



# More light on George Sharp

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TODAY GEORGE SHARP (1802-1877) IS A RELATIVELY OBSCURE PAINTER, NOT LEAST because there are only a few of his works in public galleries or known to be in private collections. The re-emergence and extremely high sale price of Sharp's *View of the west convent on the Claddagh, Galway* (1844) in 2005 has yet to stimulate the rediscovery of more works,<sup>1</sup> therefore the materials are insufficient at present to expand on what Julian Campbell wrote about Sharp as an artist in 2002.<sup>2</sup> This may sound like an unpromising start to an article, but notwithstanding the paucity of Sharp's paintings that are available to study, many of his letters survive. Together with the interesting sketches in pencil or pen-and-ink that embellish some of them – an aspect of Sharp's work that is otherwise unknown – they add greatly to the established record and throw considerable new light on his activities and opinions (Plate 1). The surviving letters are nearly all to members of the Crampton family of Dublin, and are to be found amongst the Crampton Papers which are divided between the manuscripts department of the Library of Trinity College Dublin, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the Print Room of the Ashmolean Museum, also in Oxford.<sup>3</sup>

## SHARP AND THE CRAMPTON FAMILY

SIR PHILIP CRAMPTON, FIRST BARONET (1777-1858), WAS AN EMINENT DUBLIN SURGEON. In addition to medical and scientific interests, Crampton, like many other medical men of his era, also had extensive cultural interests, ranging from poetry – for example, being a friend of the poet Thomas Moore and one of those responsible for setting up the monument to Moore in College Street, Dublin – to music and art.<sup>4</sup> His elder son, Sir John Crampton, 2nd Baronet (1805-1886), was in the British diplomatic corps. He was an able amateur artist, having been a pupil of Sharp's, and to judge from the surviving letters, both he and his father maintained a close and friendly relationship with the

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1 – *George Sharp, self-portrait, a fragment of a letter inscribed 'Wentworth Place. Dublin. June 30 1854'* (courtesy Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

artist despite the difference in status between them.<sup>5</sup>

The group of letters in the Ashmolean Museum is particularly interesting for the documentation they provide on the creation in the 1850s by Sharp of a collection of British watercolours for John Crampton. This collection came to include works by David Cox (1783-1859), Copley Fielding (1787-1855), Samuel Prout (1783-1852) and John Varley (1778-1842), to which nucleus Crampton later added other watercolours, prints and oils, as well as a considerable collection of drawings and watercolours by Thomas Rowlandson (1757-1827). Some of these were bequeathed to the Ashmolean by his indirect descendant the composer, Selina (Ina) Boyle, in 1967.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the documentation of Sharp's role as Crampton's agent, the letters in the Ashmolean are informative with regard to other areas of Sharp's activity (which this article concentrates on) – his role as a private art teacher; his theories regarding the methods of art education and his corresponding struggle to bring them to official and public notice; and his opinions about the contemporary art world in both Dublin and London.

Sharp was initially encouraged and supported by Philip Crampton, and then became the teacher of John Crampton, probably of his sister Selina too, and possibly his other siblings, Josiah (who was later a profligate clergyman at Enniskillen) and Anna Maria, but the references in the Crampton Papers are too vague to be sure.<sup>7</sup> One letter shows that Sharp continued this teaching, giving long-distance advice to Crampton while he was posted to the United States.<sup>8</sup> Sharp also made clear his belief that Selina was sufficiently accomplished to make the transition from painting in watercolour to painting in oil, but it cannot be proved that she ever did so. Sharp made many complimentary references to Crampton's artistic ability and art-historical knowledge. Whatever the precise details of their relationship may have been, Crampton and Sharp had a strong mutual affection, although, as might be expected, Sharp's occasional gestures of familiarity are balanced by more deferential comments. Unfortunately, few of Crampton's own private letters survive (as opposed to those on diplomatic business), and none survive to Sharp, so the picture that emerges is rather one-sided. However, that does not detract from the inherent interest of Sharp's letters.

Sharp was a well-known and liked figure who held some status in the Dublin art world of the 1850s and '60s. He was an Associate of the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) from 1842 and a full Academician following the reform of the Academy in 1860, although he may not always have been in complete sympathy with all its practices. He exhibited there most years from 1835 to 1866, as well as at Belfast and Cork, the latter by invitation.<sup>9</sup> Sharp was one of only three Irish artists represented in the collection when the National Gallery of Ireland opened in 1864.<sup>10</sup> He took seriously his role as an Academician – for example, by reading a paper discussing the style of the great artists and the principles of study on the occasion of the RHA student prize-giving in 1865.<sup>11</sup> When, in the later 1850s, the RHA came to rely on a mixture of English, Belgian and French artists to make up the numbers and to compensate for a lack of quality in its exhibitions, Sharp lamented the situation:

we have an exhibition here and formidable & imposing placards announcing Painting Sculpture and Architecture how much of either have we of our own producing I would be ashamed to say – in fact next to none – a few small landscapes next door to sketches are all we have to boast of and they have been all purchased – no very great improvement in portraiture or figure painting C Smith has a portrait of Lady Eglington [*sic*] upon the most improved principles of modern portraiture very white and smiling the academy here would close but for the collection of Belgian pictures in Exhibition they bear stamp of French education in art in fact I suppose Paris now is the only School to learn in. The German is different and not so acceptable I think...<sup>12</sup>

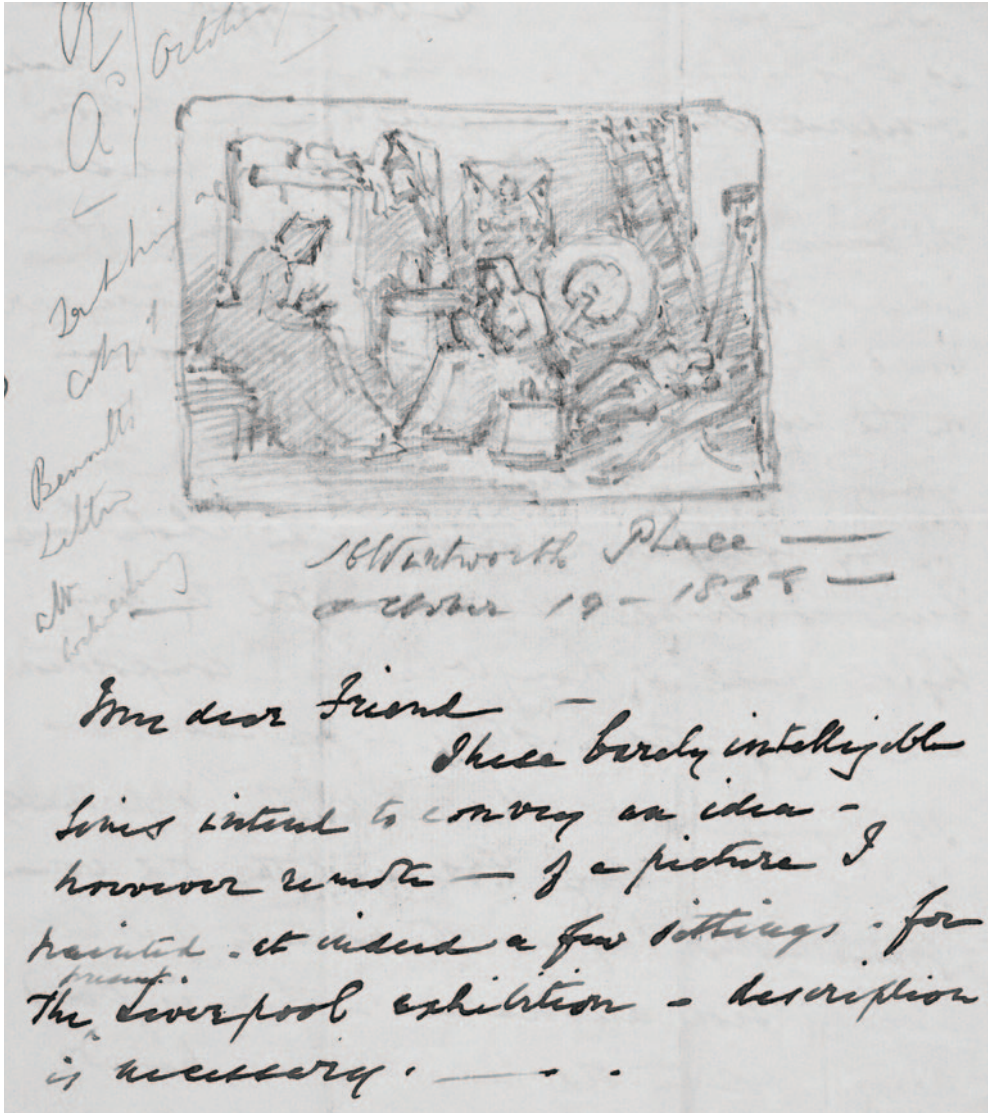
The Belgian and some other continental schools had rapidly become prominent in the RHA annual exhibitions following their successful inclusion in the Fine Art section of the 1853 Irish Industrial Exhibition. Then, Sharp thought the Prussian and Belgian schools better than the French or English, and admired *The temptation of St Anthony* (1848, Chateau royal de Laeken, Brussels), a work by the Belgian painter Louis Gallait (1810-1887), ‘one of the best modern painters’, perhaps because it was in a looser style than his usual Romantic history paintings as well as being suffused with the dramatic chiaroscuro of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664). Sharp was also the beneficiary of several purchases by the Royal Irish Art Union (RIAU), which bought paintings for distribution by lottery to its subscribers.<sup>13</sup>

Occasionally his letters include some Dublin gossip – for example, mentioning Frederic William Burton’s comings and goings. Burton, he noted in 1857, just before his return to Munich, ‘is so changed he is no more the snappish looking young man but frank and vigorous looking ... he is no longer the petit maître but mature...’<sup>14</sup> He passed on news of the death of the sculptor John Hogan (1800-1858), who Sharp had once introduced to Crampton, as well as news of the agitation amongst the students and fellows of Trinity College.<sup>15</sup>

To the lists of works Sharp exhibited in Ireland can be added those he contributed to the annual exhibitions of the Academy and other organisations in Liverpool.<sup>16</sup> The composition of one of those works, *The letter from Australia* (unlocated), is known only from a sketch Sharp included in a letter to Crampton (Plate 2). Sharp gave an intriguing description of the production of this work:

the whole affair ... had its foundation in studies made at separate times by lamp-light in the bottom painting room a long time ago – and shows the value of said painting room – for without its aid no attempt at a picture ever would be made by me the old woman on the left hand is a separate study the young woman reading a paper is another the boy lying down another the whole have been combined and repainted by day light made I thought a good composition and suggested a story – for example the young woman has taken the opportunity of the sleeping boy to read to the old woman grand mother say the contents of a letter received from





2 – George Sharp, sketch of an unlocated work, *THE LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA*, in a letter dated 19th October 1858

(courtesy Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Crampton Papers, MS 47, fol. 69)

Australia there is good news for the old lady has her hands locked in thanksgiving there is a placard nailed to the wall in the distance as of the Black Ball line of emigration ships and shows how and when the party went ... in fact the circumstance actually happened to ourselves in a letter from Melbourne from the Sailor [i.e. one of Sharp's sons].<sup>17</sup>

The subject matter fits in with migration imagery of the mid-nineteenth century in which the family left at home is shown receiving or reading or replying to a letter from an emigrant relative. This enduring and popular subject was tackled by many artists, including James Collinson in *Answering the emigrant's letter* (1850, Manchester City Art Gallery) and Thomas Webster in *A letter from the colonies* (1852, Tate Britain). The only known occasion when Sharp sought entry to the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts came in 1858. He thought that to have his work hung there would be 'a lift for professional distinction', but correctly predicted his rejection.<sup>18</sup> His main subjects, evocatively discussed and contextualised by Campbell, were genre scenes and portraits, the latter produced to satisfy the market as his letters show.<sup>19</sup>

Sharp worked in a broad, liquid style that can readily be seen in *Figures with a bear* (1847, National Maternity Hospital, Dublin).<sup>20</sup> He sometimes commented with disapproval on what he saw as excessively high finish. For example, he decried Pre-Raphaelitism and had ambivalent feelings about the polished, academic finish of the work of Daniel Maclise (discussed below). Sharp's preferred qualities have been associated by Campbell with early nineteenth-century French artists, with whom he connected him as a proto-realist, and with seventeenth-century Spanish painters such as Diego Velázquez (1599-1660). The latter connection is confirmed by evidence given below.

Sharp's training may first have been conducted in Dublin. According to Strickland, Sharp studied in London, and in Paris under François Picot (1786-1868) and Thomas Couture (1815-1879). Sharp does not appear in the published list of students at the Royal Academy of Arts in London or the Royal Dublin Society, but may possibly have been a pupil of the RHA.<sup>21</sup> At present only his connection in the mid-1830s with Picot, a neo-classicist who was well known as a teacher and whose pupils included such late academic stalwarts as Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889) and William Bouguereau (1825-1905), as well as more independent-minded artists such as Jean-Jacques Henner (1829-1905) and Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), can be corroborated. The mention of Couture may be correct, but it might also be the result of confusion as Sharp's pupils Nathaniel Hone the younger (1831-1917), whose connection with Sharp has not previously been documented (see below), and Harriet O'Hagan (1830-1921) did study with Couture, whose atelier opened only in 1847.<sup>22</sup> The putative connection with Couture would be most interesting to document, if possible, as Picot and Couture were supporters of contrasting approaches to artistic training.<sup>23</sup> Be that as it may, Sharp and Crampton were sufficiently knowledgeable about the French school to be able to compare the merits of Copley Fielding with those of the marine specialist Théodore de Gudin (1802-1880). Indeed, both men seem to have admired maritime painting, hence Sharp's mention of the works of Ludolf Backhuysen (1630-1708), which he saw in London in 1852: 'you would grow quite frantic with delight at the water flopping about really alive.'<sup>24</sup>

Sharp married Alicia Carroll on 9th November 1840 at St Mary's (Church of Ireland), Jervis Street. The financial arrangements he made at the time complicated his already indebted situation, and he fell into bankruptcy in 1841.<sup>25</sup> In 1866, Sharp suffered

a stroke and concomitant poverty, being incapacitated, but was supported by means of a public subscription which raised at least £255, including £20 from Crampton.<sup>26</sup> In 1868, his fellow artists in Dublin and London undertook fund-raising activities on his behalf, including the production of an album of more than thirty original sketches in oil and watercolour bound together, which, with other works, was sold by lottery. This raised at least another £410.<sup>27</sup>

## SHARP AS A TEACHER

GIVING INSTRUCTION TO ARISTOCRATIC AND GENTRY FAMILIES WAS A COMMON SOURCE of income for artists who struggled to exist on what could be derived from their own productions. This was certainly the case with Sharp, who found himself obliged to teach to support his family. As Strickland put it, ‘his principal occupation after 1842 was in teaching’, for which he was ‘well known in Dublin and the country’.<sup>28</sup> Sharp occasionally remarked on his desire to devote himself to painting, and acknowledged his frustration that he could not do so: ‘I sometimes think that I will sit down and turn painter but I can hardly hope for such a luxury I must satisfy myself on the subject of London patronage in teaching first.’<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt that such teaching was humdrum, but knowing that it had been undertaken out of financial necessity by artists such as Cox and Fielding, both of whom he much admired, may have made it more acceptable to Sharp.

Sharp’s teaching was carried out in two ways, either peripatetically in gentry and aristocratic homes in Ireland and England, or in the school he ran in his own house at 16 Wentworth Place (now Hogan Place, after Sharp’s friend and neighbour at number 14, the sculptor John Hogan), between Fenian Street and Grand Canal Street Lower. Crampton had helped him to set up, possibly at the end of the 1840s, what Sharp claimed to be ‘the only school room for drawing established within the city of Dublin for 50 years’. There he sometimes ran a women-only class, or ‘ladies’ day’ as he termed it.<sup>30</sup> The names and numbers of his pupils are not known (with the two exceptions noted above), and numbers seem to have fluctuated. As Sharp wrote in May 1852, ‘I still have pupils ... but on the whole the furor for Drawing is not so furious as 4 years ago. No matter.’ Later, thinking that his teaching ability was never better, he remarked that he was ‘sure that I could do more within an Academy of artists than young ladies although they have been my greatest friends and in fact are still’.<sup>31</sup> Although it is not possible to show that Sharp’s patrons, who included eminent contemporaries such as Sir Charles Coote of Ballyfin, county Laois, and the 7th Viscount Powerscourt, were also taught by him, it is undeniable that working in private homes would have meant close contact with potential patrons for his paintings. He proudly enumerated the distinguished families he worked for, his pupils in Ireland including Miss Fitzgerald, the daughter of Lord William Fitzgerald, and the daughters of the Earl of Milltown.<sup>32</sup> In England his pupils included Lady Howard de Walden, Lady Charlotte Denison (the daughter of the Duke of Portland), Lady Ruthven



3 – George Sharp, two views of Dunluce Castle, fragment of a letter, 1852 (?)  
 (courtesy Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

and Lady Belhaven. He was invited to London by Lady Gosford, but he also travelled to the Gosfords' Irish property at Markethill, county Armagh, to teach the family, which trip gave him the opportunity to visit the Giant's Causeway, Glenarm and Dunluce (Plate 3). Crampton may have introduced Sharp to some of his pupils; he was certainly thanked for providing letters recommending him as a teacher.<sup>33</sup> In May 1860, soon after Crampton's marriage to the singer Victoire Balfe (1837-1871), daughter of the Irish composer Michael William Balfe (1808-1870), Sharp wrote offering to give drawing lessons to Lady Crampton, hoping to be persuasive on the matter by adding 'you know how distinguished my pupils are'.<sup>34</sup> The letters show that Sharp's single most important pupil was Nathaniel Hone the younger (see below).

In 1847, when the RIAU mounted a loan exhibition of old master paintings to raise funds for famine relief, Sharp took advantage of the event to open a 'morning academy' with the help of other Academicians. They supervised the artists, numbering from twenty-five to forty, who attended daily between 6am and 10am for the 'free and exclusive' study of the works in the exhibition. This meant copying from the works in accordance with long-standing academic practice, something Sharp would have been familiar with from his studies in the Louvre while a pupil of Picot.<sup>35</sup>

## TEACHING METHODS

**S**HARP WAS STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY THE IDEAS OF ALEXANDRE DUPUIS (d.1854) ON the teaching of drawing that were practiced in French art schools. Strickland states that Sharp 'translated, in 1845, the work written by Dupuis' on elementary drawing instruction, although the precise title is not specified.<sup>36</sup> Campbell notes that this work, which he does not name, was published in 1847. Dupuis produced several publications on the teaching of drawing, and the one in question is likely to be his *De l'enseignement du dessin sous le point de vue industriel* (Paris, 1836). However, Dupuis may not have been the force Sharp believed him to be, and his approach, as the title of his book suggests, had emerged through the industrial art schools rather than the *écoles des beaux-arts*



of France.<sup>37</sup> Be that as it may, Sharp was stimulated to compose his own lecture, modelled on Dupuis, on how best to teach drawing.<sup>38</sup> His ideas may have been given practical demonstration in some drawings, 'Models to facilitate the teaching of Drawing', exhibited in the National Exhibition of the Arts, Manufactures and Products held in Cork in 1852.<sup>39</sup> The lecture was subsequently published and dispatched to prominent figures such as Prince Albert and other officials connected with the art world in London, from where the art schools of Britain and Ireland were then administered.<sup>40</sup> Sharp sought, unsuccessfully and for many years, to have his version of those ideas adopted in the government schools of art in Britain and Ireland, and there are many references to this in the surviving correspondence.

In sum, Sharp's academy advocated a simplified approach to drawing, intended to develop basic skills rather than labouring over minute detail. The almost universal and unthinking requirement of routine copying, he thought, in a clear echo of Dupuis, put pupils off, noting how they are 'sick of copying – they say so here they say so every where in vain.'<sup>41</sup> His pupils drew from casually arranged groups of plaster casts, exploring broad masses and chiaroscuro, rather than meticulously reproducing casts of antique heads (Plate 4). This he later termed his 'Pot and Pan system' of 'familiar objects artistically arranged in outline, light shade form and colour are placed before the pupil at one view he is treated to a picture at once'. This, he thought, 'develops and encourages' the pupil: 'I dig about and cultivate his faculties for art so that I defy him to escape if there is the least bit left in him it must increase. I tell him of Velasquez and I preach Rubens – that is enough.'<sup>42</sup> The classes Sharp gave at his academy, at the unnamed school he is known to have visited near Stillorgan, county Dublin, or privately, would have been opportunities to test out his method.<sup>43</sup>

In pursuing his teaching plans in England, Sharp found he was required to prove his bona fides. Fortunately, he was able to produce references from Richard Whately, the Archbishop of Dublin, his friend John Hogan, the sculptor, and Martin Cregan, the president of the RHA.<sup>44</sup> Sharp's ambitions were frustrated by the reluctance of anyone to accept his proposal for an experiment comparing two groups of pupils, one to be taught in accordance with established practice, the other by his methods. In London, Sharp had an introduction to various artists including William Mulready (1786-1863), Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), J.R. Herbert (1810-1890), who was connected with the government schools from 1842 to 1853, and Charles Eastlake (1793-1865), who was president of the RA, and keeper, later director, of the National Gallery. They were politely encouraging, but the administrators of the Government system were either vaguely positive but noncommittal, or hostile.<sup>45</sup> Sir Philip Crampton was due to introduce Sharp's published lecture on art education to 'Mr. F. Grant' – that is, Francis Grant (1803-1878), a future president of the RA – and the reforming politician and francophile, Lord Brougham, the latter having been 'interested at one time and surely now in the early education of the art for working people he was in Paris a great Patron of Dupuis', but nothing seems to have come of this.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Sharp could persuade neither Henry Cole, who had day-to-day



4 – George Sharp, imaginary group of students at work in the studio, detail of a letter dated 10th March 1852

(courtesy Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

responsibility for the Government schools, nor his political master, Lord Stanley of Alderley, the vice-president and later president of the Board of Trade, to allow an experimental trial of his plans.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, Sharp's timing was bad: he arrived in London when the issue of art education was highly controversial. The Government schools set curricula, and when new ideas were sought regarding alternative practices, they went directly to France rather than taking up Sharp's interpretation of French ideas. In 1853, for example, a report was presented to the Department of Practical Art (which had responsibility for the management of teaching) on 'French art collections and instruction' which were seen as a benchmark.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, innumerable new theories on art education and guides to art teaching and to learning how to draw were appearing at the time. Sharp was trying to be heard in a very busy and highly competitive situation. His affiliation with Dupuis might not have helped: the *Athenaeum*, in reviewing one of many art-teaching titles in 1854, commented that there was a vogue for teaching the basics of art and music to all and sundry, adding that 'in Dupui's [*sic*], as well as in all other systems, the progression of copies is too slow and conventional for the generality of students.'<sup>49</sup> In another context Sharp might have agreed.

Running his own school would have allowed Sharp to proselytise on behalf of his

own methods, but his main motive must have been economic: his letters allude to various children. This was certainly the case with other Dublin painters in the 1850s when a veteran such as George Petrie (1790-1866) encouraged William F. Wakeman (1822-1900) to set up a private academy precisely to generate an income in a way that would allow time to pursue his real interests:

You may think perhaps that because I had been successful in my career as a teacher without having resorted to such a measure, you may be equally so. But be assured that, as far as Art is concerned, in Dublin, the times are greatly changed, and for the worse. No teacher in Dublin now, and for many years past, can, or could, boast as I could, that he had received as much as 800 pounds a year from private tuitions. And possibly even in those times I might have received considerably more if I had opened a school, as I was constantly advised to do. At present, as I feel well assured, there is no teacher of drawing in Dublin, who receives a sixth of this amount, except those who keep drawing schools, and we know that many of those make a very respectable income, and that there are some, even, that accumulate money – Brocas for example. Let me add, too, that it is only in this way that you will be likely to get time to study and paint with a view to the increase of your powers and reputation as an Artist; for the life of a teacher, running from house to house, is wearisome, timeabsorbing, and mind-dissipating, and so deprives the artist from having his mind in fit tune for the production of any important work. But even viewed without any such high motive I deem the measure necessary to procure the means of comfortable existence. Such schools are now the order of the day, and nothing else will do, at least as a main prop. And I urge it the more strongly, because I feel assured – and you know that I do not flatter – that, with energy and perseverance, you have talents of such an order as must place you above your competitors and insure your success.<sup>50</sup>

## SHARP AT THE EXHIBITIONS AND ON THE ART WORLD

SHARP WAS NATURALLY INTERESTED IN WHAT HIS COLLEAGUES WERE UP TO. VISITING London to make purchases for Crampton meant he could attend the annual exhibitions. He passed on to Crampton some opinions regarding what he saw, and commented particularly on the efforts of well-known artists such as Cox or David Roberts (1796-1864) and on Irish artists such as McClise. He admired the latter's *King Alfred in the camp of the Danes* (Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne) at the Royal Academy in 1852:

McClise has after all the Picture of the exhibition it is painted in his own peculiar manner objectionable to many but full of thought of poetry and artistic knowledge and beauty the grouping and the drawing and the handling matchless yet the tout

ensemble has not a good effect expressions of [illegible word] of – tired love – of the merry heart – in wine the passion of play and the gamblers excitement are all portrayed out and out while Alfred disguised as a pilgrim bent down concealing his triumph in a mixed look of disgust and eagerness to attack as he sees that Danes lying about in the several ways engaged that gives him possession of them and the careless leader spread out in the state satisfied with all around him beauty & [illegible word] of food and drink knows not what is waiting for him in the humble harper feeding his senses and the ladies round about with welcome music the habit and manners of the savages are painted I know not how their arms & accoutrements hanging up given in a way that no other painter is in the habit of even trying to do – all denotes the greatest man in England!<sup>51</sup>

His admiration might not have been predicted given Sharp's negative feelings about high finish. He especially loathed the Pre-Raphaelites for that reason. In 1853, when others thought them to be at their peak, Sharp was 'glad to say the pre-Raphaelites are dying out – for Mallais [*sic*] their head has actually condescended to soften an outline in part of his picture this year which however roared about by the Dealers is no great shakes.'<sup>52</sup> The reference is probably to John Everett Millais' *Order of Release* (1852-53, Tate Britain) shown at the RA that year. In a letter of October 1852, Sharp's loathing for high finish prompted him to write that

painting at the present day is lost or degenerated into licking the canvas with the end of the brush and spreading the smallest complement of Paint over its surface and the more polished the more meritorious; if that is the way then Titian did not know how to paint.<sup>53</sup>

A few years later he was pleased by press criticism which 'pays off the fiddling of the Pre-Raphaelites', believing it to be 'blasphemy' to see Raphael's name caught up with such modern artists.<sup>54</sup> In an apparent paradox, Sharp also commented dismissively on the taste for Turner's 'dash', which he disliked, thinking that one day soon people would 'realise and Turner will go down like William Etty who was once sought after but who is now very cheap'.<sup>55</sup> Sharp's stylistic affiliations may have helped to make him, in 1861, an early enthusiast for James Abbott Whistler (1834-1903), of whom he commented to Crampton, 'look after a fellows picture peculiar in this "age of finish" named Whistler he is an American paints things as he sees them no more no less.'<sup>56</sup> This must be a reference to *La Mère Gérard* (1858, private collection), exhibited with three etchings at the RA that year. That broadly painted work possesses exactly the technical and visual qualities that Sharp admired and practiced.

It does not seem that Sharp sought out Irish artists (other than Maclise) or Irish subjects at the London exhibitions, although many such works were shown. For example, at the RA in 1852 he could have seen Richard Rothwell's *Glendalough with its celebrated Round Tower, Vale of the Seven Churches, County of Wicklow – Guides on the look-out*



for *Tourists*,<sup>57</sup> and, in 1853 he could have seen *The Round Tower of Clondalkin, County Dublin* (unlocated), one of a very few Irish subjects by the Liverpool painter, Roger Tonge.

Sharp was also an occasional landscape painter, to judge from the titles of exhibited works, such as *Robin's Castle from the Strand, Malahide* (RHA 1846, no. 264). He certainly had a keen eye for landscape, and took great pleasure in observing and describing the changing light and weather as he walked over the Wicklow Hills. Some of these effects he noted in sketches included in his letters to Crampton, often related to the area near Crampton's lodge at Lough Bray (Plate 5).<sup>58</sup> Sharp was disappointed that despite the natural beauty readily available to them, Irish landscape painters were insipid:

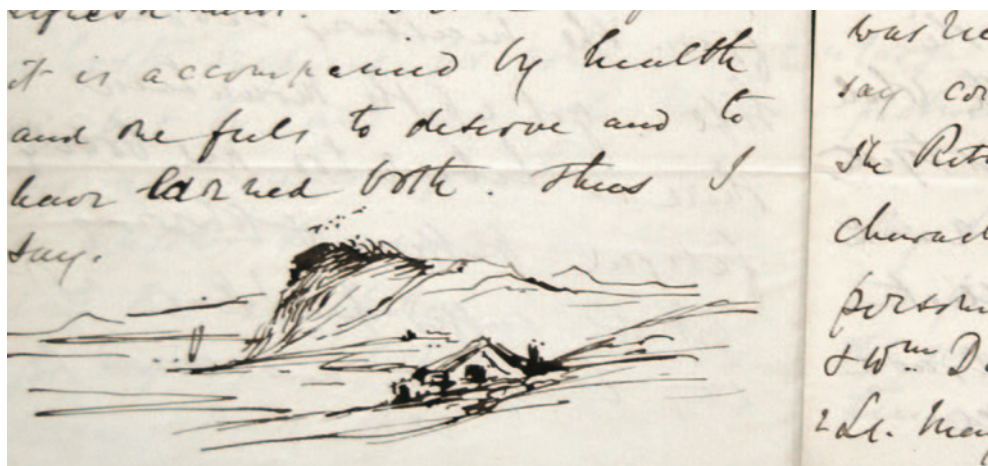
there are a few pictures of 'nature' in the open air in the Hibernian Academy now but a pink gauzy veil is drawn over a scene say of Glencree which never belonged to it, it is meant for the haze of nature at early dawn say but it is as artificial as if it was powdered & rouged as folk did of old.<sup>59</sup>

He also drew motifs further afield, such as Dunluce Castle, county Antrim.<sup>60</sup> The latter seems to have impressed him greatly, and he wrote describing his wish that Copley Fielding might paint it, tackling it with the same sense of drama he brought to his scenes of ruins such as Rievaulx Abbey or coastal castles such as Bamborough in Crampton's own possession:

if Copley Fielding could be persuaded to get his stomach repaired [his hatred of sea travel is mentioned in another letter] and in proper order for a journey to our Giants Causeway and take away on paper Dunluce Castle as it stands on one of those wintry, wintry evenings or early mornings what a picture it would be ... he little dreams what charms are preserved for his pencil if he could but cross the Irish Sea.<sup>61</sup>

## SHARP'S ARTISTIC PREFERENCES

IN 1857, SHARP EAGERLY ATTENDED THE ART TREASURES EXHIBITION IN MANCHESTER, to which thousands of works in a variety of media were lent from private collections, including some in Ireland.<sup>62</sup> The vast scale of the exhibition impressed many visitors, let alone the quality and fame of many of the works. Sharp lamented the absence of large works by great masters such as Titian, Veronese and Rubens, but added that 'we have a fine show of portraits and your old steady and determined friend Olivares from the hand of Velasquez is most prominently there'. Murillo's self-portrait (1670-73), then in the collection of the Earl Spencer (now in the National Gallery, London), had 'very subdued colour of flesh expression most marvelous'. His favourite painting in the exhibition was Van Dyck's portrait of Frans Snyders (1620, Frick Collection, New York), which he claimed 'shines out and [it] would be worth a 100 miles journey to have a peep at him'. The Snyders and Maclise's *Macbeth* (i.e. *The ghost scene in Macbeth* [1840, Guildhall Art



5 – George Sharp, view of Lough Bray in an undated letter, but of 1853  
 (courtesy Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

Gallery, London]) were the ones he said he would steal ‘to hang up & look at which enjoyment is not always the object of collectors’.<sup>63</sup> Although this might seem to be an off-hand comment, it also serves to give a sense of Sharp’s appreciation if not knowledge of the history of art and his willingness to make discriminations across periods and styles. This comes over all the more strongly in relation to Sharp’s favourite artist, William Hogarth (1697-1764), ‘the greatest artist mechanically speaking ever in England’. He especially admired his portrait of Thomas Coram (1740) and his *March to Finchley* (1750), both of which he had already been able to study at the Foundling Hospital in London.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps second to Hogarth in Sharp’s pantheon was Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), whom he praised a number of times, knowing that Crampton shared his admiration. In 1852, when Sharp attended the annual loan exhibition of Old Masters at the British Institution in London, he singled out Velázquez, who ‘has some portraits, fine of course but not his most attractive there is a fine picture tho’ by him not large of three figures standing in the air near ruins called conspirators belongs to Lord De Grey it is a glorious study for colour.’<sup>65</sup> Sharp doubtlessly saw Spanish works in Paris (he is not known to have visited Spain), and may even have visited the Galerie Espagnole of Louis-Philippe, which opened in the Louvre in 1838 but was sold off at Christie’s in London in the summer of 1853. It is not known how Crampton developed his knowledge of Spanish art, although his acquaintance with Spain seems long to predate his diplomatic service there in the 1860s. This taste was passed on by Sharp to his students, so he was proud to hear from Nathaniel Hone the younger in 1853 that:

Fridays and Saturdays find me at the National Gallery Brush in hand before the Big Velasquez [sic] which of course you know ... I need not say one word in addition

or in approval of this subject to you who know Velasquez well, one of the few who have taste and courage to be in raptures with this picture in particular.

Sharp made some highly perceptive comments about Hone, noting that he was 'likely to become a first rate artist in the Landscape way' and praising the breadth of his style: 'he paints with a big brush more than that he thinks with a big brush.' Sharp pointed out that Hone was 'taught from the beginning' by him; 'he draws well and is sprung from a line of artists the Hones, painters about the period of Sir Joshua [Reynolds]' and was a 'man of sense too and distinguished in the College & in his Engineering course but the spirit of painting fell upon him in his rambles through our School rooms behind the house where you [Crampton] held evening talks.'<sup>66</sup>

Although there had long been a taste in Britain and Ireland for the work of Murillo, it is striking to see how early Crampton and Sharp were in their admiration for Velázquez, who, in the 1850s, was only just beginning to inspire serious interest. Indeed, the Spanish School as a whole had previously been seen as something of an artistic also-ran. For example, speaking to a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the National Gallery in London in 1853, the connoisseur and collector James Dennistoun portrayed the Spanish school as being of only historical rather than aesthetic interest.<sup>67</sup>

The most important Dublin event during the period of the correspondence between Sharp and Crampton was the Industrial Exhibition of 1853. Sharp mentioned this several times, and sent sketches of both the vast temporary buildings put up on Leinster Lawn for the occasion and some of the objects shown (Plate 6). Although he did not participate in the Fine Art section himself, Sharp wondered if Crampton would send over examples of his work – 'some American scenery' – and hoped that American artists would be represented. Sharp had an introduction to the moving force behind the exhibition, William Dargan, of whom he remarked, 'his life or career [*sic*] in life is an extraordinary one 50,000£ in wheelbarrows is reported to me to be one of the minor items in the long list of moveables his personal property I think it rather a long yarn to spin.'<sup>68</sup>

Sharp emerges from his letters as a kindly and affable but opinionated man, one with a strong determination, or a naïve enthusiasm, to bring his ideas about art instruction before the world. The fact that his efforts to find a substantial audience for his theories were all frustrated must have created a sense of resentment, although it seems he always enjoyed Crampton's support. He was active as a writer beyond his published lecture, and some or all of the many articles ('infantine scribbling', he called it) on art topics, including education and the teaching of drawing, published in the *Dublin Sentinel* in 1854-55 are probably by Sharp, who is known to have contributed to that paper.<sup>69</sup> The well-known German-language art dictionary, Thieme-Becker, describes Sharp as 'maler und fachschriftsteller' (painter and specialist writer); the reference may be to more than his pamphlets on drawing.<sup>70</sup> It would be interesting to identify the extent to which he may have been able to advocate his views through other newspapers.

Sharp's artistic preferences were largely conventional, albeit with a bias towards



6 – George Sharp, view of Merrion Square and the 1853 exhibition building in a letter dated 31st March [1853]

(courtesy Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

some of the more painterly artists – for example, Van Dyck, Rubens and Titian – but sometimes unexpected, if understandable, as when he described Daniel MacNee, later president of the Royal Scottish Academy, as ‘the very best portrait painter in the big style for a full length life size picture perhaps in the world’.<sup>71</sup> Impressive portrait-painting on a large scale was but one aspect of Sharp’s affection for Velázquez, marking an incipient and unproven taste, even in the 1850s. His antipathy to the Pre-Raphaelite type of high finish was expressed in stylistic terms; Sharp’s personal painting style was forward-looking by the standards of the time, but may not have been fully in tune with the prevailing tastes of Irish patrons. Given the small number of surviving works it is hard to draw firm conclusions, but his penchant seems to have been for genre scenes, such as the *Boy and bear*, and still life; the demands of the market obliged him to add portraiture. Sharp’s comments on Whistler show he was able to spot, and, in Hone’s case, encourage, emerging artists of ability. Although he could have been only loosely acquainted with the work of Whistler, this did not prevent him from seeing his talent and potential. Although we can hear Sharp’s own voice through his letters, he remains, like so many nineteenth-century Irish artists, an elusive figure.



## ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

BMS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Crampton Papers.

AMS Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Crampton Papers. These are neither numbered nor bound and so are cited by date where a date is given. All letters are from Sharp to Sir John Crampton unless stated otherwise. Quotations are given *literatim*, although punctuation has occasionally been introduced for clarity.

JC Sir John Crampton

GS George Sharp

- <sup>1</sup> Whyte's of Dublin, 25th April 2005, lot 96, with a lengthy catalogue entry by Julian Campbell.
- <sup>2</sup> Julian Campbell, 'George Sharp, proto-realist', *Irish Arts Review*, 19, no. 3, 2002, 125-29. There are also brief references to Sharp in Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters 1600-1940* (New Haven and London, 2002) 230-31. A summary biography is given by W.G. Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (1913; reprinted Dublin, 1969) II, 327-28.
- <sup>3</sup> The papers in TCD are mainly to do with Sir Philip Crampton, first baronet, 1777-1858.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, BMS 3, fol. 162, 21st April 1852, G.F. Mulvany to JC.
- <sup>5</sup> Works by John Crampton are in the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. He and his sister Selina are extensively represented in the National Library of Ireland; see *National Library of Ireland News*, 7, 2001, 3-4. See also Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *The Watercolours of Ireland: works on paper in pencil, pastel and paint, c.1600-1914* (London, 1994) 205-06; and William Laffan (ed.), *Painting Ireland: Topographical Views from Glin Castle* (Tralee, 2006) 136-38, 198-201, 230-31.
- <sup>6</sup> Philip McEvansoneya, "'A thing to be seen": creating the Crampton collection of English watercolours in the 1850s', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 21, no. 1, 2009, 95-110. The works in oil bequeathed to the Ashmolean are reproduced in C. Casley, C. Harrison and J. Whiteley (eds), *The Ashmolean Museum Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings* (Oxford, 2004) 49, 95, 221.
- <sup>7</sup> BMS 46, fol. 49, 13th June 1858, GS to JC.
- <sup>8</sup> AMS, 13th October 1852. Crampton told his friend and successor in Washington, John Savile Lumley, that he had been absent from Dublin for five and a half years up to July 1856: Nottingham, Nottinghamshire Archives, Savile of Rufford Papers, DD SR 226/16/59a, JC to Savile Lumley, 24th July 1856.
- <sup>9</sup> Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: Index of Exhibitors and Their Works 1826-1979*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1986) III, 143-44; Ann M. Stewart, *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765-1927*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1990) III, 655-56. His dedication to the RHA was shown in other ways, for example in 1851 when F.W. Burton was worried that the annual exhibition that year might be rather thin, Sharp agreed to send another work, no. 49, *An old man's head – a study from life*. It had been begun by his pupil Crampton, who left it in the family home in Merrion Square from where Sharp removed it, painted in a background and sent it to the RHA. Priced at £4, it was one of only a few works sold that year; AMS, 10th March 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>10</sup> George F. Mulvany, *Catalogue, Descriptive and Historical, of the Works of Art in the National Gallery of Ireland, with Biographical Notices of the Masters* (Dublin, 1864) nos 63, 134, 138.
- <sup>11</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 11th December 1865.
- <sup>12</sup> BMS 50, fols 30v-31, 9th July 1859, GS to JC. Stephen Catterson Smith had recently been elected president of the RHA.

- <sup>13</sup> AMS, undated but 1853, GS to JC. That is, Sharp's works were given as prizes by the RIAU, he was not himself a prize-winner. Campbell, 'George Sharp', 126.
- <sup>14</sup> BMS 44, fols 51-56, 22nd October 1857, GS to JC.
- <sup>15</sup> AMS, 20th-21st May 1852, GS to JC; BMS 7, fols 44-45, 7th January 1853, John Hogan to JC, in which the sculptor recommended his emigrant friend, the engraver George McCloy, who was with the 'US coast survey'; BMS 45, fols 154-57, 15th April 1858, GS to JC.
- <sup>16</sup> These are not mentioned by Campbell: 1849, no. 122, *Tired Out* / no. 178, *Idling*; 1858, no. 673, *The Letter from Australia* / no. 617, *The Minstrel Boy*; 1860, no. 349, *The Dream*; 1863, no. 299, *Waiting for Orders* / no. 1033, *Life at fourscore and six* / no. 1075, *Game*. In 1863, George Sharp junior contributed no. 962, *Prayer and supplication*. See E. Morris and E. Roberts, *The Liverpool Academy and Other Exhibitions of Contemporary Art in Liverpool 1774-1867* (Liverpool, 1998) 545-46.
- <sup>17</sup> BMS 47, fols 69-72, 19th October 1858, GS to JC.
- <sup>18</sup> BMS 45, fols 154-57, 15th April 1858, GS to JC.
- <sup>19</sup> BMS 49, fols 6-9, undated letter endorsed as received 3rd June 1859, GS to JC, where Sharp mentions turning to portraiture owing to fashionable demand.
- <sup>20</sup> Reproduced by Campbell, 'George Sharp', 124.
- <sup>21</sup> Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, II, 327; S.C. Hutchinson, 'The Royal Academy schools, 1768-1830', *Walpole Society*, 38, 1958-60, 123-91; G. Willemsen, *The Dublin Society Drawing Schools, Students and Award Winners 1746-1876* (Dublin, 2000).
- <sup>22</sup> Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, II, 327; Campbell, 'George Sharp', 126, 129, note 12; Albert Boime, *Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision* (New Haven and London, 1980).
- <sup>23</sup> Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1986), especially chapter 2.
- <sup>24</sup> AMS, 8th November 1852, GS to JC (the work of Gudin, who worked in oil and watercolour, was well known in England); AMS, 18th June 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>25</sup> Dublin, Representative Church Body library, church register; *Freeman's Journal*, 4th December 1841, 28th April 1842.
- <sup>26</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 8th January 1867.
- <sup>27</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 22nd May and 2nd June 1868. A printed flyer, listing the contributors to and contents of the album and advertising the lottery, is in BMS 61/1, fol. 219, headed 'For the benefit of G. Sharpe [*sic*] R.H.A.'.
- <sup>28</sup> Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, II, 327-28. Strickland gives no authority for the date 1842.
- <sup>29</sup> AMS, 5th May 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>30</sup> AMS, 14th March 1852, 14th June 1853, GS to JC. Sharp mostly referred to drawing but occasionally mentioned his pupils painting in oil, as JC too had done: AMS, 5th May 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>31</sup> AMS, 20th-21st May 1852, GS to JC; BMS 55 fol. 127r-v, 4th February 1861, GS to JC.
- <sup>32</sup> AMS, 17th January and 31st March 1853, GS to JC.
- <sup>33</sup> AMS, 10th March, 21st April and 26th June 1852, 14th June 1853, GS to JC.
- <sup>34</sup> BMS 53, fol. 172v, 25th May 1860, GS to JC. The marriage inspired great gossip not least because it proved short-lived, ending in divorce in 1863 on grounds of JC's impotence. The divorce case papers are in Kew, National Archives, J 77/5/B160.
- <sup>35</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 28th May 1847. See Philip McEvansoneya, 'Cultural philanthropy in mid-nineteenth century Ireland', in L.M. Geary and Oonagh Walsh (eds), *Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (forthcoming); Campbell, 'George Sharp', 126, 129, note 12.
- <sup>36</sup> Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, II, 327. No published translation attributed to Sharp can be traced.

- <sup>37</sup> See also Boime, *The Academy and French Painting*, 192, note 14.
- <sup>38</sup> AMS, letters of 16th and 21st April and 26th June 1852.
- <sup>39</sup> Stewart, *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions*, 3, 656. These drawings have not been located.
- <sup>40</sup> George Sharp, *A Lecture on Elementary Drawing* (Dublin, 1852). Strickland's statement that the lecture was read to the Royal Dublin Society in January 1852 has not been corroborated. In an undated loose sheet from a letter to JC (AMS), Sharp said that Sir Philip Crampton helped to edit the Lecture for publication.
- <sup>41</sup> AMS, 17th January 1853, GS to JC, cf. Dupuis, *De l'enseignement*, 20-21. See also the comments on the lecture by Campbell, 'George Sharp', 126.
- <sup>42</sup> BMS 47, fols 71r-v, 19th October 1858, GS to JC.
- <sup>43</sup> AMS, 1st December 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>44</sup> AMS, 31st March [1853], GS to JC.
- <sup>45</sup> AMS, 9th July 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>46</sup> AMS, 8th June 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>47</sup> AMS, 31st March [1853], GS to JC. The contents of Sharp's second pamphlet, *Two Letters on the Subject of Elementary Drawing* (Dublin, 1856), were addressed to Lord Stanley.
- <sup>48</sup> Reported in the *Art Journal*, new series 5, February 1853, 49-54. See also E. Bonython and A. Burton, *The Great Exhibitor: the life and work of Henry Cole* (London, 2003) 149-61, and Stuart Macdonald, *The history and philosophy of art education* (London, 1970), on Cole and the Government schools of art at this time.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Fine Arts' (book review), *Athenaeum*, 1382, 22nd April 1852, 496-97. A rival theorist in Ireland was the Drogheda painter, Bernard Tumulti. In 1845 he wrote to George Petrie, then the secretary of the RHA, requesting a hearing for his 'Scientific Chart', a 'System of Design' that 'comprehends at a glance all that is usually taught in Drawing schools and Academies'. National Library of Ireland, Petrie Letters, MS 793, no. 614, 26th February 1845. Unfortunately it is not known what this was.
- <sup>50</sup> George Petrie to William F. Wakeman, 8th February 1858. This recently discovered letter is the subject of ongoing research.
- <sup>51</sup> AMS, undated fragment, GS to JC.
- <sup>52</sup> AMS, 14th June 1853, GS to JC.
- <sup>53</sup> AMS, 13th October 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>54</sup> BMS 56/1, fols 113-17, 25th June 1861, GS to JC.
- <sup>55</sup> AMS, 22nd July 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>56</sup> BMS 56/1, fols 18-19, 10th May 1861, GS to JC.
- <sup>57</sup> This painting, or a version of it, is now in the National Gallery of Ireland as *Two children on a bank, Glendalough behind*.
- <sup>58</sup> See Patrick Bowe, 'Irish sporting lodges', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, VII, 2004, 106-39; 119; 123; pl. 16; 128-29, pl. 26.
- <sup>59</sup> BMS 53, fol. 172, 25th May 1860, GS to JC.
- <sup>60</sup> AMS, 10th March 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>61</sup> AMS, 8th November 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>62</sup> On the exhibition, see Elizabeth A. Pergam, *The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857: entrepreneurs, connoisseurs and the public* (Farnham, 2011).
- <sup>63</sup> BMS 43, fols. 194-98, 10th September 1857, GS to JC. Two portraits of Olivares were shown, an equestrian portrait, no. 789, about 9' x 7' from the collection of the Earl of Elgin, and no. 737, a full-length portrait lent by Col. Hugh Baillie and now in the collection of the Hispanic Society of America, New York.

- <sup>64</sup> AMS, 13th October 1852, GS to JC; see also BMS 49, fols 6-9 [1859], GS to JC.
- <sup>65</sup> AMS, [18th] June 1852. This must be the work reproduced by N. Glendinning, E. Harris and F. Russell, 'Lord Grantham and the taste for Velázquez: "the Electrical Eel of the day"', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 141, no. 1159, 1999, 598-605, 600 and 605, fig. 18.
- <sup>66</sup> AMS, 17th January 1853, GS to JC. The 'Big Velasquez' can only have been Philip IV hunting wild boar, 'La tela real', which was the sole work by Velázquez in the Gallery at the time.
- <sup>67</sup> Report of the Parliamentary select committee on the National Gallery (London, 1853) especially paragraphs 5828-5902; see also Nigel Glendinning and Hilary Macartney (eds), *Spanish art in Britain and Ireland 1750-1920: Studies in reception in memory of Enriqueta Harris Frankfurt* (Woodbridge, 2010).
- <sup>68</sup> AMS, 1st December 1852, GS to JC.
- <sup>69</sup> AMS, 12th May 1854, GS to JC.
- <sup>70</sup> Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 37 vols (Leipzig, 1907-50) vol. 30, 561.
- <sup>71</sup> BMS 49, fols 6-9, undated but endorsed as received 3rd June 1859, GS to JC.
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