

Book Launch, 28 March 2023

An Architectural History of the Church of Ireland

By Dr Sandra O'Connell

I was delighted to have been asked to launch Dr. Michael O'Neill's *An Architectural History of the Church of Ireland*, but I was humbled too because we are here tonight in the presence of so many eminent scholars, historians, theologians and architects. And on top of that, Dr. Raymond Refausse gave me a tough brief – “just surprise us”, he advised, when I asked him if there was a particular angle he wanted me to take. I hope that by sharing a few insights from this handsome book, I might answer Ray's brief, while giving this important publication the recognition it deserves.

Books like this don't come around very often as they are a long time in the making – 12 years precisely – for it all began with the monumental task of digitising some 9,500 drawings of ecclesiastical buildings, a project undertaken by the author on behalf of the RCB Library. Significant collections date from the period of the Board of First Fruits (1808-1830s) and the ensuing Ecclesiastical Commissioners (1833-1871), which are both given large chapters in the book.

Alongside the wealth of elevations, sections and floor plans of churches and Cathedrals there are also drawings of Glebe houses, the residences of the clergy, and details of church furniture such as triple-decker pulpits, rood screens and box pews as well as specifications, vestry minute books, church inventories and records of episcopal visitations. Together they combine into a rich, colourful tapestry of ecclesiastical history through which this book weaves like an illuminating golden thread.

'A Visual Window'

The digitised drawings had their first outing in an exhibition here at the Irish Architectural Archive in 2019, entitled 'A Visual Window into an Ecclesiastical World'.

'A Visual Window' is a great metaphor for the brilliant research by Dr. O'Neill. The humble Church of Ireland parish church is arguably much more hidden from our daily experience than their Roman Catholic counterparts. This is mainly because of access, which can be limited to the hours of the Sunday morning service. We might have peered through door gaps, pressed faces against window panes, or stood patiently in line on heritage days to catch a glimpse of their interiors. Thankfully this book allows us a very special view now and there is much to see and discover!

In addition to the countless hours spent researching the collections, Dr. O'Neill had to engage in much detective work to access the contemporary church interiors. When visiting a small village or town, he would look at the shopfronts for a Protestant-sounding name in the hope that a key for the church could be produced. Experiencing the church interiors provided invaluable clues to identify typical layouts, repeated design patterns, radical changes, ubiquitous styles and foreign fashions. And this sense of discovery is palpable, as the author tells a compelling story of building, adapting, repairing and sadly even sometimes demolishing, and of the ecclesiastical, economic, social and political forces behind.

Medieval to Reformation / Continuity and Change

Many of the churches we conceive today as 18th or 19th century – a prolific time in church construction – are in fact part of a much older medieval landscape, a palimpsest that can be difficult to decipher but, with the help of this book, we know now to look for “diagnostic features”, evidence of earlier medieval buildings, such as “massively thick walls, deeply splayed windows” and long narrow interiors, which would have been typically divided by a rood screen. An example of a medieval church is St Cronan's, Tuamgraney, Co. Clare, a typical rectangular ‘nave and chancel’ church and a palimpsest: the nave dates from the original tenth-century church, while “the chancel is a twelfth-century Romanesque addition” (22).

Another puzzle is why so few of the medieval parish churches have survived, particularly as there were well over 2,000 medieval parishes (19). Dr. O'Neill writes that “hundreds of ruined medieval parish churches dot the landscape, adding to the ruined silhouette of medieval monasteries, priories and friaries”. He believes that the reasons were largely economic as in the post-reformation world parishes were combined to ensure that the tithe income “provided a realistic income for a university-educated clergyman” (19).

Reformation

The Reformation period brought significant changes to church architecture, described in rich detail by Dr. O'Neill. The Royal Supremacy was first enacted by the Irish Parliament in 1536 and as common prayer books were introduced, altars, relics, images of saints and candles were banished. Significantly the rood screen – which divided nave and chancel in the medieval churches and separated clergy from parishioners – was removed in many churches to bring the congregation closer together for the prayer service.

There is a wonderful description in the book from the *Irish Canons* of 1634, of the restrained inventory of a Church of Ireland, which had to provide:

“A fit seat for the minister to read the service in, a comely and decent pulpit to be set in a convenient place for the preaching of God’s Word; a font of stone set in the ancient usual place, for the ministration of baptism, together with a fair table to be placed at the east end of the church or chancel, and a cup of silver for the celebration of the holy communion.” (63)

This account reminded me of the simple, unadorned interior of the gothic Münster in my home town Ulm. The interior austerity only heightens the drama of space and light. As a young student at Trinity College Dublin I told Professor Terence Brown proudly that I came from a Southern-German city with the highest church tower in the world. “Protestant or Catholic?” he enquired - “Protestant, the Münster fell during the Reformation”, I replied ... only to be swiftly and emphatically corrected by Terence Brown: “You mean it was liberated!”

Triple-Decker Pulpits

In this liberation of space, pulpit and lectern, not altars, became the major focus. In a fascinating chapter on church interiors, the author discusses the **triple-decker pulpit**, which could accommodate – as Francis Johnston’s exquisite pencil sketch shows – a **clerk** in the bottom register to provide the responses in the Prayer Book, a **reader** at the middle desk and the **clergyman** on top, who would ascend the pulpit only to deliver the sermon (277). The triple-decker pulpit was a clever multi-functional and space-saving device of which today’s product designers would be proud! While many were removed in the later 19th century after Disestablishment, some have survived, including in St. Nicholas, Ballymakenny in Co. Louth and in Ballinderry Middle-Church, Co Antrim (181).

It was fascinating to learn though that the Reformation spread much slower in Ireland than in England where it had been “a runaway success” as Dr. O’Neill points out. In fact there was “resistance to Reformation doctrine in the form of widespread non-attendance at Protestant services while forced attendance led to disruptive behaviour in church” (42-3). The Irish-born Protestant population was small – hardly forty in 1585, only grown to about 120 by 1600 (43). And yet, Canon 94 also ensured that where Irish was spoken amongst the parishioners, “the Common Prayer book had to be provided in the Irish tongue” (63)

In the decades after the Reformation, the Irish Protestant Church remained quite impoverished – especially in the rural areas and smaller towns and villages – whereas it thrived in the larger urban settings. Tithes raised from the entire population for the

Protestant Church went to the Crown and were, in many cases, not passed on to provide for vicars and curates or to support the repair of churches and of glebe houses. Dr. O'Neill compiles fascinating statistics throughout the book of how many churches had fallen into disrepair. The poor condition of many churches did not go unnoticed and the book quotes the Planter Edmund Spenser who wrote in 1596: "some that have been lately repaired are so unhandsofly patched and thatched that men do even shun the places for the uncomeliness thereof" (50).

Income from box pews was therefore essential and it explains why they dominate the floor plans of so many churches shown in this book, leaving only standing space for visitors and poorer parishioners. The discussion over their removal in favour of free bench seating was a recurring one from the early 18th century onwards.

The Building Boom

So how did the Church of Ireland turn around its fortunes and embark on an impressive building boom in the 18th and 19th centuries? Dr. O'Neill takes us through this fascinating period in two richly detailed and significant chapters: 'Thomas Cooley and the Board of First Fruits' and 'Early Victorian Administration'.

Negotiated by Jonathan Swift in London, Ireland received its Board of First Fruits in 1711, some six years after Queen Anne had established it in England, with the objective to use this annual tax to support the building of glebe houses and the repair of parish churches. From the mid-18th century, this remit further expanded into church building. What followed was a hugely prolific period for architects, builders and master craftsmen. There is a compelling graphic in the book that shows how a steady base line of Parliamentary grants to the Board of First Fruits rises sharply from 10,000 pounds in 1808 to 60,000 in 1810 (115).

These funds were swiftly put into church building as a report published by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1837 and 1838 showed. A staggering 562 churches had been built or rebuilt since the beginning of the nineteenth century (24). Following on from the 1798 rebellion and the 1801 Act of Union, this dramatic expenditure increase can only be seen as a deliberate investment to consolidate the Protestant Church's position despite serving the smaller proportion of the population.

The building programme was overseen by some of the greatest architects in Ireland, producing a rich architectural heritage, each discussed by Dr. O'Neill. First we have the English-born Irish architect Thomas Cooley – famous for his competition-winning design for the Royal Exchange, today's Dublin City Hall – a protégée of Richard Robinson, Archbishop

of Armagh. So high was the demand for the construction of new churches, that Cooley embarked on a truly innovative project in 1773 – a set of 12 ‘pattern book’ drawings’ of church designs, including “plans, elevations, sections, and roof-trusses with specifications and bills of materials”.

Cooley’s template designs – vividly described by Dr. O’Neill – included simple ‘nave and chancel’ churches with box pews (also known as Design no 2) and more elaborate versions such as Design no 7 which had a Tuscan porch at the West gable and an internal gallery. Design no 9 was a three-bay church with an integrated chancel and an attached west tower with angle buttresses. Cooley also produced a series of tower designs. To retain some control over these architectural blueprints, Cooley’s designs could only be copied in the library in Armagh and yet were so popular among architects and clergy that they are repeated over and over again throughout Ireland.

Cooley’s pupil Francis Johnston became his successor for Bishop Robinson’s church projects in Armagh but began to extend his practice to Dublin, winning for example the competition to design St George’s Church in Hardwicke Place while also designing the Chapel Royal in Dublin Castle. So intense was the workload, that Johnston’s successor John Bowden was replaced not by one but four architects: William Farrell for Armagh, John Semple for Dublin, James Pain for Cashel and Joseph Welland for Tuam. Their work is discussed in detail by Dr. O’Neill to illustrate how each were able to “stamp their individual styles within their respective provinces”.

What will undoubtedly surprise and delight the reader are the wealth of floor plans and architectural styles that were experimented with throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. There was the simple rectangular nave and chancel plan, the Greek Cross Plan, the plan with bows on the transept ends and the Z-plan with an entrance porch and robing room at each end, and many more variations. The bell-cote church and the lancet Gothic church became popular in the 1830s and 40s. Spires were designed to enliven the façades as in Richard Castle’s church for Knockbreda in Belfast or Hugh Darley’s church of St Peter’s in Drogheda. In the revival period, the Hiberno Romanesque made a comeback and round towers started to reappear as in the case of St. Patrick’s in Jordanstown Co. Antrim. Polychromatic designs were popular throughout the 19th century, achieved for example through the use of limestone in different colours and polishes. In the interior, colour was used to great effect through stained glass commissions, which technically broke the rules as they reintroduced imagery into the otherwise unadorned interior.

Conclusion

The story does not end here of course, rather what I have told you is just a brief glimpse through the 'Visual Window'. Dr. Michael O'Neill has achieved a tremendous book with the support of the RCB Library, including Librarian and Archivist, Dr Susan Hood and Dr. Raymond Refausse.

A huge credit must go also to the book designer Wendy Dunbar who brought the drawings alive on the page and gave them the space they deserve. Their reproduction is so close to the originals that we can make out the lines of the paper, the creases and tears, and the texture of the soft colour washes applied by their architects and draughtsmen.

I would encourage you all to buy and read this rich and wonderful book ... and to bring it with you on your Irish travels this summer, you might have some fun spotting Thomas Cooley's pattern book designs in the churches you will encounter on your journeys.