

## Shadow of a Necklace

Kate Whiteford

### *Shadowing Mount Stuart*

At once pictorially alluring and intellectually stimulating, Kate Whiteford's *Shadow of a Necklace* on the lawn at Mount Stuart is part of an on-going series of large-scale 'site-lines'. Incised into strategically determined locations, these invariably draw their potency from the way in which they dynamically interact with their context.

The Bute's Scottish seat at Mount Stuart was built for the third Marquess by Robert Rowand Anderson. Visitors choosing to approach this magnificently theatrical Victorian gothic mansion across the great sunken lawn, from the shore-side, will initially be afforded a decidedly contrasting impression of Whiteford's work. Understated, and indeed almost accidental, it appears as no more than a series of patches or fragments of white lines. At moments, these lines seem straight; they run parallel, three or four abreast, appearing almost to prolong the sharply-defined gravel walks bounding the lawn. From other angles, the lines suddenly emerge as curves and open loops, informally echoing the windows and arches cut into the façade of the house. Or again, series of horizontal white lines may unexpectedly interact visually with the single fine white vertical of Augusta's column, situated slightly to one side of the lawn. As evening falls on a fine summer's day, longer stretches of white lines intersect the angular edges of the black shadow cast by the house. However, at no moment and from no viewpoint on or near the lawn does a recognisably well-formed drawing emerge.

It is only from the vantage of the windows in the Family Bedroom on the second floor of the house at Mount Stuart that the elegant silhouette of a necklace appears, encased in the sunken lawn as if pillowed in green satin within an open jewel case. Aside from the antique texture of the necklace's lines, redolent of ancient pre-Celtic times, there is no immediate clue as to what the drawing may actually be doing there.

Noticing that the necklace appears somewhat distorted when seen from the drawing-room just one floor below the Family Bedroom, visitors familiar with the laws of perspective will understand that the perfect view obtained from higher up is a mental construction. Indeed, one need only return to the level of the lawn and pace out the lines of the drawing, both lengthways and laterally, to realise that the actual inscription is very much longer than it appears from its ideal viewpoint – all the more so, in that the lawn slopes irregularly down towards the sea. Both technically and iconologically, Whiteford's necklace is what the Italian inventors of perspectival drawing at the Renaissance might have called a *cosa mentale* – both an intellectually defined 'thing' and a 'cause' of intellectual activity. This is certainly not to say that this particular object is just a perplexing riddle.

Both in the rhythm of the appearance and disappearance of its lines at ground level and in the fragile 'illusory' nature of the image it constitutes when viewed from the appropriate place in the house, the drawing of a necklace is engaged in some sort of shadow-play. Hints regarding what this may involve emerge as soon as one's visual imagination is engaged. There is, for example, the suggestion that the unclasped necklace lying open at the far end

of the lawn anticipates or echoes the invisible shoreline beyond, thus acquiring the almost casual legitimacy of a natural landmark. In this sense, *Shadow of a Necklace* may be read as a celebration of the falsely natural style of landscaping which is the mark of the art of gardening in these islands.

The estate at Mount Stuart is certainly not alone in Britain in illustrating a carefully conceived 'natural' effect as the very jewel of land improvement. Equally, however, the rounded white lines and the angular silhouette on the lawn are set against the red stone of the Victorian house in much the same way as, within the edifice itself, the white marble tracery in the nave of the chapel contrasts with the red-tinted volume of the lantern above the altar (an effect created by the light coming through coloured glass). Or again, the mere fragments of necklace greeting visitors strolling round the lawn recall the carefully ruined 'folly' hidden at one end of a long vista on the beech walk, slightly to the south – which itself feels like the discrete, if not clandestine, counterpart of the highly visible column set at a veritable crossroads of formal grass paths, a few meters to the north of the sunken lawn. All such reverberations either emerge from the suggestive interplay of Whiteford's land drawing with broadly generic or cultural categories, or else are stimulated by its immediate visual impact. However, *Shadow of a Necklace* has not simply an air of formal appropriateness. It generates an improbable yet emphatic feeling of familiarity – a sign, one feels, of its close involvement with the texture of this particular landscape.

Sources readily available on the island (the official guidebook to Mount Stuart; historical monographs of Bute on sale at the museum in Rothesay) rapidly confirm this hypothesis. Let me list some of the more obvious connections suggested by the history of the original eighteenth-century house and its immediate surroundings:

- the sunken lawn in which Whiteford's drawing rests is the site of a formal parterre created when Mount Stuart was established but later grassed over; thus, the silhouette of the necklace simultaneously recalls and (in a manner appropriate to a more indigenous practice) relaxes a style of gardening, knocking it slightly off its axis;
- the early formal garden would have appeared to greatest advantage when viewed from the first-floor rooms of the white classical house, since (because of the lie of the land) these were set above a half-buried basement;
- at some time between the late eighteenth century and the major fire which in 1877 destroyed the original Mount Stuart, the forecourt of the house was excavated to reveal the sunken basement on the other side of the house, a decision which entailed a rearrangement of the rooms on the first floor and confirms that, even before the Victorian rebuilding programme, not only the relation of the house to its immediate surroundings but, more particularly, the elevation and positioning of its viewing points, was never fully stabilised.

The guide to Mount Stuart aptly suggests that the 'ghost' of the refurbishment of the original dwelling survives in the layout of the current edifice. This observation should alert visitors to the fact that, however immediate the impact of the house or however familiar its general appearance will be to anyone at all sensitive to nineteenth-century architectural style, the Victorian Mount Stuart is itself a syncretic construct. It is eclectic not only in the iconographical programme of its interior decoration but indeed in its use of diverse Gothic sources. Thus, the lantern of the chapel was copied from a cathedral built in Saragossa for

Benedict XIII, a pope who had a particular connection with Scotland which (unlike England, for example) recognised his authority, so that he in turn authorised the foundation of the country's oldest university at Saint Andrews. As Mount Stuart's architect recalled, none of this history was lost on his patron, a noted Catholic convert and educational philanthropist. Furthermore, the white marble chapel is itself the house's second such amenity, since a smaller private chapel (built shortly before the great fire of 1877) survives to this day in an old wing of the house. However, if the siting of Kate Whiteford's necklace visibly shadows the striking contrast between the luminous red lantern and the brilliant white gothic tracery in the slightly more recent chapel, this is itself but an accident of history, resulting from the early interruption of a scheme to install stained glass windows, which would have had the effect of dappling the marble of the nave in various tints.

Such phenomena suggest that a process of shadowing is built into the very structure and history of Mount Stuart. There ensues an on-going series of repetitions and variations (or indeed ghostly interruptions) that engenders effects akin to anamorphological projections of its features in time and space. The most striking reversals may be provoked by this dynamic of perpetual reinvention. A recently published collection of essays on Kew, for example, draws attention to an iconographical detail which may be taken to add another twist to the status of Whiteford's *Shadow of a Necklace*. The celebrated London gardens at Kew were laid out by the Princess Dowager Augusta in the mid-eighteenth century, under the aegis of the third Earl of Bute. It is to Augusta that the column at Mount Stuart was dedicated by Bute, who had a brief spell as prime minister (1762-1763) and was an eminent supporter of the Hanoverian court. The victim of vitriolic attacks by his political opponents, the Earl was accused of entertaining an improper relationship with Augusta and found himself obscenely lampooned in satirical poems and prints. Bute's gardening interests were turned against him and his very name punningly turned into an offence. The elegant necklace almost negligently deposited on the lawn at Mount Stuart thus reads today as discrete rejoinder to the numerous scurrilous eighteenth-century representations of the supposed misdeeds of a vulgar 'boot' in Kew Gardens.

This is but one more instance of the way in which the persuasive presence of Whiteford's site-lines at Mount Stuart results from its participation in an on-going process whose nature is not so much totalizing and territorial as rhythmical and open. The deceptively casual addition of *Shadow of a Necklace* to the lawn between the house and the sea responds to what landscapists might refer to as the 'genius of the place' – its historical, cultural and topographical rhythms. These rhythms extend beyond Mount Stuart, to spread over the island of Bute itself. Thus, in the decades preceding the nineteenth-century reconstruction of the house, a series of engineering works known as 'Thom's Cuts' were carried out to regulate the water supply on Bute. One is scarcely surprised to learn that the longest of these cuts skirts the island's central moor, tracing an inverted 'U' over four and a half miles long and set more or less at right angles to *Shadow of a Necklace*, although obviously not visible from Mount Stuart itself.

The open neck of the unclasped necklace also evokes the more distant echo of the ancient open-ended 'passage graves' to be found on the island. However, the most persuasive reference played out by *Shadow of a Necklace* obviously – and indeed literally – involves an actual funerary artefact which is itself no longer on Bute. In 1887, the third Marquess

uncovered the grave of a Bronze Age woman at Mount Stuart. This contained a scattering of beads from a jet necklace, which was reconstructed and removed to Edinburgh where it is still on display at the Museum of Scotland. A similar necklace was found in 1961 at Inchmarnock. This second necklace is in lignite, a local substitute for the jet which came from Whitby in Yorkshire. It can be seen at the museum in Rothesay.

Kate Whiteford's land drawing explicitly returns the exiled Bronze Age artefact to a site close to the cist where it laid undisturbed for several thousand years. Simultaneously, it hands the necklace back to the people of Bute. Nevertheless, knowledge of the story of the Mount Stuart grave and its contents no more turns *Shadow of a Necklace* into a larger-than-life compensatory reproduction than ignorance of this episode left it a mere enigma. Himself the Victorian re-inventor of Mount Stuart, the third Marquess observed that the restringing of the original necklace was in part speculative. Other pertinent facts should also be noted, such as (in Bronze Age terms) the extremely remote provenance of the jet of which it is made. Yet again, in tracing out her drawing in silver sand, Whiteford has effected a simple reversal of the disposition of the grave where, a century ago, the Marquess found the remains of the Bronze Age woman 'purposely pillowed and partially embedded' in sand and pebbles. All such observations discourage any temptation to assimilate the persuasive familiarity of the white shadow cut out of the lawn at Mount Stuart to an unequivocal sign of homecoming.

Just as there are gaps in the history of the necklace, there is a mystery surrounding its original owner. Her skull is perforated, possibly as a result of illness or primitive trepanation. Wherever traces are present, violence is perhaps never very far away. No trace or archive can avoid the threat of its disappearance: indeed, the possibility of eradication is constitutive of such artefacts. This may be forced, as in the destruction of the records of the burgh of Rothesay by Cromwell's armies departing Bute in the sixteenth century ; or it may appear self-fulfilling, as in the garden designer Thomas Mawson's perhaps complacent remarks a hundred years ago, on his achievement in inserting pools and cascades into the course of Racers Burn at Mount Stuart – "The result when complete was most beautiful, and much more like generous, wayward nature than the stream as we found it".

For historians, an enigmatic or an absent trace may be a source of frustration. In poetic terms, however, such blanks will function as caesurae. Constituting necessary breaks in an on-going rhythm, these are valuable pointers to a non-totalizable yet pertinent or persuasive openness. Kate Whiteford's *Shadow of a Necklace* no more rounds off a cycle by restoring – even partially – a long-lost presence, than it highlights ruptures testifying either to the struggles in which the Butes have been involved or to the fortunes of Mount Stuart itself. While the island's at times turbulent past may be guessed at in the ruins of the castle at Rothesay (formerly home to the Bute family), the Victorian edifice built on the site of the country seat to which they repaired in the early eighteenth century almost seamlessly absorbs both its sources and the fluctuating history of building and landscaping at Mount Stuart. *Shadow of a Necklace* has a similarly rich but nuanced texture. It is, to borrow the words of the designer of the Marquess of Bute's garden, beautiful and generous; it is also (as Mawson would further have it) 'wayward' – if only we understand by this that the work imposes no single trajectory or set of references but rather encourages the visitor to thread

a new version of the tale to which the open series of discernible features at Mount Stuart variously points.

This suggestion that the 'natural' beauty of Kate Whiteford's project for Mount Stuart lies in the manner in which it suggests a delicate rhythmical notation for its setting would appear to be confirmed by its proposed final stage. This will involve seeding the silver site-lines with grass slightly darker in shade than the lawn. Once the new grass has grown in, *Shadow of a Necklace* will become a shadow of itself, thus repeating – yet again with a subtle difference – the very poetics of its inscription in the site.

© Yves Abrioux  
Mount Stuart 2001

SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY : Rev. J. KING HEWISON, *Bute in the Older Time*, vol. 1, Edinburgh & London, 1893 ; Ian McLagan's, 'Robert Thom's Cuts on the Island of Bute', *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, vol. xxiv, 1996 (pp.3-19) ; Ian MACLAGAN & Anne SPEIRS, *Bute: An Island History*, Rothesay, 2002 ; Dorothy N. MARSHALL, *History of Bute*, revised ed., Rothesay, 1992 ; *Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute*, guidebook, 2001 ; *New Arcadians Journal* n° 51/52 'Kew Gardens – a Controversial Georgian Landscape', 2001.