

Civic-minded Cleghorn ran one of city's first commercial nurseries

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“Robert Cleghorn was a public-spirited citizen and a man of domestic tastes, and the influences of a home of culture and refinement left their impress...”

That's how W. H. Atherton summed up Robert Cleghorn's life in his History of Montreal. He used few words because the piece was about his prominent son, James Power Cleghorn.

Robert Cleghorn ran Montreal's largest commercial nursery from about 1805 to 1835. It might well have been Montreal's first, although Louis Charles might earlier have run a nursery.

Cleghorn was born in Scotland in 1778, the son of Robert Cleghorn, a physician who gave lectures in materia medica (which included botany)

at the University of Glasgow. Growing up in a medical household, the young son would have learned something of the botanical world. Doctors at that time needed to recognize plants that had medicinal properties and to know about the simple drugs sold by herbalists and apothecaries.

By the early 1800s, Cleghorn was in Montreal establishing a nursery and sending unusual plants back to England and Scotland. In an article titled On the Culture of North American Plants in *The Gardener's Magazine*, March 1827, Ayrshire nurseryman John Goldie listed plants he observed in 1817-19, among them:

“*Cypripedium arietinum*, in a swamp in Montreal, which I believe is the only place it has ever been found.

It was discovered about 1808 by Mr. Robert Cleghorn, Montreal, and sent by him to London ... it grows well in vegetable mould and soil, and should be kept moist and shady.”

This plant, known as ram's head lady's slipper, is now an endangered member of the orchid family.

In the 1820s, Cleghorn sent several plants to Glasgow, where William Jackson Hooker was the University of Glasgow's Regius Professor of Botany. Some of Cleghorn's plants were recorded in Hooker's *Exotic Flora*, among them the orchid *Coralorhiza multiflora*. Hooker noted: “For the introduction of this singular and highly curious plant, our Botanic Garden is indebted to Mr. Cleghorn of Montreal.”

A description of Blink-

bonny Gardens at Côte à Baron, now the St. Louis Square area of Montreal, appeared in John Claudius Loudon's *An Encyclopedia of Gardening*, 1860 edition (after the death of both Loudon and Cleghorn; the reference presumably appeared in an earlier edition and not updated):

“The principal nurseries in Lower Canada are at Montreal, and the best of these is Blinkbonny Garden, kept by Robert Cleghorn. (He) has paid great attention to the introduction and cultivation of fruit trees, and has for sale about 30 kinds of apples, 15 or 18 kinds of pears, about as many kinds of plum, three or four kinds of cherry, as many grapes, and about six or eight kinds of gooseberry. He has also a collection of perennial, herbaceous, and greenhouse plants; and an extensive col-

lection of indigenous plants and trees.”

Robert Cleghorn's first wife, Margaret, died in Montreal in 1817 after a long illness, at the age of 22. He remarried Eliza Ann Power from Soré and, according to Atherton, there were 10 children.

Even with extensive family and business commitments, he participated in the community. As a militiaman, he attended the funeral of his neighbour, McGill University founder James McGill in December 1813. He was active in the Montreal Floral Society, Montreal Mechanics' Institution and the Natural History Society of Montreal. He kept detailed records of the weather, at a time when individuals and companies kept meteorological observations rather than the government.

In his latter days, Robert

Cleghorn converted his nursery grounds into a garden promenade. Alexander Gordon wrote in *The Gardener's Magazine* in January 1840, “Its numerous shady walks and rural retreats render it a desirable field of recreation for the citizens in general; while its rich and botanical stores eminently adapt it to the pursuits of the scientific.”

In April 1844, three years after his death, his widow, Eliza Ann, went to Notary Stanley Clark Bagg to formalize the apprenticeship of her minor son, James Power Cleghorn, to drygoods merchant Samuel Ralston, thereby starting him on a long and successful business career.

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