

London. 11. 7th Dec 1777.

Dr Sir

it is now a month pass'd that I answer'd your's dat'd
 from the 5th Nov^r last, but having receiv'd no answer, fear that
 my letter did not come to you as I have put your first direction
 on it, I have been expressly busy else. you would now be
 in possession of your pictures, they will as I think be finish'd
 at Xmas next and I hope you will find I have treated
 you as an artist, they are 2 ft. 6. inches wide & 1 ft. 10 inch
 high. morning & evening with figures & cattle, the price is as
 Mr Picot has mark'd in this letter to you Sir. 40[£] 45^l.
 or forty quineas. both. I have the pleasur to send you in
 this the prints you desir'd of me, and when you will have
 receiv'd your pictures shall be very happy to hear
 from you that they are to your liking, if any gentl^l
 should per chance ask the price of them I begg to
 tell them to be 30 quineas each as it is the price I
 generally have for picture finish'd and of this size
 I am Dr Sir your most obedient Servant
 De Aurtherborey

‘I have treated you as an artist’: a letter from Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg to Jonathan Fisher

WILLIAM LAFFAN AND BRENDAN ROONEY

INFORMAL CONTACTS BETWEEN ARTISTS TEND TO LEAVE LITTLE TRACE ON THE HISTORICAL record but can be vital catalysts in the transmission of imagery and ideas. That the ‘Dublin Group’ of landscape painters in the 1760s and 1770s was becoming increasingly part of the London and European mainstream was attributable in large part to the presence of important works in private collections and to the circulation of prints. The process by which this happened has always been difficult to quantify, but one small episode sheds some light on how artists in Dublin were connected with the artistic practice of London, and how artists could be each other’s customers, buying pictures from each other, painting each other’s portraits, and promoting their international colleagues at home. Olivier Lefevre’s monumental catalogue raisonné of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740-1812), published in 2012, succeeded brilliantly in its aim of re-establishing the artist’s critical reputation, which had plunged dramatically after his death.¹ Lefevre shows de Loutherbourg to have been among the most cosmopolitan of artists, and one adept at playing the art market of his day. Both qualities are further emphasised in a letter by the artist that has emerged since, which concerns a commission that de Loutherbourg received for two pictures from his fellow landscape painter, the Dublin artist Jonathan Fisher. Investigating this letter and its context has also allowed for the reattribution to de Loutherbourg of a painting in the National Gallery of Ireland, and has revealed new biographical information on Fisher himself.

In his letter of 2nd October 1777 (Plates 1, 2), de Loutherbourg excuses the delay in finishing Fisher’s commission: ‘I have been extremely busy else you would now be in possession of your pictures, they will as I think be finished at Xmas next and I hope [*sic*] you will find I have treated you as an artist.’ He goes on to describe the pictures: ‘they

1 – Letter from Phillipe-Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740-1812) to Jonathan Fisher (1735-1809)
(private collection)



2 – Verso of Plate 1

are 2 ft 6 inches wide & 1 ft 10 inches high morning & evening with figures and cattle’, and specifies the price for the pair as £40 40s, or forty guineas. This figure had evidently been agreed in an earlier letter to Fisher from a ‘Mr Picot’, no doubt the French-born, but London-based, engraver and print-seller, Victor Marie Picot (1744-1802), who is likely to have introduced de Louthembourg and Fisher as he had produced prints after both artists: in 1776 (the year before the letter), Picot engraved de Louthembourg’s *Smugglers on the English Coast*, while in 1770 he had engraved Fisher’s *View of Sullivan’s Cascade* and exhibited a copy of it at the Society of Artists in Ireland.² The two paintings were not Fisher’s only purchase in this transaction, as ‘the prints you desired of me’ (of unspecified authorship) also accompanied de Louthembourg’s letter.

As de Louthembourg is keen to emphasise, Fisher was getting his pictures at a discounted price. In an exchange between two of Fisher’s compatriots in spring 1766, James Barry noted to George Barret that de Louthembourg (and Claude Joseph Vernet) charged ‘exceeding great prices for their pictures’.³ Some fifteen years later, another contemporary noted that monetary value and artistic quality were not always in line: ‘were we to judge from the great prices [de Louthembourg’s] pictures bear, we should rank him on a level with Gainesborough [*sic*] or Wilson’.⁴ Clearly Fisher did make such equivalence, as all three landscape artists were represented in his collection, as were George Barret and Angelica Kauffman. De Louthembourg’s ambitious pricing of his work in the hundreds of

pounds, rather than the forty guineas he billed Fisher, culminated in 1804 when he charged the Prince of Wales the prodigious sum of £1,000, admittedly for a very large canvas.

As well as acknowledging Fisher as a peer (and treating him ‘like an artist’), de Louthembourg was no doubt mindful of the commercial benefits of having his work on display in Dublin, then the second city of the Empire. He continues: ‘if any gentlemen should per chance ask the price of [the paintings] I begg [*sic*] to tell them to be 30 guineas each as it is the price I have for pictures finished and of their size.’ Suitably incentivised, Fisher may indeed have promoted his fellow artist’s interests, and two of de Louthembourg’s most significant works, *Landscape with a Waterfall and a Man Attacked by a Snake* (1776, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Mirande) and *The Waterfall on the Rhine at Schaffhausen* (1787/88, V&A Museum, London), found their way to Ireland. Both were part of the notable collection assembled by Lord Farnham of Farnham, county Cavan, and Rutland Square, Dublin, which was described in 1781 (flatteringly, if rather inaccurately) as one of only four collections ‘of consequence’ in Ireland.⁵ Although it is conceivable that these works by de Louthembourg entered the Farnham collection at a subsequent date – the later barons were active as collectors in the early decades of the nineteenth century, purchasing, in 1841, Tintoretto’s great *Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) – it seems unlikely that a work such as the enormous Schaffhausen view would have found favour with later generations of the family. De Louthembourg’s artistic standing declined rapidly after his death; when *Cattle, Evening Scene* was sold in Dublin in 1815, it fetched only £3 13s.⁶ The proximity in date of the *Landscape with a Waterfall and a Man Attacked by a Snake*, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1776, and the letter to Fisher of the following year is, if nothing more, suggestive. The reduction in price that de Louthembourg offered Fisher may, in part, have been a gesture of gratitude, or perhaps even a commission for services rendered.

With the kind assistance of Dr Lefevvre, it has been possible to identify with some degree of certainty the two pictures that Fisher ordered in 1777. The subject matter, dating, measurements and Irish provenance (of one of them) combine to make *Landscape with Travellers* (V&A Museum, London) (Plate 3) and *Morning Landscape with a Coach followed by a traveller on horseback* (private collection) likely candidates for Fisher’s pictures.⁷ Further evidence for de Louthembourg’s fall from commercial favour is the fact that when *Landscape with Travellers* was acquired by the V&A in 1887 it cost £50, just £10 more than Fisher had paid for it – or, at the very least, for an identically sized work – 110 years earlier.

It is not surprising that Fisher wished to own examples of de Louthembourg’s art. While their technical approach to landscape is rather different – the exuberance of de Louthembourg’s compositions and his effortless facility contrasting with Fisher’s more prosaic vision and hard application of paint – they had much in common. Both were pioneers in painting the picturesque and sublime, de Louthembourg in Snowdonia, Fisher in Killarney; both published guides reproducing their aquatints (the former in *The Picturesque Scenery of Great Britain* (1801) and *The Romantic and Picturesque Scenery*



3 – Phillipe de Loutherbourg (1740-1812), *LANDSCAPE WITH TRAVELLERS*
c.1777, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 74.9 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

4 – *The baptismal registry for St Luke's church, Dublin*

5 – Hugh Douglas Hamilton (1740-1808), *PORTRAIT OF JONATHAN FISHER (1735-1809)*
n.d., pastel on paper (detail) (private collection)

18. Mary Daur of Richd & Ellen Turner.
21 Hannah Daur of George & Alice Ormston.
22. Jonathan Son of George & Catharine Fisher?
23. Tho^t Son of Edward & Margret Storrard.
24 Anne Daur of M^r & Elisabeth Peince.
25 Elisabeth Daur of Edward & Jane Ballard.
25 Tho^t Son of Stephen & Elisabeth Robinson.
29. Tho^t Son of Rob^t & Alice Turpin
December?
1. Richard Son of Timothy & Rebecca Cumford
14 Alexander Son of D^r & Mary^e M^r Doolan.



of *England and Wales* (1805), the latter in *The Scenery of Ireland* (1795-96)); and both were decidedly entrepreneurial and innovative in marketing their wares through engravings and exhibitions.

The date of Fisher's birth was hitherto unknown, and most recently has been given as 'probably in the 1740s'.⁸ It now seems clear, however, that he was, in fact, born in the previous decade, as a Jonathan, son of George and Caroline Fisher, was baptised in St Luke's Church of Ireland church in Dublin on 22nd November 1735 (Plate 4).⁹ George and Caroline/Carolina, both of the parish, had married at the same church on 7th September 1732. This surely refers to Fisher the artist, as it appears to be the only surviving baptismal record in Dublin for a person of that name, and in date and location is consistent with Anthony Pasquin's assertion that Fisher was 'originally a woolen-draper in the Liberties'.¹⁰ St Luke's church, now derelict, is in The Coombe, the heart of the Liberties, where Dublin's wool and weaving trade was concentrated. That Fisher was baptised in the Church of St Luke, the patron saint of artists and the dedicatee of the guild of Dublin painters, was nicely prophetic. The date of his birth is, however, of more than biographical interest as it indicates Fisher's seniority among his peers in the Dublin group of landscapes painters: he was eleven years older than William Ashford, and thirteen years Thomas Roberts' senior. Although associated more with these artists, Fisher was much closer in age to George Barret, who was born, also in the Liberties, most likely in 1732. That Barret's birth date is frequently incorrectly stated exaggerates further the supposed generational gap with Fisher: not only is Fisher's birth date, as usually given, too late by more than five years, but Barret's is too early by four. Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin note that Barret's date of birth is 'variously reported in 1728 and 1732'.¹¹ However, it cannot be the earlier date as in May 1747 Barret was one of 'Sixteen boys under the age of sixteen' recorded in the Dublin press as competing for a premium.¹² This later date of 1732 can also be supported by a rare surviving signed work – Barret was hardly ever to sign later in his career – which is dated 1747, and which still seems to be little more than juvenilia (private collection). Confirmation of his birth date demonstrates that Fisher was a rather mature twenty-eight when, in 1763, he was awarded a premium from the Dublin Society for a landscape, and makes sense of Pasquin's assertion that Fisher had pursued a previous career before embarking on his artistic profession.

De Louthembourg's letter emerged from a private collection accompanied by a fine portrait of Fisher by Hugh Douglas Hamilton (Plate 5). The first image known of the artist (a further portrait by Gilbert Stuart is merely recorded), the pastel shows Fisher as smartly if decorously dressed, reminding us that he was a man of solid substance who could boast several commercial interests (property dealing and a sinecure in the Stamp Office) as well as a successful artistic practice.¹³ There is something rather gratifying in being able to 'put a face to a name', as Fisher on two occasions included a self-portrait within his landscapes, but on too small a scale to allow his features to be discerned. He appears in two of his most ambitious landscapes, sketching in front of the landscape of Tinneyhinch, county Wicklow (c.1765, Irish Heritage Trust, Fota House, Cork) and Killarney, county



6 – Jonathan Fisher (1735-1809)

VIEW OF THE LAKE OF KILLARNEY FROM THE PARK OF KENMARE HOUSE (detail)

1769, oil on canvas, 99 x 126 cm (private collection)

opposite 7 – Hugh Douglas Hamilton (1740-1808), PORTRAIT OF THOMAS ROBERTS (1748-1777)

c.1769, pastel on paper, 27 x 22 cm (National Gallery of Ireland)

Kerry (1769, private collection) (Plate 6). Just as artists have long collected each other's works, so they have also painted each other, and Hamilton's pastel of Fisher can be added to his portraits of the young Thomas Roberts (Plate 7) (c.1769, NGI) and his friends in Rome, Antonio Canova and Henry Tresham (c.1788, V&A Museum, London).



Fisher's collection of paintings, comprising sixty-five works, including the two de Loutherbours, the works by Barret, Wilson and Gainsborough already mentioned, and 'others by Italian and Dutch artists', was dispersed at auction after his death.¹⁴ Omitted from the auction was a lost painting by Jacob Ennis, a 'picture of the Artist's Club', presumably a commission by, or gift to, Fisher.¹⁵ It was evidently both professionally and personally significant, as it was bequeathed, along with his drawings and painting materials, to his pupil and studio assistant, Henry Graham. Nothing further is known of this painting, but its title conjures up the world of convivial relationships between Dublin artists that emerges from other sources – of shared lodgings, of artists painting each other's portraits and banding together to exhibit in the Society of Artists.¹⁶ Fisher, with his fine collection of paintings, was at the heart of this circle. He was a founding member of the Society of Artists, and his early seniority within the artistic community is apparent when, in February 1767, he was asked to advise the Dublin Society (alongside Jacob Ennis and Robert Carver) on the future of the School of Figure Drawing.¹⁷ Access for budding artists to works by contemporaries such as Gainsborough is likely to have been easier at Fisher's house in Great Fish Street (to which he invited the public to view his Killarney series) than at the private picture galleries of the elite. (However, it is well documented that these too could be visited by the genteel.)

Indirectly, de Loutherbours had further influence on Irish artistic practice. In 1784, set designs for Smock Alley Theatre were praised: 'a happy contrivance of giving the distant Perspective of a Fort, a beautiful View of a Sea, Shipping, rural Scenery and a terminating Sky, comprehended a Series of Paintings in the Manner of Loutherbours, executed by Mr Walmsley, one of his Pupils'.¹⁸ Eight years later, de Loutherbours's famous Eidophusikon (a theatrical light show) arrived in Dublin with its 'view of the Miltonic Hell ... a scene of magnificent horror'.¹⁹

Rounding things off rather neatly, one additional work, coincidentally now in Dublin and previously miscatalogued, can be added to the total number of autograph pictures by de Loutherbours assembled by Dr Lefevre. Showing cattle being driven home



in the morning (Plate 8), it was acquired by the National Gallery of Ireland in 1934, ironically as a work by Fisher, but is in fact clearly by de Louthembourg, as a comparison with a landscape in Virginia Museum of Arts in Richmond, Virginia, immediately shows (Plate 9).²⁰ Happily, there is once again a de Louthembourg in Dublin.



8 – here attributed to *Phillipe de Louthembourg* (1740-1812), *A LANDSCAPE*
c.1790, oil on canvas, 100 x 127 cm
(National Gallery of Ireland)

9 – *Phillipe de Louthembourg* (1740-1812)
MORNING, WITH LANDSCAPE AND CATTLE
c.1790, oil on canvas, 50 x 66 cm
(Virginia Museum of Arts, Richmond, VA)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Olivier Lefeuvre, *Phillipe-Jacques de Louthembourg, 1740-1812* (Paris, 2012). A deserved winner of the Prix Marianne Roland Michel, it includes 309 autograph paintings, 278 documented works (with inevitable overlap between the two categories), as well as six letters by the artist and other documents.
- ² George Breeze, *Society of Artists in Ireland, index of exhibits, 1765-80* (Dublin, 1985) 21.
- ³ James Barry (ed. E. Fryer), *The Works of James Barry*, 2 vols (London, 1809) I, 37, quoted in Lefeuvre, *de Louthembourg*, 143.
- ⁴ Joseph Pott, quoted *ibid.*, 144.
- ⁵ The pictures were sold, with others from the Farnham collection, at Gernon, Dublin, 15th-16th June, 1827, nos 18 (40 guineas) and 133 (£31 5s). See Lefeuvre, *de Louthembourg*, cat. nos 133 and 197. For the reference to the eminence of Lord Farnham as a collector, see Thomas J. Mulvany (ed.), *The Life of James Gandon, Esq.* (Dublin, 1846) 50. (The other collectors singled out were the Duke of Leinster, and Lords Charlemont and Londonderry.)
- ⁶ Herbert's, 17th February 1815, lot 74.
- ⁷ Lefeuvre, *de Louthembourg*, 243 and 345, cat. nos 140 and 141.
- ⁸ Anne Crookshank and Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters, 1600-1940* (New Haven and London, 2002) 54.
- ⁹ Church of Ireland Records, St Luke's Parish, Dublin, DU-CI-BA-102099, online at www.irishgenealogy.ie. This site hosts records of baptisms, marriages and burials for parish registers in the city of Dublin and counties Carlow and Kerry.
- ¹⁰ Anthony Pasquin (John Williams), *An authentic history of the professors of painting, sculpture and Architecture in Ireland* (London, 1796) 54.
- ¹¹ Crookshank and Glin, *Ireland's Painters*, 133.
- ¹² *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 23rd-26th May 1747.
- ¹³ For the Stuart portrait of Fisher, see Carrie Rebora Baratt and Ellen G. Miles, *Gilbert Stuart* (New York, 2004) 76.
- ¹⁴ Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (Dublin and London, 1913) I, 348. So far, no catalogue for this auction has not been located, nor are its details listed in the comprehensive Getty Provenance Index.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Brendan Rooney, 'Regarding Irish Eighteenth-Century Artists: comment, culture and community', in William Laffan and Christopher Monkhouse (eds), *Ireland, Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690-1840* (Chicago, 2015).
- ¹⁷ RDS Minute Books, IX, 5th February 1767. See Nesta Butler, 'Jonathan Fisher', in Nicola Figgis (ed.), *Painting 1600-1900: Art and Architecture of Ireland II* (London and New Haven, 2014) 251-53
- ¹⁸ *Hibernian Journal*, 30th January 1784.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 3rd February 1792.
- ²⁰ Lefeuvre, *de Louthembourg*, cat. no. 201.