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Unfinished Business: Thomas Duff of Newry

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The *Festschrift*¹ is the friend of unfinished research relegated to shelf or drawer, too hard-won and engaging to be forgotten. The date '24th April 1985' is inscribed on a manuscript transcription made at Armagh in a file which has gathered dust for two decades, its subject Thomas Duff of Newry. Though Duff has since been the subject of a student dissertation, a journal article and an entry in the Dictionary of Irish Architects at the Irish Architectural Archive, his work remains under-researched for an architect of such national significance.² This short essay in honour of Noel Ross revisits research of the 1980s with the aim of encouraging fresh scholarly interest in Duff's architecture and its place in the wider context of Gothic Revival architecture in Ireland, a burgeoning field of enquiry in which the iconographic, representative and economic aspects of revivalism are of greater concern than the stylistic and qualitative preoccupations of the 1980s.³ The shifting sands of historiography are acutely felt in the excavation of decades-old jottings in which tantalising short-hand gaps in transcription point to overlooked material of newly-felt significance. Several themes emerge from these youthful notes not least the business of architecture and building construction, the relationship of architect and client, and the close connections between the neighbouring towns of Dundalk and Newry which fostered emulation in design and craftsmanship, a factor of increasing significance for historians,⁴ here illustrated by the fortunes of Saint Patrick's Pro-Cathedral at Dundalk, Duff's acknowledged masterpiece,⁵ and arguably 'the most perfect Gothic church of the period in the entire country'.⁶

Duff's practice is documented in a range of primary material including correspondence with clients, building committee minutes, parish records, drawings, newspaper articles and a large-scale architectural model.⁷ He was clearly considered a competent practitioner by the exacting trustees of the parish church at Newry whose construction he supervised from 1813 following a protracted design and tender process overseen by Francis Johnston and involving at least five architects.⁸ Like

¹ This short essay was first contributed to the *Festschrift* presented to the editor on 7 June 2016 at Drogheda.

² Gerard M. Rogers, 'The work of Thomas Duff (1792-1848)', Unpublished dissertation (Queens University, School of Architecture, 1986). Paul Larmour, 'That eminent and tasteful architect', *Perspective*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Sep.-Oct. 1998), pp.58-63. Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940. (<http://www.dia.ie/architects>)

³ Niamh NicGhabhann, 'Reconstruction of the Gothic past: cultures of conservation' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2012); Roger Stalley, *Irish Gothic architecture: construction, decay and reinvention* (Dublin, 2012); Myles Campbell, 'Building British identity: British architects and the Tudor-Revival country house in Ulster 1825-50' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2014); Niamh NicGhabhann, *Medieval ecclesiastical buildings in Ireland, 1789-1915: building on the past* (Dublin, 2015); Judith Hill, 'The uses of Gothic in Irish domestic and ecclesiastical architecture, 1785-1829' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2016); Caroline Martha McGee, 'Windows on Catholic Ireland: Hardman of Birmingham. Mayer of Munich and the Religious Art Industry, 1850-1922.' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2017)

⁴ For a recent discussion of political and economic rivalries in public building activity see Richard J. Butler, 'Architecture, patronage and Protestant culture in Ireland, 1800-1850' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016.)

⁵ '...it still remains decidedly the 'chef-d'oeuvre' of Thomas J. Duff', Paul Larmour, 'That eminent and tasteful architect', *Perspective*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Sep.-Oct. 1998), 61.

⁶ Christine Casey and Alistair Rowan, *North-Leinster* (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.68.

⁷ The model for Ravensdale Park is now at the Irish Architectural Archive.

⁸ NLI MS 2235, Minutes of the meetings of the trustees appointed under 51 Geo. III cap. 200, 'An Act for building a church in and for the Parish of Newry in the Counties of Down and Armagh: 26th June 1811' copied from the original by Francis C. Crossle, Newry 1905.



Plate 1: The turreted facade of St Patrick's Pro-Cathedral, Dundalk.



Plate 2: The facade of the Presbyterian Church, Dundalk.



Plate 3: Left: A door case with hood moulding from St Patrick's Pro-Cathedral, Dundalk; Right: A door case from the Presbyterian Church, Dundalk with Perpendicular detailing



Plate 4: Interior view of the nave of St Patrick's Pro-Cathedral, Dundalk.



Johnston, Duff travelled in England to visit and draw medieval buildings though unlike Johnston no manuscript tour survives and we are reliant on the observations of contemporaries and Duff's publication subscriptions for knowledge of what he saw and admired.⁹ Like his contemporary Sir Richard Morrison, Duff was more attuned than Johnston to the taste for Tudor-Revival which developed in the teens and twenties of the new century as a more archaeological solution to modern domestic architecture than the grandiose castellated houses of previous decades, in which ecclesiastical detailing was employed inventively and without scruple. In a letter of July 1826 to Nicholas Whyte regarding a house at Loughbrickland Duff explained that 'the external appearance of the building is to imitate the old English Manor House which style would look well in such a situation'.¹⁰ Though Duff moved freely between Gothic and Classical idioms, he was conscious of the problems in combining old, new and disparate elements and in a later letter to Whyte regarding the new chapel of Loughbrickland agreed 'perfectly' that 'it would add to the beauty of the building if both ends were in the same style of architecture'.¹¹ Though issues of design and stylistic expression were central to Duff's practice, he was also much absorbed by matters of economy, materials and construction. His submission to the building committee at Armagh Cathedral included a report on material from seven quarries which found in favour of Ballybrannon freestone in 'Mr Duff's opinion... an excellent stone and durable'.¹² Frequent travel for site inspection is recorded and at Armagh in April 1840 building of the foundations was 'suspended till the Primate and Mr Duff be present to inspect the work done'.¹³ Duff was required to make working drawings for contractors such as the plan of a column base and mouldings provided for the mason John Carvill in March 1841 and the drawings for pattern moulds to be made by William Marron, Clerk of Works.¹⁴ Marron was required by Duff to oversee all of the cut-stone work and departures from his designs would result in taking down and resetting the stone at Marron's own expense. While presentation and working drawings were supplied to the client and contractors, Duff evidently retained the bulk of the design drawings and documentation for the cathedral for his own use and protection, a professionalism which later aided his widow in reaching a financial settlement that required return of 'all the drawings and papers connected with the cathedral'.¹⁵

The correspondence with Nicholas Whyte of Loughbrickland and the tenor of committee minutes and newspaper reports suggest that Duff was both scrupulous and accommodating in his dealings with clients. Alternative design proposals were discussed and Duff was attentive to the specific requirements of site and orientation. When Whyte found estimates excessive, savings were suggested; reduction in size, cheaper timber, plain rather than ornamental stonework, and the reuse

⁹ The oft quoted description in Caesar Otway's *Tour in Connaught* (Dublin, 1839) provides a potential avenue to further exploration of Duff's English itinerary: 'as an instance of the ambition of the Irish priests in the erection of their places of worship, I may mention that not long ago, while on a visit to Cambridge, there was an Irish architect then occupied in taking plans, elevation etc of the King's Chapel, certainly the finest specimen of Gothic architecture in England or perhaps in the world, His declare purpose was to build a similar church in Dundalk: either his eyes were bigger than his purse, or his faith was steeped in purgatory and Irish pride, such a building would now cost half a million'. Hugh Dixon's file on Duff consulted at PRONI in April 1984 noted that Duff was a subscriber to the 4th volume of *The Antiquities of Athens* (1830), William Caveler, *Select specimens of Gothic architecture* (1839) R. and A. Brandon, *An analysis of Gothick Architecture* (London, 1849). Earlier, Dixon had argued that Duff's acquaintance with London publications suggested that he may have trained there (H. Dixon, *Ulster Architecture 1800-1900* UAHs, 1972), 7.

¹⁰ PRONI Whyte papers D2918/3/15/1-57. Letter 24th July 1826.

¹¹ PRONI 2918/3/16/1-26. Letter 17th August 1827.

¹² Ara Coeli, 'Document relating to the building of the cathedral' (copy of original minute book). Consulted 24/4/85. Entry for 22 September 1839.

¹³ Ibid, Monday April 27th 1840.

¹⁴ 'Document relating to the building of the cathedral', 7th March 1841, 10th May 1841. Carvill most likely belonged to the family of Newry and Dublin, timber merchants and builders, see Susan Galavan, 'Architecture and aspiration: building Dublin's Victorian suburbs' (PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 2013).

¹⁵ Document relating to the building of the cathedral', Sunday 6 November 1853.



Plate 5: The nave vault of St Patrick's Pro-Cathedral, Dundalk.

of old shuttering.¹⁶ Following a lengthy discussion of plans for a Fever Hospital at Newry 'throughout which the utmost unanimity prevailed, it was unanimously resolved that Mr Duff's plan be approved'.¹⁷ The architect's obituary noted the esteem of 'all who knew him... for his excellent qualities of head and heart'.¹⁸ A Roman Catholic, Duff successfully navigated the complex confessional geography of Victorian Ulster and was employed by all of the principal denominations. It is ironic therefore that confessional sensitivities caused a local scandal which reportedly took its toll on Duff's health and was a contributing factor to the rapid decline of his health and early death. His eldest daughter, Mary Catherine became romantically involved with the Rev. Thomas Butler D.D. whom she married in Manchester in August 1848 after her father's death.¹⁹ An Irish language poem from south Armagh noted by Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich in the mid 1980s but as yet untraced evidently contains details of the affair and its heavy toll for Duff's family.²⁰

Early documents for Duff's work at St Patrick's Dundalk have thus far not been forthcoming though its close relationship to Newry Cathedral speaks of tangible connections between the clerical administration and business communities in respective towns, a relationship which is vividly portrayed by later parish minute books at Dundalk which record George Coppinger Ashlin's alterations to Duff's

¹⁶ PRONI Whyte papers, Correspondence 20th March, 4th April, 12th May 1826.

¹⁷ NLI 2208 Crossle MSS, Newry Jottings, pp. 312, 320.

¹⁸ NLI MS 2210, Crossle MSS, p.161.

¹⁹ NLI MS 2209, Crossle MSS, p.314.

²⁰ Ex. Info. Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich, Armagh, 24 April 1985.

building in 1907-9.²¹ The minute book for April 1908 described the building as ‘one of the most beautiful churches in the country’ and reported that Ashlin had told Fr Quin ‘that every time he visited it he found new beauties in it’. In March 1909 it was resolved that members of the building committee would ‘go down to Newry with Fr Quin and inspect the mosaic work being executed in the Cathedral there’.²² A letter received from J. Stokes of the Dundalk and Newry Steam Packet Company recommended a marble dado and mosaic figures of Saints Patrick and Bridget. Though encouraged by Newry to deal directly with craftsmen, the Dundalk committee referred the sanctuary decoration to Ashlin who provided a plan.²³ A visit to inspect the mosaic at Newry was made on May 28th 1909 and in early June Cardinal Logue rowed into the debate noting that three mosaic contractors had been employed in the recent renovations at Armagh Cathedral ‘and he was sorry for it’ as ‘Oppenheimer was the best man that could be got’.²⁴ The resplendent mosaic sanctuaries at Newry and Dundalk thus reflect a rich regional consultative process which doubtless also informed Thomas Duff’s original church commissions at Newry, Dundalk and Armagh. There is undoubtedly more to know about the life and work of Thomas Duff and fresh meanings to be elucidated.



Plate 6: Mosaic decoration in the Lady Chapel of St Patrick’s Pro-Cathedral, Dundalk, depicting the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

²¹ Saint Patrick’s Parochial House, Dundalk. Parish Minute Books.

²² Ibid, 11th March 1909.

²³ Ibid, 9th May 1909.

²⁴ Ibid, Wed. 9th June 1909. ¹ Select biographical works include: Brian Ó Baoill, *D’Arcy Mac Aoidh 1825-1868: Éire Óg, na Finíní*,