

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 erudite 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 (only to be let down later by London, especially the House of Lords), and attired in then less-than-fashionable British Army uniforms. Among those whose loyalties were conflicted by the abrupt change of mood and poisoned polemic of the day (3) were the intrepid and resolute Antarctic explorer Tom Crean who hid his British Merchant Naval uniform on return to his Kerry family home in the early 1920s, the poet Tom Kettle, killed during the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and whose solitary statue in St. Stephen's Green fails to record that he was both an Irish Volunteer and British Officer, and the Co. Meath poet Francis Ledwidge, he of

He shall not hear the bittern cry, / In the wild sky, where he is lain, / Nor voices of the sweeter birds / Above the wailing of the rain.

Since the nearby Dominican sisters had erected the oratory to peace between all war protagonists in the school grounds it was considered appropriate that the statue be offered to them to install as a centre piece. (And they were obviously endowed with a greater degree of intestinal fortitude those factious times than other potential recipients.) 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 and nurtured by the technique her father Thomas had developed, the Lynch method of Celtic art. This was mainly 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 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 *sui generis* school. The transcendent beauty of the oratory is such it 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 frescoed 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, incomplete ceiling stage must have been especially demanding for the indomitable Sister in frail health as it would have involved mounting scaffolding and painting on her back. It 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 as creative oeuvre 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* masterpieces in Sienna, the Duccio fresco and Martini altarpiece, especially the wistful, cherubic face of the child Jesus which is even more animated than that achieved by the masters of similar scenes, Correggio and Raphael. 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 (4).

The historic roll-call of major women painters is limited due to patriarchal obscurantism and sexist discrimination; they were either discouraged or prevented from giving expression to their latent talents and potential. For which the world posterity of art and culture is the poorer (5). Of the few who succeeded many were the daughters of artists such as Artemesia Gentileschi and Lavinia Fontana who had access to their father's *bottega* in the pre-modern-studio era when an important

task in a workshop was the preparation and mixing of pigments, a task magnanimously allowed to women. (Further evidence of the innate talents of women artists is provided by the ladies who embroidered the Bayeux tapestry and the few surviving gems of English pre-Reformation hierarchical vestments, and such recent exemplars as Evie Hone, Wilhemena Geddes and Imogen Stuart.) Since an entrenched misogynistic culture barred the entry of women to the bottegas except as assistants, and prejudice commissioning of 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 unique intellectual and imaginative 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 (6) has been published by the Sisters of the Dominican Convent, Dun Laoghaire (though, regrettably, 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 (7).

Brendan Cardiff

Honeypark

Dun Laoghaire,

November 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 location of Kettle's grave was lost, though his name is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial and is included on the Island of Ireland Peace Memorial promoted by FG TD

Paddy Harte and Unionist Glenn Barr and opened in Messines, Belgium in 1998 by Queen Elizabeth, President McAleese and the King of Belgium. He happened to be in Belgium in 1914 and, witnessing the brutality of the German invasion, decided it was impossible not to be with Belgium in that conflict and to stay passive. He wrote that Germany had thrown a well-considered challenge to all the deepest forces of our civilisation. Considering the suffering of the Belgian civilian population he considered that Ireland could not remain neutral, as if one were to counsel a Christian to stand neutral in the judgment between Nero and St. Peter. Neutrality is already a decision, a decision of adherence to the evil side. Writing to his daughter Betty in September 1916 he described his objective as an Irish patriot in fighting on the British side,

So here, while the mad guns curse overhead, / And tired men sigh, with mud for couch and floor, / Know that we fools, now the foolish dead, / Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor, / But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed, / And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

In her introduction to Alice Curtayne's life of Francis Ledwidge (New Island Books, 1998) novelist Jennifer Johnston cites the poet as writing, "I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions"

- (4) 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.
- (5) UCD art and painting historian Carla Briggs is eloquent in recording the contribution of women artists historically and the impediments put in their way
- (6) 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.
- (7) 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.