

## Protestant Dublin, 1660-1760: Architecture and Iconography

**Review Number:** 1278

**Publish date:** Thursday, 28 June, 2012

**Author:** Robin Usher

**ISBN:** 9780230223899

**Date of Publication:** 2012

**Price:** £55.00

**Pages:** 264pp.

**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:** Basingstoke

**Reviewer:** John Gibney

Robin Usher's *Protestant Dublin* sets out its stall from the beginning: it is a study of symbolic and iconographic landscape of Dublin, the essential purpose of which is to explore 'how the physical environment conveyed meanings relating [sic] to institutional authority' (p. 3). The title leaves no doubt as to the location of the physical environment, and the nature of the authority.

One of the most well-known and well-worn faces that the Irish capital has presented to the world is its 18th-century urban fabric: 'Georgian' Dublin. If one were to compare the first extant map of Dublin – that of John Speed, published in 1612 – with the best-known – John Rocque's, published in 1756 – it would be strikingly obvious that in the 142 years between them, medieval Dublin was stripped away and replaced by a streetplan that is still largely intact as the city underwent a remarkable transformation. Dublin was reconfigured by the Anglican aristocracy usually described as the 'Ascendancy'. The subject of Usher's book is the manner in which this Protestant aristocracy constructed a Protestant capital city.

Usher's starting point is the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. His terminal date is 1760, just after the establishment of the Wide Streets Commission that developed much of the streetscape that survives in central Dublin. The timeframe makes sense. After the Restoration Dublin experienced an unprecedented demographic and physical expansion that easily outstripped that of the rest of the country; estimates of Dublin's population in the early to mid 17th century vary, but by 1700 it had perhaps as many as 60,000 inhabitants. Dublin was traditionally a hub for administration, education, finance, trade and, inevitably, politics. It now became a magnet for the Protestant elite who had benefited from the upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s, and whose descendents became the gentry of the 18th century.

The physical fabric of the city changed dramatically in the decades after the Restoration, with the creation of St Stephen's Green and the viceregal demesne in the Phoenix Park, along with the development of new and increasingly prestigious residential areas north and south of the River Liffey. By the 1730s Dublin had also acquired a number of significant public buildings: the Royal Hospital at Kildmainham (1680–4), the Royal Barracks (now the National Museum Collins Barracks, and at the time of its completion in 1710 the largest barracks in Europe), the reconstructed Dublin Castle, the 'Old Library' of Trinity College Dublin (1712–32) and above all Edward Lovett Pearce's grandiose Parliament House (1729–31). Such buildings were

expressions of confidence and power, and while 18th-century Dublin was a key centre for cultural life in a number of spheres, it was defined by the fact that it was by then, in large part, an aristocratic city. 'Ireland', according to Usher, 'was a country whose built environment (especially in Dublin) was moulded by anglicised elites' (pp. 7–8); but these were also Protestant elites, and Dublin was to be reworked into what was, officially, a Protestant capital city.

The first chapter is largely concerned with how royal (and Protestant) authority was embedded in the streetscape in the years after 1660. Usher is alert to the importance of civic ritual in the official life of the city (such as the riding of the franchises, the symbolic reaffirming of the city council's authority by travelling around the municipal boundaries). However, the architecture and streetscape of Dublin may not have been up to the task of maximising the impact of these public ceremonials. This was especially true of traditional forums of royal power, such as the grim and ramshackle edifice of the castle (which, after all, housed the viceregal court). Like earlier scholars such as Maurice Craig and J. C. Beckett, Usher recognises the importance of the towering figure of James Butler, duke of Ormond, who served as viceroy after the restoration and who was well aware of the value of such pageantry. Official ceremonies (such as processions, and the raucous celebrations that could accompany them) often used the castle as a focal point, and in doing so 'dragged it ... into the iconographic web of the greater urban area' (p. 25). In other words, the mere presence of the castle, with its connotations of power, could count for as much as any building that might be deliberately designed to reflect authority. The Phoenix Park, for instance, was another symbol of authority (and brainchild of Ormond); but it was, and still is, a park, rather than a consciously crafted building. The fact that it was there at all got the message across. The first new public building to be erected in Dublin after the restoration was the massive edifice of William Robinson's Royal Hospital (1680–4), famously established as a home for old soldiers along the lines of Les Invalides in Paris. But in symbolic terms this was a subtle monument to Ormond (whose arms adorn the building) above all else. These two related (and adjacent) projects suggest that 'the Butlers had cast a net of progress and civility over the physical and cultural landscapes of Dublin and Ireland' (p. 30).

Ormond's authority was not, however, the same as the authority of either monarch or established church. Other centres of power spoke to other meanings. Chichester House, the seat of the Irish parliament, was a somewhat underwhelming structure during this period: 'splendour belonged elsewhere' (p. 32). One implication to be drawn from this was of Dublin's (and Ireland's) subordination to England. Dublin Corporation, on the other hand, was located in the Tholsel, at the heart of the medieval core of the city. Here was another centre of power imbued with a complex iconography drawn from, and indicative of, the specifics of Dublin's past. There was also a strictly functional element to the reworking of the official streetscape that took place in this period. The renovation and reconstruction of Dublin's churches in the later 17th century was partly aimed at reflecting new 'administrative demands' on the established church. But again, meanings could be invested in particular buildings regardless of any obvious aesthetic value or symbolic purpose. The two medieval cathedrals of Christ Church and St Patrick's, for instance, were seen as quite dilapidated, but retained their prestige in civic terms (and as burial sites).

The statues of monarchs erected in Dublin after 1660 also illustrate the manner in which meaning could be imposed on the streetscape. They were generally erected by the 'municipality', and conformed to established models and conventions. Grinling Gibbons' statue of William III – William of Orange – on College Green, just outside the parliament house, was the most significant of all, and its unveiling in 1701 was accompanied by fervent and enthusiastic celebrations. The statue was actually based on a statue of Charles II at Windsor, but the subject and its location were more important than its style. The later statues of George I (on Essex Bridge, near the centre of commerce and the 18th-century port) and George II (in St Stephen's Green, near the centre of style), were far less prominent in symbolic terms: a revealing indication of the priorities of Protestant Dublin. 'The Protestantism of the statues lay in the perceived merits of the individuals they depicted' (p. 128). By that criterion, William III was undoubtedly more significant than his Hanoverian successors: here was the defender of a Protestant constitution conveniently located outside the building that most obviously embodied Protestant 'ascendancy' (a meaning subtly reaffirmed by the revisionism of Francis Wheatley's famous painting of 1780). Yet there was nothing on either the statue or the parliament

house that reflected this in and of itself. Once again, presence was enough; at least until 1929, when it was destroyed by a republican bomb. And even that was not the first protest registered against the statue (though it was certainly the last): in 1710 it had been defaced by Trinity students who were presumably hostile to ‘revolution principles’.

The role of iconography in urban geography has been recognised in relation to other cities and cultures. But, according to Usher, a key problem in studies of contested iconography is an emphasis on ‘implantation and destruction’; on events like the construction and destruction of the statue of William. Consequently, ‘the period in between, and the possibility of an earlier lack of controversy, are seldom considered’ (p. 5). In other words, in the course of their existence, what culture (or cultures) do these symbols actually speak to, and what do they say? The statue of William had a greater significance in Dublin than its Hanoverian counterparts precisely because he was venerated as the deliverer of Protestant Ireland, and Usher is right to point out that there is more to such statues than simply the fact of their eventual destruction.

Public statuary is dealt with in chapter three and acts as a bridge between the 17th and 18th centuries. The fourth chapter, on ‘architectures of authority’, is essentially a continuation of the first. Where buildings such as the castle dominated chapter one, iconic buildings such as the Parliament House – which could be a focal point for protest as well as Protestant confidence – were naturally of more importance after 1700. Commercial power was reflected in the construction of the Royal Exchange (now City Hall) in the 1770s and James Gandon’s Customs House thereafter. The final chapter concerns itself with another obvious (if less grandiose) manifestation of Dublin’s new role as Protestant capital city: the creation of a city for Protestant residents, with the development of St Stephen’s Green south of the Liffey in the 1660s, and the estates laid out by figures such as Humphrey Jervis and Luke Gardiner north of the river.

Usher is at pains to avoid interpreting the symbolic landscape of Dublin in colonial or imperialist terms; the fact that the authority that was to be embedded in the streetscape was Protestant is largely incidental, as it took forms that were by no means unusual in British and continental terms. A ‘colonial’ paradigm is, in Usher’s view, too simplistic; his emphasis is on Dublin’s role as a ‘Protestant’ city, rather than an imperial one. Yet this is one instance when his grasp of nuance seems to slip. It is true, as he himself seems to recognise, that a paradigm of colonialism is not automatically applicable to every aspect of Irish history. It is, however, applicable to some elements of that history, and conquest and colonisation were fundamental aspects of the Irish historical experience from the middle of the 16th century to the end of the 17th. And the colonial community that emerged in this era was Protestant in composition. Usher is wary that such an emphasis can lead to a simple adversarial dichotomy between coloniser and colonised, and of the crude reductionism that can arise from this. But the interpretive model of colonialism is not antithetical to the historical complexity of Protestant Ireland, as revealed by scholars such as Toby Barnard, David Dickson, Sean Connolly, and Jacqueline Hill (all of whom are name-checked here).

Usher makes a very strong case that Dublin’s iconography, while essentially Protestant, simply drew its aesthetic and its practical functions from a range of British and European sources. It was not automatically intended as some kind of cumulative message to the vanquished from the victor. But it did not have to present such a message: by 1660 the ‘Protestant (and wholly Anglican) body politic’ (p. 8) of Ireland had largely been confirmed in their position and status. That confirmation became definitive after the Jacobite-Williamite War of 1689–91, and facts on the ground surely spoke for themselves, irrespective of the confidence or insecurity of the Protestant elites who were preoccupied with reconstructing Dublin. It is a contextual quibble that does not materially alter the substance of the book. But given that Usher does – rightly – suggest comparisons with British and European cities, and ends with an imprecation for further research, one could equally suggest that a comparative framework for Dublin should include urban areas in locations that might be recognised more explicitly as British colonies: Boston or Philadelphia come to mind, not to mention the cities scattered across the globe by other European empires.

Yet this is a relatively minor issue, and points towards another day’s work rather than the book under review. *Protestant Dublin* is an erudite, scholarly and shrewd work. It is also very well written, being

surprisingly lively and readable. Usher takes Protestant Ireland on its own terms, has scoured a wide range of primary and secondary sources, weaves his material into an impressive whole, and displays a notable alertness to subtlety and nuance as he does so. While his focus is on the physical framework of the city, he does not exclude social, economic, and political history: all make an appearance as required, and in lieu of any systematic account of (admittedly obscure) public opinion, the book is interspersed with a running commentary culled from popular ballads and broadsides. Amongst other things, *Protestant Dublin* is an extremely useful compendium of architectural and social detail, with a good balance of anecdote and argument. It is very well illustrated, with 85 black and white images (many taken by the author) in 206 pages of text. The fact that Usher manages to fuse a wealth of fragmented detail into a coherent study makes *Protestant Dublin* a notable contribution to the underworked field of Irish cultural history, and, given that 18th-century Dublin was one of the largest cities in Europe, it is surely also a notable contribution to urban history. All in all, this book is a most impressive achievement.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to respond.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1278>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/22697>