

The Oratory, Dun Laoghaire – A Treasure of Celtic Art

Dear Neighbours and, especially, Belgian friends,

Though I live in Dun Laoghaire for almost two years I was intrigued when, recently, my genial neighbour Catherine Cox told me about a nearby artistic gem, the Peace Oratory (on Library Road). This spectacular riot of Celtic revival art was painted on the walls and ceiling of a tiny, secluded oratory on the grounds of the old Dominican girls' school at Dun Laoghaire by a teaching nun, Sister Concepta Lynch, of a Dublin artistic family. In addition to all her other responsibilities she devoted four hours every day over the last sixteen years of her life to a prodigious task.

The Oratory itself is a tiny haven of peace erected on school grounds in 1919 in memory of those who died in the carnage of WWI. The impetus to the murals originated when the inhabitants of a town in Flanders, Poperinghe, beside the French border and near Ieper (Ypres in French), wished to commemorate an estimated 500 youths of the Irish Guards, mainly from the Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire after 1920) Christian Brothers school, killed fighting nearby. (Dun Laoghaire local historian Sean Downes (1), who has visited the Flanders battlefields, believes the high rate of casualties was as a result of a surprise German gas attack on the Dublin regiment.) According to local historian Veronica Heywood (2) the town, which was used as a billet by the British army, donated a Sacred Heart figure of Christ from their local church to the Brothers' school since Irish troops, on relief from front line duty, used worship there. It was even carried out towards the trenches where the D-L boys had perished and, at the war's end, gratefully donated to the Brothers' school. But it arrived during the War of Independence when the national mood music now favoured the dead and executed of the 1916 Easter Rebellion and those espousing separation from imperial government, rather than the unfortunate volunteers of 1914, many of whom died in support of Home Rule in WWI, and attired in then less-than-fashionable British Army uniforms. Since the nearby Dominican sisters has erected the oratory to peace between all war protagonists in the school grounds it was considered appropriate that the elegant statue be offered to them to install as a centre piece. Poignantly, many of the victims had attended the infants section of the Dominican school before transferring to the Brothers.

Sr Concepta, nee Bridget (Lilly) Lynch, was aged just twenty-two and an orphan when she left the family art business in Dublin (the Grafton Street studio had just burned down) and entered the then enclosed order. As a teacher of art, crafts and music (and being a talented musician) the eclectic lady started to decorate the surrounds of the altar on which the statue had been placed, continuing until almost all the tiny building was enveloped with her extraordinary mural artwork. Her unique style was inspired by the technique her father Thomas had developed, the Lynch method of Celtic art, influenced by the golden age of Hiberno-Celtic non-representational art on many artifacts in the National Museum and at Monasterboice, and by the Book of Kells in Trinity College Library, a masterpiece of illustration and design with its spectacular Christian iconography, interlacing knots and curves, Celtic calligraphy, zoomorphic designs and patterns, interwoven with depiction of man and beast. Her style also includes influences of Moorish, Coptic and of Byzantine art and iconography, especially a magnificent Greco-Byzantine cross as a centerpiece in one panel, appropriate as this form of cross was the motif logo of the Eucharistic Congress held in Dublin in 1932. Evidence of her innate joie de vivre is shown where she depicts a couple of monks in the scriptorium prankishly pulling each other's beard. But she integrated all these influences with her own unique, sui generis inspiration, especially as her work receded from the immediate surrounds of the conventional Catholic styling of the plaster-cast statue.

At first sight of the good sister's awe-inspiring chef-d'oeuvre I must admit I was quite blown away. Entering the tiny oratory is reminiscent of entering an Egyptian early dynasty funerary chamber in

the Valley of the Kings, with sarcophagus replaced by the statue of the Sacred Heart, and pharaonic wall art and hieroglyphics by vibrantly-coloured Celtic designs and iconography – of the Sister Concepta original school. The serene beauty of the oratory could fit proudly into a side chapel of that magnificent repository of early Renaissance art, the Dominican Santa Maria Novella in Florence, or within the extravagantly fresco-ed halls of the old Palazzo Publico in Sienna. With its ceiling decorated by Sr Concepta during her terminal illness, one recalls the similar exertions and creative passion of Michelangelo in the Sistine chapel. This final stage must have been especially demanding for the Sister in frail health as it would have involved mounting scaffolding and painting on her back. I provides us with an insight into her method of sketching and stenciling out of the original forms. Though she probably intended it remain lighter than the walls and frieze its relative brightness helps light up the murals below. Still, to the uninitiated it does not appear incomplete and one can only surmise at her heroic final efforts. The oratory may be tiny but the work of art is prodigious.

The vivid colours of the murals, never retouched, are as lively now as when she was painting them. But as an enclosed-order-sister she could not leave the convent and, with very limited funding from friends and admirers to buy the necessary pigments, depended on her faithful pupils, imbued as they were with her infectious sense of artistic enthusiasm, to pick up regular household paint, suffused as it then was with lead, from the local hardware store. When she required a specific colouring she instructed the young ladies to get the hardware supplier to mix colours to meet her specific requirements. Lacking funds she could not resort to gold-leaf as did the Byzantines, so she devised a special preparation to depict their style of gold colouring. Our guide Ms Liz Pilkington showed us where she allowed her young lady assistants to fill in some designs with a little dot each. It must have been a great feeling of participation for them to realise they had personally contributed to the masterpiece, no matter how small their contribution. One wonders if they occasionally return, with their own children or grandchildren, to point out proudly where they had left their individual mark.

The Oratory is illuminated by some interior lighting but also by some external daylight filtering through seven gorgeous stained glass windows by the Harry Clarke studio, Dublin. These were donated by admirers and grieving relatives of local WWI fatalities. The windows reach the summit of such artistry, and perfectly complement the exuberance of the mural artwork. A number depict the Holy Family; one in particular the traditional Virgin and Child scene, though the execution in stained glass appears even more exquisite than the celebrated Maesta fresco masterpieces in Sienna by Duccio and Martini, especially the wistful, cherubic face of the child Jesus. Master Clarke resorted to a degree of artistic license, no doubt agreeable to the good sisters, in depicting St. Dominic in the company of the Mother and Infant (3).

The historic roll-call of major women painters is limited due to obscurantism and sexist discrimination; they were either discouraged or prevented from giving expression to their latent talents and potential. For which the world of art and culture is the poorer. Of the few who succeeded many were the daughters of artists and had access to father's bottega (Artemesia Gentileschi, Safonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, the ladies who wove the Bayeux tapestry, or the more local and recent exemplar, Imogen Stuart) in the pre-modern studio era when an important task in a workshop was the preparation and mixing of pigments. Since an entrenched misogynistic culture barred the entry of women to the bottegas, and prejudice commissioning from their works, we should be all the more grateful to the superiors of Sr Concepta who gave her the latitude to practice her art. Among the pantheon of great artist ladies one should surely consider including Concepta Lynch.

Tragically, the inhalation of lead paint worked its deleterious effects on Sr Concepta who died prematurely in 1939, labouring with courage and resilience against inexorably deteriorating health to complete the work on the ceiling. Fortunately for Irish art and the borough of Dun Laoghaire, this enchanting artistic gem was not bulldozed with the rest of the school when it was sold off to a

shopping arcade developer during the late 1980s. The country and art lovers worldwide must remain ever grateful to Sr Concepta's superior, Mother Mary Lyons, who allowed and encouraged her contribution to the national patrimony earlier on. We should be equally grateful to those motivated and enlightened locals, including Ms Heywood and a senior official of the National Gallery, with support of the then Minister for Culture (now President) Michael D. Higgins, and the EU Cultural Directorate who assured her exquisite legacy survived. It is now protected, covered by a surrounding architectural shell designed by the OPW (Office of Public Works) – which has itself appropriately won some design awards. Situated within an idyllic little Peace Park, it is air-conditioned to prevent the condensed breaths of visitors from damaging the murals. To this end no more than 15 visitors are allowed to enter the chamber during each hourly visit – so it is important to arrive some minutes before the designated hour.

If interested one can Google ‘the Oratory, Dun Laoghaire’ to check details of opening hours and view some professional photographs – which should whet one's appetite for this three-dimensional Book of Kells set within a palpable aura of old Dominican tranquility. An illustrated guide to the Oratory (3) has been published by the Sisters of the Dominican Convent, Dun Laoghaire (though, regretfully, it seems to be out of publication). The two guides when I visited were part of a roster of dedicated guides working for the Summer Heritage Program of Dun Laoghaire and Rathdown CoCo and were most informative and helpful. I hope I have correctly recalled some of the history as outlined by my inspiring guide Ms Pilkington and officials in the local history section of the DLRCoCo Lexicon (4).

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September 2017

- (1) Interview with Mr Sean Downes of the Local Studies Section, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council dlr Lexicon, 30/08/2017.
- (2) Heywood, V, “The Celtic Oratory”, Genealogical Society of Ireland Journal, Vol. 13 (2012).
- (3) The celebrated Renaissance artist, and Dominican, Fra Angelico resorted to similar artifice when he depicted the ubiquitous St. Dominic hovering in the background both at the Annunciation and the Crucifixion in his frescoes in the Museum of San Marco in Florence.
- (4) Dominican Sisters, Dun Laoghaire, “A Shrine of Celtic Art, the Oratory of the S.H. Dominican Convent, Dun Laoghaire”, with introduction by Prof. Etienne Rynne, CJ Fallon, Palmerstown, Dublin 2008.
- (5) I wish to acknowledge assistance from MM Nigel Curtin and Sean Downes from the Local Studies Collection, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Library Service, dlr Lexicon, in preparing this note. The enhanced number of guided tours of the Oratory recently comprised one of over 30 events organised as part of “Summer of Heritage 2017” by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown CoCo, coordinated by James O'Sullivan.