

## **The Best Address in Town:**

### **Henrietta Street, Dublin, and Its First Residents (1720-1770).**

Melanie Hayes. Final Draft Manuscript, extract.

'Before the gorgeous Blessington was seen  
Or dandy D'Orsay graced the splendid scene  
Herculean chairmen bore the fair  
To routs and masquerades, and the yellow flare  
Of the link-boys' torches burned away the gloom  
Down Primates' Hill, to some Palladian room  
Where the rococo craftsmen set a foil  
For Gardiner, Clements, Ponsonby and Boyle,  
Spendthrift inheritors of the mean renown  
Of archiepiscopal rakes like Stone.  
Gone are their filigrane splendours: Palladio's door  
Unhinged; Tracton Apollo and his stuccodore  
Alike in turf. In the street today  
Poverty pullulates and the arts decay.  
Down the proud steps, from the panelled hall,  
The children scramble and the babies crawl.  
Their swarm enjoy the franchise of the street  
Skilled to avoid postprandial Benchers' feet  
And blind to the mellowed majesty of law  
Pursue their wonted games of hole and taw.'

**'Henrietta Street' C.P. Curran.<sup>1</sup>**

## Introduction: the best address in town

In the early years of the 1730s two major building projects were taking place in Dublin city, one in the public sphere, the other in the domestic arena. Both stood as very visible manifestations of the wealth and ambition of Ireland's governing elite. Both looked to the latest imported architectural models and fashionable tastes of London's beau monde and both involved the same close knit group of architects, builders, developers and occupants. The first of these was Edward Lovett Pearce's Parliament House at College Green, a pioneering and virtuoso exercise in neo-Palladian design, the other, Luke Gardiner's similarly pioneering domestic development at Henrietta Street – palatial scale *pieds-à-terre* built to house the most influential power brokers from church, military and state. These lofty dwelling houses were more than bricks and mortar, more than the judicious disposition of rooms, a finely finished facade or an elegant interior: they served as symbols of success and social status, as spaces for living in and the settings for life. Looking behind the red-brick facades of these once grand Georgian town houses at the people who populated these spaces we can still catch a glimpse of life when Henrietta Street was the best address in town.

### Situating Henrietta Street

Located on a broad elevated site in the north-east quarter of the city, Henrietta Street was ideally set in close proximity to the established residential core around Capel Street, and within easy reach of the city's principal places of business and pleasure. The Castle, the Tholsel and the Parliament were but a short carriage-ride away, while the legal enclave around Green Street could be reached by chair. The bowling green at Marlborough Street and later the pleasure gardens and rotunda rooms at the Lying-in Hospital drew crowds of pleasure seekers, while the many taverns and coffee houses which had sprung up around Bolton Street provided regular meeting places for Georgian men. Indeed, in the first half of the century the north side of the city had yet to be overshadowed by the south as hub of fashionable leisure.

In terms of architecture Henrietta Street holds a special place in the city's built heritage, as the earliest and most intact example of Dublin's Georgian terraces. Ambitiously large in scale, with neat red brick-fronts, regular rooflines above and carved stone door-cases below, these houses set the standard for

Dublin's domestic architecture for the century to come. The spacious layout of the street, which measures a broad 50ft between the wrought-iron railed areas that were set before the houses, ample stable lanes to the rear and a 'good road' and granite paving in front, established new levels of grandeur in the urban landscape. There were, of course, earlier examples of high-class building in Dublin. Some large mansion houses had been built on the Longford Estate, around Aungier Street and Longford Street in the second half of the seventeenth century, and Joshua Dawson's holdings adjacent to Trinity College included several generous buildings from the early years of the 1700s.<sup>2</sup> On the north-side of the city there were some ambitious domestic enterprises around Oxmanstown Green and Humphrey Jervis' estate toward the turn of the century – Richard Tighe's bowling green in Smithfield was pronounced 'the finest in Europe' in 1690, while Jervis' developments around the north quays would have a lasting impact on the cityscape.<sup>3</sup> His holdings around Capel Street and Jervis Street proved particularly popular among early eighteenth-century elites, and maps from the period show several very large houses fronting these thoroughfares. Of particular note was Speaker William Conolly's mansion house on the west-side of Capel Street, which no longer survives but appears to have been of some scale and pretension. Built about 1707, this enormous structure had pavilions that projected into the street in front, creating a shallow forecourt of sorts, and a large planted garden behind.<sup>4</sup> Little is known about the architecture of these houses, but in all likelihood they would have been built of brick, as opposed to the timber cagework houses which had predominated prior to the Great Fire of London in 1660. They may also have adopted the Dutch style gabled roofs and perhaps even the new sash windows which had been introduced into the city in the 1680s. It was the concentration of palatial-scale residences, however, and the wholesale adoption of new, imported building practices that broke new ground at Henrietta Street.

Although construction commenced in the 1720s Henrietta Street was built up piecemeal and the final house was not completed until nearly thirty years later. As such, these houses, which were built in three distinct phases, and employed a range of development practices, architecture models and construction techniques, form a microcosm of sorts, encapsulating the major developments of Dublin's domestic architecture during the first half of the eighteenth century. The impact of these imported practices would be felt through the city for the century to come, not only at Luke Gardiner's mid-century developments around Sackville Street and Mall, and indeed his grandson's expansion of the estate to Mountjoy Square and beyond, but also on the Pembroke Estate on the south side of the city, where the red-brick terraces at Merrion Square and the surrounding grid of streets would later over take their northern counterparts in fashion.

Ireland's leading Palladian architects, Sir Edward Lovett Pearce and Richard Castle have long been associated with the design of several of the early houses at Henrietta Street. In terms of style and calibre these works fit into their broader *oeuvres*, and the finely crafted interiors, in particular, speak of a skilled hand or hands in their execution. Both architects, it shall emerge, had close connections among the street's early residents, as well as influential circles on both sides of the Irish Sea. At the same time the pioneering structures at Henrietta Street, particularly the early group of houses built about 1730, exhibit some of the firmest instances of imported British influence, not only in the surviving facades and what can be discerned of the original layouts, but also in the elegant street setting and aspects of the development model employed. No. 9 Henrietta Street is an almost direct transcript of a known London model of less than a decade earlier, where as the unified treatment of the pair of houses at Nos. 11 & 12 Henrietta was precocious in its early adoption of British neo-Palladian ideals. Sometimes seen as provincial copying, this form of emulation was typical of this period, and can be found across all the major urban centres of the British Isles. The Henrietta Street houses, in fact, diverge from their sources in several small but significant ways, pointing up the sophistication of these borrowings in their response to local conditions and context. Indeed in terms of scale, it shall be seen, the Irish examples were larger, on average, than their London counterparts, a point which prompts a closer look at this intersection of imported and local practices. What is more, such emulation highlights the close cultural links between the two capitals in the early Georgian period and offers insights into the channels by which these models spread.

### **A house in town**

For the wealthy cosmopolitan set who also possessed country estates, a house in town fulfilled a myriad of functions, both public and private, physical and conceptual, often simultaneously. Practically speaking these houses provided convenient city bases for politicians and professionals, close to their places of business, where they could conduct their affairs after hours when parliament was sitting. At the same time these establishments served as suitable abodes from which to enjoy the delights of Dublin's social season, which ran through the winter months. From Michaelmas to St. Patrick's Day Irish high society would abandon their country estates for the pleasures of the city, and the seemingly never-ending round of social engagements. During this time these houses were intensely, if only periodically used, regularly hosting large-scale entertainments and overnight guests. The arrival of summer heats and the increased risk of disease, however, heralded the end to the season, and time for these peers and politicians to pack up their possessions and close

up their town residences until winter. In terms of physical use, these houses were densely packed, if only seasonally used, and as such room function was fluid and flexible. Similarly, there were few distinct boundaries between public and private space and rooms were adapted to serve dual functions. In a century where ‘show’ was essential and ‘taste’ was king these domestic spaces provided much more than mere shelter – they stood as very visible symbols of the wealth, status, and above all the fashionable taste of their occupants. The domestic household was the site of both social and political power in eighteenth-century elite society, and the grandly-scaled and sumptuously fitted out interiors served as the settings for hospitable display and social scheming, places to conduct business and the stages on which political intrigues, strategies and preferment played out.<sup>5</sup>

Second only to the Castle as a hub of elite power, this fashionable enclave became an important arena in which a close-knit and intricately connected group of the country’s leading power brokers came together, where peers rubbed shoulders with property developers, clerics with social climbers, and military men mixed with the leading-lights of the capital’s beau monde. In the first thirty years of its existence Henrietta Street was home to no less than six titled residents, two army generals, three archbishops, two speakers of the House of Commons and the Lord Chancellor of Ireland. Here, this distinguished group of neighbours formed influential and often far reaching networks, utilizing their lofty new town houses in their bid for advancement. Bonds of friendship, family ties and mutually advantageous alliances united many of these early residents, and cronyism was rife. As key players in the burgeoning associational culture they joined similar clubs and societies, from the Freemason’s to the Hellfire Club and the Society of *Dilettante*, and moved in the same social circles, promoting new forms of urban sociability among the Dublin’s Georgian elites. Yet beneath the convivial facade bitter rivalries and divisive political fault-lines ran deep, with these close-knit networks splintering off into smaller cliques and cohorts, all intent on furthering their individual agendas.

## **Power and Patronage**

In September 1752 Nathaniel Clements hosted a political gathering at his house at Henrietta Street. On the surface the scene was a common and convivial one: a distinguished group of elite males convened with a good deal of posturing, claret flowed in abundance and amidst this conspicuous consumption the lively conversation was peppered with frequent toasts to good health and honour. Yet on this occasion there was a

distinct undercurrent to the proceedings, as the company gathered round the table came from opposing sides of the political divide. This was the beginnings of a decade long debacle which raged through the corridors of government. Essentially a row between members Irish parliament and the British administration at Dublin Castle over the remittance of surplus Irish revenue to the Crown, the so-called the Money Bill Dispute was one of the most seismic political conflicts of the mid-century. Events came to a head in 1753 and as ever, much of the action was concentrated at Henrietta Street. Battle lines were drawn with John Ponsonby and the vociferous Archbishop George Stone leading the charge for the 'Castle' party and Henry Boyle, speaker of the Commons and his staunch ally Thomas Carter championing the 'patriots'. Neighbour was pitted against neighbour in support of the opposing factions, although some like Clements played a duplicitous part, while Luke Gardiner outwardly remained neutral, though no one was in any doubt about where his support lay. Who the ultimate victors were is hard to say. Ostensibly some, like John Maxwell, or indeed Boyle benefited from the exchange, emerging from the fray with a peerage, while others like Stone, and even Clements to a degree, were relegated to sidelines; none, however, came out unscathed.

What began as power struggle between rival parliamentary factions 'ended in open tumults in the theatres and streets of Dublin,'<sup>6</sup> and both the row and its aftershock had far-reaching effects on the political and cultural landscape of Georgian Ireland. It ripples could be felt in all circles, from members of parliament and their families, government officials on both sides of the Irish Sea, to the many beneficiaries of parliamentary boards and committees, not to mentioned the more tangential supports of the political machine. All stakeholders must take a side, such was the intertwined nature of power and patronage in Georgian society. The destruction of Thomas Sheridan's Smock Alley Theatre in 1754 by angry mob who were incensed by references to the dispute in a production Voltaire's *Mahomet* shows the potency of this politicised culture. This outbreak of violence was seemingly fuelled by inflammatory political toasts which had previously been made at the theatre's Beefsteak Club, where Thomas Sheridan was also the proprietor.<sup>7</sup> At Henrietta Street the close circles in which its residents moved must surely have made for some awkward meetings during this period. Imagine, for example, the necessary *froidueur* between Mrs Hannah Clements and her next door neighbour Mrs Elizabeth Ponsonby, women of a similar age and social circle, who would have been required to support their husband's public positions, even in the private sphere. Blood was thicker than water, and politics even infiltrated family life. Nathaniel Clements, in fact, was drawn into the debate on the side of the Patriot opposition, not because of his own political sensibilities but because his wife's family, the so called 'nine Gores,' who having previously backed Clements in parliament, called for his support.<sup>8</sup>

Patronage was a two way street. Defined as the power to give someone an important job or advantages in exchange for help or support, in the eighteenth century there was little distinction between different forms of patronage – whether political, social or indeed of the arts and culture, each went hand in hand to fulfil the same aims and ambitions. Such symbiosis between political and architectural patronage, in particular, runs throughout this book, colouring the lives of Henrietta Street's residents and the spaces they inhabited. One of the most controversial instances of this interconnection was the expulsion from parliament in 1753 of the surveyor general, the chief architect and engineer of the state, Arthur Jones Neville, MP for County Wexford. Ostensibly ousted because of his role in the related scandal surrounding the Barracks Board, in reality Neville was a convenient 'governmental' scapegoat in the Money Bill Dispute, scarified as a well known crony or 'creature' of the Lord Lieutenant and the 'Castle' cohort, who was seen to have reaped little too much benefit from this official line of patronage. The leaders of the opposing, patriot, contingent utilised their considerable powers of patronage to drum up support against Neville, with Lord Kildare and his family apparently going 'from house to house,' to 'put all their friendship upon carrying this point.'<sup>9</sup>

Smaller tremors the aftermath of this event could be felt across Dublin's building industry. One of the direct consequences of the Money Bill Dispute was the multitude of public works which followed, with projects like the building of the new West Front and Parliament Square at Trinity College being undertaken at exchequer's expense. This can be seen as a form of rebellion on the part of Irish Parliament, which by using up any future surplus revenues on such state-funded projects, rather than remit them to Britain, was effectively thumbing its nose at the British administration. As Teller of the Exchequer Nathaniel Clements would have played a leading role in distributing these surplus funds.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, he and his allies were connected to several of the beneficiaries of these works, including such politically well-connected building practitioners as John Magill, and the Darleys, who also worked on Luke Gardiner's property developments around Sackville Street during the period in question.

Returning to the aforementioned occasion at the Clementses, it did not go off smoothly. Nathaniel Clements, we will see, got called-out by Archbishop Stone for speaking out of turn and because of his high-profile public office came under censor from the administration for disrespectful 'conversation and behaviour in private company.'<sup>11</sup>

## **Repopulating the Georgian street**

This volume brings together a rich collection of biographical accounts of Henrietta Street's first residents, in which a fascinating array of characters emerge. From social climbers like the Clementses and the Grahams, intent on establishing themselves on a broader stage, to politically-minded clerics like Archbishops Boulter and Stone, who regularly courted controversy for their unpatriotic views, to ageing military men and senior statesmen such as Generals St George and General Molesworth, Henry Boyle and John Maxwell, who despite their years pursued the ambitious agendas of much younger men, not to mention such notorious figures as Nicholas Loftus and his neighbour the libertine Lord Kingsborough, whose dissolute lifestyles brought scandal right to the doors of Henrietta Street. Drawn here by its social cache, this seemingly disparate group of individuals were not simply connected because they chose to live on the same street, but rather were bound together by kinship, friendship and professional ties. In exploring the intricate lines of connection between this close-knit group of neighbours, and the influential networks they moved in on both sides of the Irish Sea a fuller portrait of the street's social history emerges; one which shows the sophistication and cosmopolitan nature of these supposedly provincial elites and their importance as conduits in the spread of culture and polite taste between the two kingdoms. By weaving this social narrative around the framework of the buildings and pioneering architectural development of the street, in repopulating the houses with their original occupants and offering a window into the lives carried on within, it breathes life, once more, into the eighteenth century street.

## **Losses, changes and omissions**

The Picture is far from complete and much has been lost to time. The Primate's house was replaced by the King's Inns Library in 1824, without any visual record taken. Extensive changes to the fabric of Nos. 11 & 12 Henrietta Street in the late eighteenth century altered the original layout beyond recognition, and only an idea of the unified facade design can be reconstructed. The subdivision of the large house at Nos. 5-6 Henrietta Street into two separate residences in the nineteenth century resulted in the loss of many of the original internal features, including what must have been a magnificent Portland Stone stair. Other interior schemes, such as the panelled stair hall at No. 7 Henrietta Street, survive but in a much diminished state, and only hint at the original splendour. Financial and other documentary records relating to the building of the street are thin on the ground. There is still debate as to when the actual development began, and, indeed, when the final house was complete, and although a number of well-known architects are associated with the

earliest buildings at Henrietta Street, the craftsmen and master-builders responsible for the construction and decoration of the majority of houses remain largely anonymous, leaving decided holes in our picture of the street's physical creation. Similarly, although surviving fabrics allow us to recreate a sense of how these spaces were laid out and functioned, none of the original furniture or fittings remain, and only one inventory of household goods, taken at No. 10 Henrietta Street in the 1770s, survives.

Perhaps the most significant omissions relate to the residents. Despite a much more equal balance in reality women make only an occasional appearance in the following accounts. This male dominated affair is the result of a lack of evidence rather than lack of interest. There is much work still to be done to draw Henrietta Street's female occupants out of the shadows. Of the streets' noble heiresses, Lady Henrietta Boyle, Lady Alice Moore, Hon. Mary Granville and Hon. Anne Stewart, women who brought fortune and the fame of their good name, little trace remains. Indeed in the case of the latter three women not even a portrait or likeness survives, while such prominent society hostesses as Hannah Gore and Eleanor FitzGerald, whose talents and good taste were lauded by contemporaries, make only rare appearance in their husband's narratives. At this time married women's names did not appear on leases or tradesmen's bills, even though they may well have been the commissioning agent, nor indeed would any respectable woman be mentioned in the public press, except in announcements of births, marriages and deaths.<sup>12</sup> The intimate and everyday events of female life would of course have been closely chronicled in letters and diaries, but few of these have been uncovered to delineate their experience. Yet, in the eighteenth century these wives, mothers, and daughters played an integral and often very visible role in the running of elite households, with the mistress of the house successfully negotiating the blurred boundaries between the private sphere and the public world of their husbands. The same can be said of the scores of servants who lived and worked in these houses. Although they made up even greater numbers than their elite employers these domestic retainers are shadowy figures, seldom mentioned in documentary sources, and largely overlooked in anecdotal accounts, their stories have been relegated to the margins of history.

'Grand, bare and somewhat grim,' the centuries have wrought great changes at Henrietta Street.<sup>13</sup> The social make up of the street has altered considerably through the ages, reflecting the broader societal changes at play, transforming the elite single-family homes of the eighteenth century into commercial offices and legal premises, and then multiple-occupancy tenements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, though there is a renewed vigour to the street, the passage of time is much in evidence. Of the thirteen surviving houses, several show a somewhat shabby face to the world, and the marks of their changing inhabitants are keenly felt inside. While these layers of history do and must remain, as the tricentenary of

Henrietta Street approaches, the importance of looking back to the street's origins and gaining a greater understanding of the people who shaped its early history comes to the fore. By drawing on the past, we can better understand the present, and the place of Henrietta Street as Dublin's premier Georgian Street.

## Chapter Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Hand-typed poem, with manuscript corrections by C.P. Curran, date and current location unknown. C.P. Curran Research Notebooks are preserved in IAA 0077/006.29.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Usher, 'Domestic architecture, the old city, and the suburban challenge, c.1660-1700,' in Casey (ed.), *The eighteenth-century Dublin town house: form function and finance* (Dublin, 2010), pp 59-72.

<sup>3</sup> Brendan Twomey, 'Financing speculative property development in the early eighteenth century, in Casey (ed.), *The eighteenth-century Dublin town house*, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Usher, 'Domestic architecture', pp 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Tague, *Women of quality: accepting and contesting ideals of femininity in England, 1690-1760* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp 99-100. Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven, CT, 2004), p. 82. Rachel Stewart, *The town house in Georgian London* (New Haven, CT, 2009), p. 192; Amanda Vickery, *Behind closed doors: at home in Georgian England* (London, 2009), pp 18, 93-94, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Welch, *The list of Queen's Scholars of St Peter's College, Westminster: admitted on that foundation since 1663* (London, 1852), p. 241.

<sup>7</sup> Martyn Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (New York, 2005 ) p. 23; Eamon O'Flaherty, 'The new Smock Alley Theatre,' *History Ireland*, 5:20 ( Sept/Oct 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Malcomson, *Nathaniel Clements: politics, fashion and architecture in mid-eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2015), p. 8

<sup>9</sup> Edward McParland, *Public Architecture in Ireland 1680-1760* (New Haven & London, 2001), pp 135-6.

<sup>10</sup> Malcomson, *Nathaniel Clements: politics, fashion and architecture*, p.8; idem, Anthony Malcomson, *Nathaniel Clements: government and governing elite in Ireland* (Dublin, 2005) pp 227-30, 313-18.

<sup>11</sup> PRONI T3019/1975, 21 Sept. 1752, Sackville to Wilmot.

<sup>12</sup> Vickery, *Behind closed doors*, pp 107, 125, 130-131.

<sup>13</sup> Christine Casey, *Dublin: the city within the Grand and Royal Canals and the Circular Road with the Phoenix Park* (New Haven & London: 2005), p. 193.