

The Princess & the Prime Minister

There is a curious illustration in Robert Thornton's *The Temple of Flora* (1801)ⁱ. Under a likeness of John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, who is hailed as "the Maecenas [i.e. patron] of botany", and two *Stuartia* flowers – a plant that was named after Bute – there is "an allegorical representation of the prosperity of Great Britain under Lord Bute's administration". This engraving features four female figures, the most prominent of which is holding a palm leaf, symbolising victory and peace (in 1763 Bute, as Prime Minister, had negotiated the Treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years War against France and Spain). Another figure holds the scales and sword of justice; another pours out the contents of a cornucopia, symbolising the wealth of Britain and her colonies; while the fourth considerably smaller figure, with head veiled and hands crossed on her breast, may represent the defeated Catholic countries or the Protestant ascendancy in Britain. In one corner assorted artifacts refer to the thriving arts and sciences, while a ship in the background evokes Britain's merchant marine and Royal Navy triumphantly ruling the waves (to use the words of Kew resident poet James Thomson).ⁱⁱ As a snapshot of the year 1763, there is nothing particularly controversial about this. However, this idyllic picture is markedly at odds with the way Bute was generally perceived in England in the late 18th century.

In 1762, the 3rd Earl of Bute, an Eton educated Scot, succeeded the Duke of Newcastle as Prime Minister, ending forty-six years of Whig ascendancy. Bute was George III's favourite – one of the last of the dying breed of king's favourites in British politics. He was also a close friend of George's mother, Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, the Dowager Princess of Wales. Augusta had married Prince Frederick at the tender age of seventeen and was widowed at the age of thirty-one while she was carrying their ninth child. Bute and Augusta were to become the victims of one of the greatest scandals and one of the most vicious political campaigns of the 18th century.

In the year following his appointment as Prime Minister, the Tory Bute was pilloried by the Whig opposition for his alleged leniency towards the French in the negotiations that ended the Seven Years War. One man in particular, John Wilkes, the rabble-rousing Member of Parliament for Middlesex, would prove to be the Prime Minister's downfall. Wilkes made much of Bute's Scottishness. Since the Union of 1707 an influx of Scottish migrants of all social strata, from aristocrats to gardeners, had rankled with many in England. Also, it was less than twenty years since a distant relative of Bute, Charles Edward Stuart ("Bonnie Prince Charlie"), had invaded England at the head of a Jacobite army. They had got as far as Derby before withdrawing and London had been in a state of panic. It was therefore not difficult for Wilkes to stir up Scottophobia in the capital.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even worse, a rumour was put about that Bute and Augusta were having an affair. No historian seriously believes that there was any truth in this allegation. King George certainly did not believe that his mother was having an adulterous liaison with his Prime Minister, who was a married man of high moral principles. However, a torrent of cartoons and broadsheets poured off the presses, ridiculing Bute and Augusta and giving them the nicknames "Jack Boot" (a play on his name and title) and "Petticoat".^{iv} The Prime Minister's situation became so untenable that the King had no alternative but to accept his resignation less than a year into his administration. Bute,

it is now recognized, was an able and conscientious man, but un-suited to the cut and thrust of London politics.^v As a contemporary, Bishop Warburton, said of him: “Lord Bute is a very unfit man to be Prime Minister of England. First, he is a Scotchman; secondly, he is the King’s friend; and thirdly he is an honest man.”^{!vi} On the plus side, Bute now had more time to pursue what would be his lifelong passion – botany – including acquiring plants for Princess Augusta’s estate at Kew, where he was the first unofficial (i.e. unpaid) director. There was surely no physical relationship between Augusta and Bute, but there was clearly a strong emotional connection and it may not be too fanciful to regard Kew Gardens as, in a sense, their “child”.

It is likely that Bute first acquired his interest in botany from his uncle and guardian, Archibald Campbell, 3rd Duke of Argyll (Bute had lost his father at the age of ten). Argyll was another important Anglo-Scottish politician of the time – in his case a staunch Whig. Argyll was born at Ham House and had an estate with a notable garden at Whitton in Middlesex. This garden contained a superb collection of plants of economic importance as well as ornamental trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants from around the world.^{vii} He created it out of a swathe of Hounslow Heath, starting in 1725 when Bute was twelve years old. A visitor said of it that the soil “was very meagre, nearly all around being bare ling-heath; but the Duke has been able to show what pleasure, art, and money are able to effect, and that by their means the most meagre places are converted into fruitful land”.^{viii} This is remarkably similar to what the architect William Chambers would say in 1763 regarding Bute’s work at Kew (see below). Such was Argyll’s zeal for botany and horticulture that he lived in a gardener’s cottage while he laid out the garden at Whitton, only later getting round to having a grand mansion built.^{ix} Horace Walpole called him “the tree monger” and observed that “the introduction of foreign trees and plants, which we owe principally to Archibald, Duke of Argyll, contributed essentially to the richness of colouring so peculiar to our modern landscape”.^x Following his death in 1761, some of his exotic trees and shrubs would be spirited away to Kew by Bute. After Eton, Bute went on to study at Leiden University which at that time, under the Professorship of the great Herman Boerhaave, was the leading centre of botanical science in Europe. This experience would have further intensified Bute’s interest in botany.

After a period spent on the improvement of his Scottish estate, Bute came to England and had a chance encounter with Frederick, Prince of Wales and Duke of Rothesay – a German who, of course, owed these titles to his Stuart ancestry.^{xi} Around that time (1747) Frederick was busy extending his estate at Kew (much of this estate was only acquired in the period 1749-51). He was sufficiently impressed by Bute to appoint him Gentleman of the Bedchamber, so that Bute was an adviser to Frederick from that time until the latter’s untimely death in 1751. One of Bute’s duties, if Horace Walpole is to be believed, was to take Augusta for a walk whenever Frederick wanted to be alone with his alleged mistress, Jane Hamilton, and (said Walpole) “as soon as the Prince was dead, they walked more and more in honour of his memory”!^{xii} Bute became thereafter adviser and tutor to Frederick and Augusta’s son, the future George III. George’s strong political opinions and high moral principles owed much to the influence of Bute, whom George doted on.^{xiii} Bute also arranged George’s felicitous marriage to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

In 1758 Bute leased a house in Kew Green (today the much altered Cambridge Cottage) for the use of his wife and children. His wife was Mary Wortley Montagu, from a very wealthy landed Yorkshire family (her mother was a noted writer). They

had four sons and six daughters. Beside this house Bute built another as a study for his own use. An infamous cartoon of the period made much of the fact that his house had a garden gate and a path leading to the White House where Augusta lived. The implication was that this was a well-trodden path. Of course, Bute being Augusta's director, it made perfect sense to have a gate opening straight onto the estate.^{xiv}

Bute's responsibilities at the Kew estate included staff recruitment, landscaping and plant acquisition.^{xv} He is credited with the recruitment of the botanist John Hill – author in 1768 of the first *Hortus Kewensis*, a catalogue of plants growing at Kew – and the gardeners John Haverfield and William Aiton. Lanarkshire born Aiton was employed at Kew for thirty-four years and was succeeded as Head Gardener by his son, who was in post for a further forty-eight years. Bute was a great patron of architecture: he introduced his compatriot Robert Adam to the Duke of Northumberland at Syon House, where Adam's fine interiors can still be seen; and he introduced the then largely unknown William Chambers (born in Sweden of Scottish parents) to Princess Augusta at Kew, resulting in the rich heritage of buildings that still largely survives. The Orangery, the Pagoda and the Ruined Arch are the best known. Chambers also designed three surviving small temples – Arethusa, Bellona and Aeolus – although the latter is a 19th century stone replica. Named after classical deities, these temples evoke an Arcadian paradise. However their names have another lesser known significance: all three were the names of ships of the Royal Navy that were involved in famous victories against the French in the Seven Years' War.^{xvi} Bute was an active politician throughout this war and, as Prime Minister, he negotiated the Treaty of Paris that ended it. It is therefore possible that he had a hand in the naming of the temples.

There is a reference in the archives to a "Plan" for the Kew estate, and it is generally assumed that after Frederick's death Augusta continued to implement this plan. As the contents of the plan are unknown, this can only be conjecture. Did Augusta loyally carry out her (probably unfaithful) husband's wishes? Or did she do her own thing? Or were the gardens at Kew the product of an unconsummated love affair between Augusta and Bute? The full truth may never be known, but Chambers, who designed only buildings at Kew, gave Bute the credit for the general landscaping of the Pleasure Grounds: "Originally the ground was one continued dead flat: the soil was in general barren, and without either wood or water. With so many disadvantages it was not easy to produce anything even tolerable in gardening: but princely munificence [Frederick and Augusta], guided by a Director [Bute] equally skilled in cultivating the earth, and in the politer arts, overcame all difficulties. What was once a Desert is now an Eden".^{xvii} The Bute/Chambers Pleasure Grounds were a not untypical English Landscape garden of the late 18th century – informal in style, devoid of straight lines and geometric shapes, and grazed by sheep and cattle. There was an irregular-shaped lake extending over thirteen acres and a number of man-made mounds. Trees were largely confined to the perimeter, where there was also a serpentine path dotted with exotic and classical buildings. The latter were mostly designed by Chambers and included at one time an Alhambra, a Gallery of Antiques and an open air theatre. This was a landscaping style that Chambers characterised as "nature improved by art".

Crucially for the future of Kew, Bute was actively involved in the creation, in 1759, of the original nine acre botanic garden at the north end of the estate, including a five acre arboretum and a 114 foot long Great Stove. The latter, designed by Chambers and a heating expert called Stephen Hales, was one of the biggest glasshouses of its

day and it continued in use for a hundred years. Augusta and Bute's ambitious aim was "to collect all the plants known on Earth". A contemporary botanist wrote (1758): "My Lord Bute has already settled a correspondence in Asia, Africa, America, Europe and everywhere he can".^{xviii} Bute had a network of contacts abroad as well as in Britain since both he and his uncle Argyll had used their political patronage to install many of their fellow countrymen in positions throughout the British colonies. Also, Bute associated with a number of noted botanists of the day, including John Hope, Peter Collinson, Stephen Hales and Sir William Watson. Collinson, one of Bute's closest botanist colleagues, was famous for establishing a scheme whereby his friend John Bartram (the "father of American botany") supplied North American seeds and seedlings to British patrons in return for an annual subscription. Also, with John Hope, the eminent Edinburgh Professor, Bute was involved in the Society for the Importation of Foreign Seeds and Plants (1763), which was the first such syndicate in Britain.^{xix} In addition to these networks, Bute had access to a number of London plant nurseries that specialised in importing and propagating exotic plants and that, more often than not, had Scottish proprietors – notably James Gordon at Mile End and Lee & Kennedy at the Vineyard Nursery in Kensington (James Lee of the Vineyard Nursery had formerly been one of the Duke of Argyll's gardeners at Whitton).^{xx}

One contemporary expressed some doubt over the number of plants at Kew actually obtained by Bute. Bute, however, like Sir Joseph Banks at a later date, was a "mover and shaker" who would have encouraged his many contacts around the world to contribute plants to the royal botanic garden. It is therefore likely that he was indirectly, if not directly, responsible for a high proportion of the 3,500 species of plant catalogued by Hill in 1768. Collinson can therefore be believed when he said that "from [Bute's] great knowledge in the science of botany the Gardens at Kew have been furnish'd with all the rare exotick trees and flowers that could be procured".^{xxi}

In addition to his work at Kew, Bute made other contributions to botanical science. He helped finance Professor Hope's new Royal Botanic Garden at Edinburgh. He subsidised a number of gifted botanical artists, including Georg Ehret and Johann Mueller, as well as the publisher William Curtis, whose *Botanical Magazine* is still being published today. He also liked to encourage women to study botany, an occupation to which he thought they were particularly suited. This led him to publish, after a long gestation period, his lavishly illustrated *Botanical tables, containing the different families of British plants* [in nine volumes, 1785] which was intended to be an improvement on the Linnaean system of classification. The botanic garden at Kew was organized according to Linnaeus's system, but Bute deplored the fact that this system had too many plants "ranged under heads they do not suit", since it was based solely on the number and type of stamens and pistils that a plant possessed.^{xxii} Furthermore, these reproductive parts of the plant were curiously referred to as "husbands" and "wives" and other more graphic terms. This led some contemporaries to regard the system as pornographic and therefore unsuitable for teaching to women and children.^{xxiii} Bute's system was based on a wider range of plant characteristics, and the dedication in his publication declared that it had been "composed solely for the amusement of the Fair Sex ... No improper terms will be found in it!"^{xxiv} Only a limited edition of twelve was printed: two of the recipients were Queen Charlotte (wife of George III) and Catherine the Great of Russia.

Bute went abroad in 1768 and Augusta started to spend less time at Kew. She eventually developed throat cancer, which she bore with great fortitude. She died in

1772 at the age of 51. When Bute returned to Britain, he devoted his time to his estates at Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire and at Highcliffe in Hampshire (he also had ancestral lands on the Isle of Bute which were managed by his brother, James). At Luton Hoo he dedicated a magnificent sandstone column to the memory of Princess Augusta, with a heart-felt inscription taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "[You will remain in my memory] so long as I am conscious and my spirit controls my limbs".^{xxv} This column, surmounted by a female figure, can be seen today in a beautiful new setting on the Isle of Bute, overlooking the Firth of Clyde.^{xxvi} Bute's end was a fitting one for a botanist: at the age of 78 he fell 30 feet while, it is said, trying to reach a plant growing on a cliff. Although he survived, this fall is believed to have hastened his death in 1792.^{xxvii} His wife outlived him by two years.

Augusta and Bute's creation, Kew Gardens, lives on. The foundations that had been laid there under Bute's direction and with Augusta's money would be built on by George III and his energetic new director, Joseph Banks; and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew would become renowned throughout the world.

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- ⁱ Originally entitled *The new illustration of the sexual system of Linnæus*
- ⁱⁱ James Thomson, "Rule Britannia!", 1740.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1992).
- ^{iv} Karl W. Schweizer, ODNB article on Bute.
- ^v Karl W. Schweizer (ed.), *Lord Bute: Essays in Re-interpretation* (1988).
- ^{vi} Quoted in John Heneage Jesse, *Memoirs of the Life and Reign of King George the Third*, vol. 1, ch 9 (1867).
- ^{vii} Roger L. Emerson, *An enlightened duke: the life of Archibald Campbell, 3rd Duke of Argyll* (2013).
- ^{viii} P. Foster, D.H. Simpson, V. Rosewarne, *Whitton Park and Whitton Place*, Borough of Twickenham Local History Society (1999).
- ^{ix} P. Foster, etc. *ibid*.
- ^x Horace Walpole, *On Modern Gardening*, written 1770. First published with *Anecdotes of painting in England* (1780).
- ^{xi} Prince Frederick was Duke of Edinburgh (the Earl of Bute's birth-place) as well as Duke of Rothesay (a town on the Isle of Bute). The latter is the title given to the heir to the Scottish throne.
- ^{xii} Ray Desmond, *History of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew* (2007), p. 28.
- ^{xiii} Desmond, *ibid.*, pp. 28-30.
- ^{xiv} Desmond, *ibid.*, p. 399 (illustration).
- ^{xv} Desmond, *ibid.*, p. 28. William Chambers referred to "original designs of the gardens and buildings of Kew plan'd by his Lordship [Bute] and executed under his inspection": John Harris et al., *Sir William Chambers: architect to George III* (1996), p. 58.
- ^{xvi} J.J. Colledge & Ben Warlow, *Ships of the Royal Navy: the complete record of all fighting ships of the Royal Navy* (2010). See also Wikipedia articles on "*HMS Arethusa* (1759)", "*HMS Bellona* (1760)" and "*HMS Blonde*" [re *HMS Aeolus* (1758)].
- ^{xvii} William Chambers, *Plans, elevations, sections and perspective views of the gardens and buildings at Kew in Surrey* (1763).
- ^{xviii} Thomas Knowlton in letter of 13 November 1758 to Richard Richardson, quoted in Desmond.
- ^{xix} Schweizer, *ibid.* iii.
- ^{xx} Desmond, *ibid.* p. 41.
- ^{xxi} Alan W. Armstrong (ed.), *Forget not mee [sic] & my garden* (2002).
- ^{xxii} Schweizer, *ibid.* iii. To be fair to Linnaeus, he was well aware that his system was not a "natural" one: in fact, it was more of a plant identification key than a classification system. At a time when most of the world's plant species had yet to be discovered, Linnaeus believed that his system was the most useful for the time being, since it could be used even by amateur plant collectors with minimal training.
- ^{xxiii} Sam George, "Linnaeus in letters: botany in an English dress", *British Journal for 18th Century Studies*, 28 (2005). http://www.academia.edu/185977/Linnaeus_in_Letters_Botany_in_an_English_Dress.
- ^{xxiv} *Gardeners Chronicle*, 20 December 1879, pp. 796-7.
- ^{xxv} Now at Mount Stuart, Kingarth, Isle of Bute: see British Listed Buildings Online: <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-12053-mount-stuart-monument-kingarth>.
- ^{xxvi} An illustration of the column can be seen in "Bute's woodland secrets unfold" in *Country Life*, 6 February 2013: www.mountstuart.com/download_file/1426/824/.
- ^{xxvii} Schweizer, *ibid.* iii.