 'conscientious opinion of many members [that Sunday opening was] a needless desecration of the Lord's Day' and that he was not surprised to have seen in the public papers, and to have heard from individuals, strong expressions of astonishment, and feelings amounting almost to indignation, that the ground that the society had so long maintained should now be receded from.⁶⁹

The Sunday opening was, in the minds of some, now linked to a loss of autonomy for the society. Lord Clancarty displayed a characteristic reluctance to submit the society to the wishes of parliament. He urged the society to spurn the parliamentary grant, clogged as it was 'with an unjustifiable condition', and found the requirement to continue correspondence with the privy council 'disagreeable' as he felt it had been 'so needlessly offensive'. He concluded with admission that subscriptions alone would be inadequate to maintain the society and that the interests of the public, as well as of the society, required some sacrifice of personal feeling.⁷⁰ One member, John Foley, said that the society would 'disgrace' itself in the eyes of the world if it capitulated for the sake of retaining the government grant; 'Whether it was upon the higher consideration of Sabbath observance, or the lesser ground of preserving the gardens for the purpose of science ... the majority of the society voted before for

64 RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 4 July 1861. 65 *Ibid.*, 11 July 1861.
66 *Ibid.*, 11 July 1861. 67 *Ibid.*, 13 July 1861. 68 *Ibid.*, 13 July 1861. 69 *FJ*, 26 July 1861. 70 *Ibid.*

keeping the gardens closed on Sunday'.⁷¹ By contrast, advocates of Sunday opening saw no harm in taking public opinion into account. Matthew O'Reilly Dease, a liberal Catholic, thought the society 'was doing a wise act and one in accordance with the spirit of progress and enlightenment'. As to the religious question, and the quantity of extraneous matter introduced, he wished it to be noted that he entirely dissented with the views held by Lord Clancarty.⁷²

On 1 August, the council agreed to make the necessary arrangement to open the gardens to the public on Sundays free of charge between the hours of 2.30 and 7pm.⁷³ The botanical gardens were finally thrown open to the public on Sundays on 18 August 1861 and the measure was a resounding success, from 700 visitors on the first day of opening, attendance ran to 15,700 on one Sunday alone in October of that year. A total of 78,132 people attended the gardens over twelve Sundays.⁷⁴ The Committee of Botany were pleased with the outcome and declared that it was 'very satisfactory'. The crowds now flooding into the gardens on Sunday were well-behaved:

the police and other persons employed have no doubt been active in preserving order among such large multitudes as have congregated together, but independent of them, the people themselves have behaved in the most orderly and decorous manner – with the exception of boys occasionally running through the plants, and leaping over the beds, no further wanton mischief has been done so far as your directions go.

The committee noted that 'some pots [had been] knocked off stages in conservatories due to the narrowness of the passages, but that this was purely accidental and that the staging should be widened'.⁷⁵

After the Glasnevin gardens opened, the MP for Galway, William Gregory, and the National Sunday League pressed for the opening of the Edinburgh botanical gardens, with Gregory noting that drunkenness in Dublin had decreased on Sundays since the gardens had opened.⁷⁶ However, opposition from sabbatarians remained stout. The Free Church of Scotland's Revd Dr James Begg remarked that it was 'very painful that the Scottish Sabbath should be interfered with by the representative of an Irish popish constituency – by the representative of one of the most degrading popish communities in the world'.⁷⁷ The Sunday opening campaign had more success in Ireland, however. Shortly after the botanic gardens were opened, a Committee for the Opening of St Stephen's Green began to gather momentum and the green was finally opened to the public in 1877.⁷⁸

The debate surrounding the Sunday opening of the Glasnevin botanic gardens was not a scientific debate at all. Instead, it reminds us that the Royal Dublin Society

⁷¹ Ibid. ⁷² Ibid. ⁷³ RDS Committee of Botany Fair Minutes, 1857–77, 1 Aug. 1861.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11 Nov. 1861. ⁷⁵ Ibid. ⁷⁶ *Caledonian Mercury*, 10 June 1863; *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1862. ⁷⁷ *Caledonian Mercury*, 10 June 1863. ⁷⁸ *FJ*, 4 Nov. 1863.

and its scientific mission were entangled with political and social conflicts of the day. The RDS was itself divided in many of the ways that Irish society was divided, and any controversy encouraged the cracks between factions to emerge. The Sunday opening controversy is reminiscent of a similar conflict over the black-bearing of the Catholic archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Murray, in 1835. Murray's refusal of membership in the society also resulted in public outcry, accusations of sectarianism and threats to withdraw the government grant.⁷⁹ The society's eventual capitulation in both cases demonstrates the fragility of its position as a privately run institution with significant government patronage.

⁷⁹ K. Bright, *The Royal Dublin Society, 1815–1845* (Dublin, 2004), ch. 5.