

*An Architectural History of the Church of Ireland*

Church of Ireland Publishing

Michael O'Neill 2023

Address by the archbishop of Dublin at its launch on 28 March 2023

Current and future generations of architectural and social historians, clergy and lay people, enthusiasts and passers-by in Ireland and beyond have much for which to be indebted to Michael O'Neill on the completion and publication of this exemplary volume entitled: *An Architectural History of the Church of Ireland*. It speaks for itself in terms of clarity of expression, beauty of presentation, professionalism of understanding and volume of information. It also displays a clear thread of argument and of elucidation in what Michael O'Neill discerns as the conundrum deep within the palimpsest of generational building in the name of the Church of Ireland: How did so few people merit so many buildings? This built corpus is part of the inherited, and frequently decrepit, deposit of religious architecture spanning a number of centuries. At the same time, it makes its own visual markers in what he refers to as a contested spiritual landscape. The author can indeed be a master of understatement when he needs to be. The fact that he has an affection for the plain little churches scattered throughout the Irish countryside speaks volumes about the respect in which he holds both the best of the efforts of the past and the depth of devotion displayed by a tiny, and diminishing, proportion of the population of the whole of Ireland to these very special buildings. In no way, however, does this prevent him from offering pungent analysis and cogent criticism. There may not be Swiftian *indignatio* but there is undoubtedly O'Neillian *acumen*.

This is not the first time that Michael O'Neill has offered history through the defining filter of buildings. He cut his teeth in this intricate field in his 2011 volume: *Bank Architecture in Dublin*. He does know his architectural terminology. It marches hand in hand with his architectural understanding – assured and detailed and it draws us infectiously into the world in which he is comfortable. His conclusions are chilling, but unsurprising. While there may indeed be a sense of *locus iste* (the location itself), he discerns little obvious sense of *genius loci* (the spirit of the place). In a panoramic analysis that moves from the churches of the Middle Ages and the Anglo Normans through to the rectories of the 1960s, Michael O'Neill finds himself facing the dilemma of no conscious sense that any explicit theology of sacred space underlies what happened nor yet again that there is any sense of an evocation of the beauty of holiness or of encountering the numinous tangibly at work throughout the period under consideration. He goes so far as to argue that at various times in our history, the Church of Ireland has built churches because we did not want the Roman Catholics, the Presbyterians and the Methodists to get too far ahead of us; that the work of The Board of First Fruits, as an agency for distributing government money, had very little explicitly to do with God but had a lot more to do with being a bulwark against revolution and a rejoinder to The Catholic Relief Act and the foundation of Maynooth in 1795. Such assessments stand as an unanswered criticism of and challenge to the Church of Ireland of today as much as of the Church of Ireland of yesterday.

Some of the many outstanding features of the book are the varied ways in which progressively it enables us to read church buildings as they stand in their time in history and to piece together the motivation of building and furnishing such edifices. Seats and burial vaults make money. The Church of Ireland down through its history is painfully slow to give up its box pews. Even in the colourless Reformation of Edward vi, the candles are gone, the images for didactic purposes are gone including glass; only imagery on tombs survives the iconoclasm - presumably because it pays up. Despite the repeated pleas to replace box pews by what we might call 'free seating,' box pews cling on for dear life; the new seating arrangements when they are eventually introduced are costed and charged (and still extant in a number of churches you can see the brass hoops and wells at the end of each pew in which to stand your genteel umbrella) and 'converts' are corralled into specially segregated seating - presumably, but I am only guessing, they too are charged. In St Michan's Church, Church Street, Dublin there was such seating and in 1700 there is evidence of a Form for Receiving Lapsed Protestants, and Reconciling Converted Papists. The Church of Ireland never made any coherent provision for the seating of visitors. The poor did not do particularly well either. Archbishop Robinson keened wistfully: '... that the poor may have room to stand and sit in the alleys, for to them the Gospel is equally preached.' Clearly the archbishop's jury was out on this one. Michael O'Neill's commentary is equally pertinent: ' [Box pews] brought social hierarchies into the church, they effectively privatized the church, and most probably disenfranchised poorer Protestants.' (page 172)

Michael O'Neill can make us sit up and take notice, as for example when he delivers his one sentence that could do none other than to stop even the most avid tweeter in his or her tracks: 'The Tudor Reformations failed in Ireland,' or 'The Tudor Reformations in Ireland were in effect a reformation without reformers.' An interesting piece of evidence he adduces is that there are no Reformation Martyrs in Ireland; the Martyrs' Memorial remains firmly in St Giles in Oxford and the very place of incineration in the middle of Broad Street outside Balliol College. It was a paper-based and a bureaucratic Reformation and in that sense had few early champions. The 1552 Prayer Book did not take off in The Greater Pale; its best hope was in the dioceses of Dublin and Meath. The population had little or no interest in conforming to The Church of Ireland and, as Michael O'Neill so pithily expresses it: university-educated preachers go where they get paid. That by 1600 there were only one hundred and twenty Irish-born Protestants is an astonishing statistic. The failure of an essentially English Reformation in Ireland can, in part at least, be ascribed to the Church of Ireland being slow, unwilling or uncomprehending about translating everything that might be spoken into the Irish language. This brings crashing down on our heads the accusations of cultural and linguistic colonialism made none the easier in our own day by the fact that the English language is the gateway to an international globalized American consumer experience, so we perhaps continue to feel no real need to bother. We might also recall that when Cardinal Cullen was offered the Medieval buildings in the build-up to what we call Disestablishment by William Gladstone, he said something to this effect: No thank you. I'd rather have the people. In its heyday the Church of Ireland could claim no more than around 12% of the population of the whole of Ireland as its adherents. The 2021 Census

data show that the Church of Ireland stands today at 11.5% of the population of Northern Ireland. We await figures for the Republic of Ireland.

What changed the focus in the long, slow process of implementing Reformed popular religion was Irish Canon 8. It required that the clergyman stand in or among the congregation. This was a radical departure with the direct incorporation of the priest among the people. It took many generations to give architectural shape to this revolution in ecclesiological thinking. Canon 8 further stated that the Irish language be used if thought appropriate by The Ordinary. (The latter point presupposed that there were sufficient clergy versed in the Irish language to make an impact.) This brought with it, over time, the following recognizable features of the Church of Ireland church which can be discerned first and foremost from the order of service for Consecration or Dedication of Churches. They include pulpit, font, reading desk and communion table. These are the staples, the basics of plain religion. Reformation is about plain religion and in essence the Church of Ireland is a plain church and none the worse for that. (We still hear them sung of at Services of Institution, although we now have the option of a symbolic procession of essential ecclesiastical artefacts, such as was never, of course, envisaged in early Reformation times.) During the dedication service, the bishop is to ascend to the communion table, implying that it was raised a few steps above the level of the nave. The further suggestion that the bishop lay his hand upon the plate implies that the communion table is placed altar-wise and at the east end. Speaking of the tolling of the bell implies a belfry tower or a bell-cote. Kneeling to receive Holy Communion further implies a kneeling step and a chancel rail. From such ordering of worship, we can assemble the jigsaw of internal furnishings, the honeycomb of crafted artefacts deemed essential to accompany the architectural changes so admirably described and delineated in this book. Much later, Archbishop Richard Robinson, ex officio Treasurer of The Board of First Fruits, institutionalized the four key components above and forbade the reintroduction of the rood screen. He also introduced an East End with no window where The Lord's Prayer, The Creed and The Ten Commandments could be written for everyone's edification and repetition. A number of these remains intact and they are universally kept in good repair. His crowning glory was that magnificent didactic hierarchical edifice - the triple-decker pulpit - which has been known to stand before the altar, behind the altar or to be carried into place in the nave and carried away again during the service like a liturgical litter. No wonder Michael O'Neill speaks of the occasional theatricality of the Church of Ireland churches.

Further additions of distinctive features of Church of Ireland churches became institutionalized at later dates. The first were the separate chancel and nave, the externalizing of both the entrance porch and vestry (to enable as full-size a church as possible), the west end font, the open seating (finally), the separating of lectern and pulpit (the end of the triple decker pulpit), the North End celebration of Holy Communion. These came about through Bishop Richard Mant in the 1820s. He was successively bishop of Killaloe and Down, Dromore and Connor. He turned from giving unheeded instruction to providing technical drawing. Add to this the work of Joseph Welland, after 1843, who brought the Gothic revival to the small parish church with its characteristics of no gallery and a robing room and entrance porch in what is called a Z plan. It all started

in Ballyhalbert in the Diocese of Down. Welland's enthusiasm to share this revival across the Church of Ireland was a direct result of the work he had done in supervising the restoration of St Patrick's Cathedral, particularly the revamping of The Lady Chapel. A further stage, as a riposte to Disestablishment and its concomitant loss of social status for the Church of Ireland, was what is called the cathedralization of parish churches: big marble pulpits (the first of these being in St Patrick's Church, Monaghan), prayer desks for reading desks, lecterns, a reredos, credence tables and stained glass, antiphonal choir stalls, encaustic floor tiles and a plethora of polished brass.

There is much more in the book over which I might linger but I must hasten on. There is discernible a consistent habit of using medieval sites and adapting existing medieval buildings. They frequently were in centres of population, and as history advanced, the Reformation sought to concentrate on such centres of population by uniting or grouping earlier parishes. Parliament was generally not in favour of founding new churches because there simply were not the people to justify them. The first planned suburban estate coming out of the Medieval era was what we now know as Aungier Street in Dublin, laid out by Sir Francis Aungier to house an urban elite with St Peter's Church (now gone) to serve the religious needs of its inhabitants. Then there was the Molesworth Street area laid out by Viscount Molesworth with St Ann's Church, still extant and in use.

Not everything was to an architectural prescription like the old Toblerone advertisement: triangular honey from triangular bees. At certain points, continuity with Celtic origins was offered by the building of a round tower. At other points, there was a harking back to Hiberno-Romanesque or the taking up of local monastic architectural features. St Ann's Dawson Street shows features of San Giacomo and also of S. Agnese in the Piazza Navona in Rome. The rebuilding of St Werburgh's shows features of Santa Chiara and The Gesu, again in Rome. The use of Counter-Reformation exemplars for Protestant Dublin churches remains a fascination inspired perhaps by The Grand Tour. Simpler to understand is the modelling of St George's, Hardwick Street (now closed) on St Martin in the Fields in London. Disestablishment disendowed such buildings and left them struggling for survival on voluntary financial contributions by ever shrinking numbers of congregants. One cannot underestimate the influence of The Chapel Royal, itself carrying vestiges of King's College Chapel, Cambridge and a building of lavish beauty, on church buildings in other parts of Ireland as far distant from Dublin as St Catherine's Tullamore and St Mark's Newtownards.

Now in 2023, numbers of Church of Ireland adherents have never been so low. Church membership offers less if any of the social leverage it once did. In Dublin in particular, surrounded as we are by residually and derivatively Church of Ireland institutions, there remains in certain quarters the aroma of Establishment. The box pew is long gone: in any functioning management structure, the CEO is happy to drink tea or coffee with the man or woman who sweeps the floor. The three decker pulpit is gone: it has been replaced by social media and the mobile phone. The requirements of personal administration in our everyday lives are such that we are our own clerks and are required to preside over our lives as never before. In a sense, it might seem to many that secularization of the church is more intense than ever before: the application of regulation and compliance will never

be quite enough to satisfy the perfectionist and there is a danger that the truncheon of order will yet beat the spirit and The Spirit into submission. The poor, denied even standing room in early Reformed Ireland, are still with us as they were with Jesus in the days of his earthly life: it is they along with the immigrant who cry to us from the perspective of their irrelevance, longing for mercy and justice, for access and for voice.

Are our churches well positioned for mission? This is a reasonable question for today that deserves a comprehensive discussion. Mission is not milk in a jug that you pour out for people to drink because it is good for them like old-fashioned cod liver oil. Mission is God already in and with the people for whom there is no room in the inn, as the Christmas Reading expresses it, as well as for those who are already its members. Mission needs buildings that function for today. And here is the new dilemma. Such changes and adaptations are always difficult and always unpopular with a vocal 'some.' Michael O'Neill has a particular fondness for the small parish churches, as do I, but I also have a similar fondness for the cathedrals, as I suspect he does. Each tells a human story. This book chronicles the best efforts of good people at different points of *happenings* and *events* which we now, with informed retrospect, call history. This book chronicles what remains of such best efforts and the complexity they have left in their train. We re-enter this stream of happenings through the content of this book, whether we believe in God or whether we do not, whether we are leaders or followers or indeed both, whether we are high up or low down or neither. These buildings approach us across the Irish landscape. We cannot avoid them. Purposing and re-purposing, innovation and renovation are all woven into this book with a detail that may well require a second read. These activities are required of us in our own day as we work out what to do with these fascinating buildings pulsating with interest for those who, like the author, are able to read them and teach others to do so.

My father's first parish as a rector had fine people and a beautiful church by the shores of Lough Erne. Later in life, he decided to go back and visit some of its parishioners again. My mother pleaded with him not to do so, but he went ahead. On entering one particular household, the man of the house, with his foot resting on the chimneybreast, looked up at him and said: Come on in, your Reverence. Is that you or what's left of you?

What would our answer be, regarding what is left of *us as the Church of Ireland*, in light of Michael O'Neill's magisterial study of its architecture and as Easter 2023 beckons us all into the light of resurrection life? The church is where people gather and where, in the words of TS Eliot, prayer is valid. It has always used its buildings to do just this. Like others, I trust that it will continue to do so.