



*1 – O'Connor's, Main Street, Abbeyfeale: upper-storey detail  
(all photos by the author unless otherwise stated)*

# The stuccowork of Pat McAuliffe of Listowel

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PAT MCAULIFFE LIVED AND WORKED IN LISTOWEL, COUNTY KERRY, FROM 1846 to 1921. In a career as a plasterer and builder, he applied exterior plaster, or stucco, to shopfronts and townhouse façades in the region. From the 1870s onwards he began to develop an ambitious and often exuberant style, using a broad range of elements culled from the vocabulary of classical architecture and ornament, while exploring an eclectic mix of art nouveau, Celtic and Byzantine influences. Local writer Bryan MacMahon, in typically poetic fashion, described McAuliffe:

In retrospect I see him quite clearly, great and black-bearded, his dark eyes alive under a cream-coloured straw hat. He came of an old-established family in the town. As a young man, Pat McAuliffe had in him a restless, imaginative streak that left him dissatisfied with the chores of plastering in an average Irish country town. After a span of run-of-the-mill work, he began, without any formal training in art, to experiment in casting in concrete in his little yard. These experiments gave him a new sense of power. Subsequently, when engaged to plaster the front of a house, he demanded a free hand with the design or else refused to execute the work.<sup>1</sup>

There has been quite a substantial bibliography on some elements of McAuliffe's practice.<sup>2</sup> Typically he is considered in terms of local heritage (MacMahon, White) or as part of a recorded catalogue of a larger subject (Rothery's *Shops of Ireland* or Sheehy's *Celtic Revival*). Throughout these writings, there has been no attempt to critically examine the entirety of his work in an architectural context. However, recent fieldwork in the north Kerry and west Limerick region has yielded a potential attribution of thirty-five to forty buildings embellished by McAuliffe.<sup>3</sup> With such a large body of work present, the innovative stylistic developments that McAuliffe's façades realised can be freshly assessed.

From the early nineteenth century, Listowel and Abbeyfeale, like many

towns throughout the country, grew in size as market towns and commercial centres. This progress accelerated towards the end of the century. Market squares and newly developed streets became the location for commercial and professional activities, as a growing middle class emerged and building plots were laid.<sup>4</sup> An active construction trade developed in the region.<sup>5</sup> While the building of banks and churches was still predominantly the realm of stonemason and carver, stuccowork was used to dress-up shops, pubs and townhouses. Much simple ornament on window and door architraves may be seen, where strapwork, knotwork and classical motifs have been incised out of blocks of setting plaster. Of the remaining examples of this work, there are renderings that can be dated to the 1850s. An amount of this work is on residential buildings.

The developing growth of this skill, mainly within the context of the shopfront, became more feasible with the advent of commercial development in the region. This was ideal ground for McAuliffe to progress from the job of building into the realm of ornament. He plastered and roofed terraces of townhouses, most notably on Patrick Street in Listowel and New Street in Abbeyfeale, before rendering stucco embellishment. He also completed decorative projects by renovating shop and pubfronts on older, three-storey buildings, built earlier in the nineteenth century in Listowel's town centre and on Abbeyfeale's Main Street. With several masons active in the area, an abundance of signature styles are seen on quoins, pilasters, cornices and consoles.<sup>6</sup> McAuliffe's commitment and ambition places him at the apex of this school of platermasonry, as throughout a long career he became technically accomplished and developed a repertoire of styles and symbolic content. This article will detail a selection of McAuliffe façades, developing from ornamental adornment through to later works with rich iconographic substance.

Any discussion of the development of the Irish shopfront and townhouse façade revolves around the dialectic of vernacular methods and classical influence.<sup>7</sup> The Italian Renaissance style of exterior stucco embellishment may be considered a significant source. Sheehy observed the versatility of the medium: 'Renaissance architecture and ornament were first introduced to Britain and Ireland first and foremost as a form of decoration rather than as an overall style for the entire building.'<sup>8</sup> Local craftsman would have adopted what was a high-style humanist activity directly into vernacular building, liberally spread onto façades.<sup>9</sup> With the continued growth of the Irish town and the resulting progression of architectural typologies, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between buildings developed from vernacular tradition, and those that represent degeneration from a high-style architecture. This tension played an important role in façade-composition, and can be traced back to Georgian influence on the Irish built environment. An important contribution from classical principals to the vernacular sphere was the drive towards formal symmetry on building façades. From the late eighteenth century onwards, this visual

device developed as an external manifestation of status symbolism.<sup>10</sup> However, an unpretentious and robust style often resulted, still visible in the streetscapes of many Irish towns. In the south-west, shopfronts from the mid-nineteenth century were much simpler wooden versions of Georgian classicism.<sup>11</sup> Later in the century, social and economic conditions presented an opportunity for more flamboyant plaster embellishment and design in the region.

While McAuliffe's practice was predominantly shaped by classical idioms and their regional adoption, he also used other prominent styles and symbolic content. Through the liberal application of ornamental attributes to a façade, various styles were often represented on a single building. Much of McAuliffe's career was contemporary to the Arts and Crafts Movement and the ornamental impetus it promoted. An important factor in the movement was the diffusion of styles to regional centres and the artisan craftsman through various means; trade journals, postcards, and historical and geographical works were all sources. The availability of the pattern book and technical instruction also contributed.<sup>12</sup> The idea of the craftsman or artisan as a worker-artist and designer was integral to the broader thinking of the time. In this sense, perhaps a definition of the vernacular and the growth of artisan craft could be as that of a repository of culture and identity. This would allude to the importance of the local and its prominence as part of a growing pan-European ethos. Katalin Keseru has defined these relationships, in a manner that might ground McAuliffe within such values:

Regionalism at the turn of the century was basically different in character from its previous appearances. It was not a provincial variation of a great style, school or workshop, but for the first time in history, regionalism itself became a style around the same time in several countries. It signalled a real 'renaissance' – by recognizing and discovering unknown local artistic values, by building them into mainstream art and through altering the characteristics of mainstream art in its regional as well as universal importance.(13)

McAuliffe's family originated in Lixnaw, and moved to Listowel some time in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was part of a long-established family trade in the town, and it is probable that his father before him was a builder.<sup>14</sup> Pat McAuliffe and Catherine Gleeson were married in 1876, and had eight children.<sup>15</sup> They are recorded as residing on Charles Street, in a terrace of artisan cottages built in the 1870s. McAuliffe used the backyard of the property as a working space. By 1911, aged 62, he was recorded as the sole occupant of the property, which had been extended in size since 1901.<sup>16</sup> It is likely that this conversion accommodated a larger working space for his practice. McAuliffe probably had use of a workyard in the vicinity to store raw materials. He used a horse and cart for transportation. He employed labourers, including Dan Brown, Consie O'Sullivan and Dan Healy.<sup>17</sup> His



2 – Assorted moulds from Pat McAuliffe's workshop

3 – Listowel Travel, 15 Main Street, Listowel: detail of console



son Jack also worked in the family trade. McAuliffe might have recruited more local help for large jobs.

The principal technical objective of McAuliffe's practice was to complete as much work as possible off-site. Consoles, quoin impressions, and large sculptural works were fabricated in sections in the workshop, and later assembled on a façade.<sup>18</sup> Various methods of casting were an important activity in the workshop. From an initial clay mock-up, plaster mould or cast-iron model, McAuliffe used a mould repetitively for the mass-production of an ornamental attribute, such as consoles, decorative brackets or modillions (Plate 2). Developing two, three and four-part moulds to accommodate awkward undercut sections was necessary for much capital detail. Undercut casting became an important skill in the complex three-dimensional shapes of later sculptural works. As his great-grandson Ray McAuliffe commented: 'the work involved was unbelievable. Any man would say it was art for art's sake. You wouldn't get paid for it.'<sup>19</sup> The entire procedure would not only include all this workshop activity, but the sourcing and transportation of sand, lime and local clay, and the preparation of each material for a plaster render. While plaster can vary greatly in appearance, plasticity and durability, according to the proportion and quality of ingredients, lime-based renders were predominant in the south-west of Ireland in McAuliffe's time.<sup>20</sup>

Workshop casts were installed



4 – Daly's, Main Street, Abbeyfeale

on-site, as sections were lifted onto scaffolding and attached onto stone or brick-faced frontages. Hard-bonding French fondue cement and metal brackets were used to secure heavy pieces to the façade. McAuliffe enjoyed staging the drama of installation, as he cordoned-off the front of a building with scaffold and a canvas covering, and ran required cornices, pilasters, architraves and stringcourses. He carved out of blocks of setting plaster *in situ*, completing arabesques and zoomorphic detail. With larger sculptural elements, lettering and embellishment all installed, the new façade was revealed to the townspeople by removing the scaffold and curtain.

Ten of McAuliffe's works are detailed here, arranged chronologically. All entries are in Listowel except where otherwise noted. Occupiers of commercial premises in June 2005 are listed to aid in the identification of particular buildings. What becomes obvious when assessing the quantity of surviving McAuliffe work is the amount of lived history and constant social development that has surrounded these façades over a hundred years. This activity will be noted in its relevance to a commission, function of the building, or its location. Subsequent alterations have directly affected the remaining plasterwork legacy. Destruction has unwittingly occurred on ground-floor façades, as fascia boards are refitted for the latest business or tenant. Business priorities and needs have dictated alternative answers rather than sympathetic use. Refenestration using uPVC window fittings is widespread, with the presence of traditional sash windows greatly diminished. Overpainting has dulled much delicately rendered detail. Colour schemes, once used to denote the particular nature of commercial premises, have gradually changed; one can only guess at the original tones used on the plasterwork.

### *Listowel Travel, 15 Main Street*

This was a public house and grocery (that of D.J. Larkin) during McAuliffe's time. The original three-bay, two-storey building probably featured a simple wooden cornice and joinery around an entrance door and shop window, dating back to the 1840s, with refurbishment and luscious plaster detail being added around 1880. Two elaborate consoles (Plate 3) demonstrate a classical *beaux arts* style, an important part of McAuliffe's repertoire at this time. Corinthian capitals, floral embellishment and facial detail all intertwine in the console, surmounted by relief detail upon a curved finial. Vermiculation appears on quoins and keystones. The elaborate moulds used here would have been purchased from a trade catalogue, rather than being fabricated in his workshop.<sup>21</sup> The most engaging element here is not the excessive classicism of such a style, but rather the manner of its incorporation into the compositional frame of the shopfront.

*Daly's, Main Street, Abbeyfeale*

This three-storey, two-bay building (Plate 4) functioned as a public house and grocery, with guesthouse over, from 1853. Its conversion to a drapery and tailor shop in more recent times resulted in the disappearance of any McAuliffe renderings on the fascia board, while today it is a private residence. His work here may be dated to 1890, and is typical of the flamboyant character of hotel-building of the time. Daly's features an eclecticism of detail: Corinthian capitals, Egyptian gorge cornice moulding, arabesques, Latin scrolls, Hiberno-Romanesque bearded men and lionheads, and Italian diamond-pointed quoins, all on a building originating from Georgian architectural principles.

Two large urns of Byzantine influence once crowned the façade at each side of a large bracketed cornice. These were removed after being cited as 'insurance risks' in the 1970s. The upper-storey cornice originally continued across an unter-raced end gable, where McAuliffe embellished a Latin text on a curved scroll – 'E PLURIBUS UNUM' ('out of many, one').<sup>22</sup> Taken from the American Great Seal, this was a suitable motto for nationalist desires of the time, with its reference to the merging of the thirteen colonies into one nation. This composition was prominent from a distance, since buildings of a lower height then existed on Main Street. Dampness in the building meant that the gable was replastered in the early 1960s, resulting in the destruction of the cornice and adornment there.

Daly's is a prime example of the elaborate outward expression seen on plaster façades of the south-west. Such renderings refute any conscious attempts at classical elegance. Instead they are heavily massed onto the frontage, dominating the façade through their material presence and use of expressive style.

*After Dark Nightclub, 19 Market Street*

A terrace of ten limestone-bricked buildings on Market Street was built in the 1870s by Isaac MacMahon, who took No. 19 as his residence and established a public house and grocery there. McAuliffe's rendered pubfront dates to the 1890s. Today it has been much altered from its original composition, harshly remodelled into a nightclub entrance.

Of other remaining details here, consoles consist of a muse's face surrounded by floral motifs, surmounted by a pinnacled fleur-de-lis finial. Pilasters contain delicate fretwork – a repeating foliated pattern reminiscent of hieroglyphic design (Plate 6). Most prominent is a representational sunburst above the cornice (Plate 5). This sculptural splendour would have been painted appropriately from the day of its installation, in tones of gold, yellow and orange. The sunburst, with its nationalist





5, 6 – *After Dark Nightclub, 19 Market Street, Listowel: sunrise detail and pilaster detail*

7 – *Trant’s Farmhouse, Toornageehy, Listowel: gable-end detail*

*opposite*  
8 – *Cryle’s Laundrette, New Street, Abbeyfeale, with cornice and upper-storey detail*

overtures for the day that Ireland literally rises from the horizon (the cornice) of colonialism, is backed into a vertically projecting niche with attached pinnacles. This feature articulates the sunburst’s drama from the cold ashlar of the terrace’s upper floor. Proportionally the static arrangement between the sunburst and its framing is uncomfortable; perhaps the latent intention is that the sun will rise until it fills the entire potential of its niche.

Growing political embitterment influenced McAuliffe’s practice through the use of sunburst motifs, and later iconography including round towers, harps and Mother Ireland. Such symbolism would, no doubt, have resonated with the local community.



*Trant's Farmhouse, Toornageehy, Listowel*

This farmhouse is located five miles outside Listowel, off the Tralee Road. The Trant family purchased the house and farm around 1900, and then extended the house in size. On the road-facing gable end, McAuliffe rendered a large scroll across the length of the gable with the Latin text 'ECCE SIGNUM' ('Behold, the Sign') (Plate 7). A five-pointed star below the scroll sees four small arrowhead motifs radiating from segments of the star, with cross-shaped detail located directly beneath. The later addition of power lines attached to the gable has detracted from the carefully proportioned scroll and star.

McAuliffe's use of Latin (and later French and Anglo-Saxon) mottos on

building façades is reflective of a strong literary tradition in the region. The Catholic Church, the format of the Mass, and the hedge school all traditionally encouraged a rural Latinity. An eclectic knowledge became part of the culture of the region: ‘When every boy knew his Virgil and Horace and Homer as well as the last ballad about some rebel that was hanged ... when Kerry peasants talked to each other in Latin ... they spoke the tongue of Cicero and Livy – the language of the educated world.’<sup>23</sup> William Bedell Stanford observed this peripheral undertaking of classicism as an incessant misquote of Latin tags: ‘an independent, free-thinking treatment of classical media combined with a fondness for erudite language and a copious eloquence almost amounting to a kind of glossolalia at times’.<sup>24</sup> Such a peripheral mode of thinking became a dynamic tool and method of expression when incorporated into McAuliffe’s practice, as a motto for a façade was meticulously chosen and carefully suited to the particular commission.

*Cryle’s Laundrette and Dry Cleaners, New Street, Abbeyfeale*

Formerly O’Mara’s public house, the cornice and upper floor embellishment is all that remains of McAuliffe’s work on the two-storey, three-bay building (Plate 8). In recent years the premises was converted from a public house into a private dwelling. During replastering, the fascia detailing and strapwork pilasters were foolishly removed.<sup>25</sup>

McAuliffe’s compositional sense frequently stressed the presence of the shopfront cornice through embellished crested ornament. Here, a gorged roll moulding underlies a large, massed cornice, upon which eight characteristic plaster block / acanthus leaf / urn combinations rest. A Byzantine flavour is evident in the urns, each topped with a cross detail. The first storey is framed by pilaster strips of Celtic interlacing, with loose foliated capitals of McAuliffe’s invention above them. Rounded modillions support an upper-storey cornice. The space around three window openings is adorned with large bands of egg-and-dart ovolo moulding and incised brackets. To complete the composition, hexagram features and irregularly radiating star shapes float above ovolo bands. The resulting façade is an eclectic mixture of exaggerated classical detailing, combined with Celtic and Middle Eastern influences. The present colour scheme stresses the remaining renderings.

*O’Connor’s, Main Street, Abbeyfeale*

William D. O’Connor had many business concerns in Abbeyfeale – drapery, public house, grocery, hardware, builder suppliers and undertaking divisions. This building

was once the family townhouse, with a drapery shop and a Provincial Bank of Ireland building housed at ground level. McAuliffe's work here is rendered as an eye-catcher on the building's upper two floors (Plates 1, 9, 10). This adornment incorporates a wide selection of iconography into the compositional setting of architectural design. The daring nature of such a large-scale embellishment runs the risk of falling into the realm of pointless pastiche. However McAuliffe avoids such pitfalls, instead inducing a curious wonderment to the building.

The original building on the site probably dates to the 1850s, with large-scale renovations taking place between 1905 and 1910. There is no evidence of McAuliffe activity on the ground floor, where a large shopfront, residential entrance and pubfront are all stacked. Instead, McAuliffe's work is spread over the upper stories. Above a decorative cornice, with a patterned cresting running the length of two sides of the building, the first floor has nine pilaster strips of free-flowing Celtic interlacing with zoomorphic detailing rising up between fenestration to meet loosely foliated capitals. Pairs of Celtic interlaced creatures stare at each other in each bay. The top floor consists of ten large imposts spread across the façade. These features are turret-like, and until the 1960s each had Grecian urns as finials. An identical arabesque decoration is incised on each impost. Above each arabesque is an alternate series of framed motifs, namely representations of a swan, pairs of flamingos and more arabesques. Pilaster strips run below each impost, with casual plaster detailing. Zoomorphic and biblical allegories are presented – a woolly mammoth, a wolf, a frog, a peacock, Eve in the Garden of Eden, and a dove all feature. More zoomorphism appears on keystoned windows, with elephants and lionheads.

The focal point of the embellishment occurs at the corner of the top floor, where McAuliffe has rendered a segmented curved mass (Plate 1). Upon this protruding volume the Latin motto 'VITA BREVIS ARS LONGA' ('life is short, art is long') appears, a suitable syntax to consider McAuliffe and his work a hundred years later. A scrolled text sprawled below reads:

<i>Hal, wes bu, folde, fira modor</i>	Hail to thee, Earth, Mother of men!
<i>Beo bu grovende on Godes ferfine</i>	Be fruitful in God's embrace
<i>Fodre greffylled, firum to nytte</i>	Filled with food for the use of men. <sup>26</sup>

This text is an Anglo-Saxon agricultural fertility charm, appropriately looking down on the farming hinterland of west Limerick. To complete the eclectic corner composition, the figure of an angel was placed above the rendered text. It was removed because of structural concerns.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years the upper storeys suffered neglect, with layers of lead-based oil paint peeling away from the façade resulting in a shoddy appearance. However, the new owner had the façade sandblasted and repainted in summer 2004. He also repaired much deteriorated plaster on the building.



9 – O'Connor's, Main Street, Abbeyfeale:  
upper-storey and corner details



10 – O'Connor's, Main Street, Abbeyfeale

*The Star and Garter, 83 Church Street*

A long-gone pub-front design was completed across this two-storey, three-bay building; today only architrave and quoin details remain. Of the disappeared embellishment, MacMahon noted ‘two dragons, also the work of the maestro’.<sup>28</sup> This detail (Plate 11) was delicately placed above an upper-storey cornice. Documentation reveals an oriental influence at work in this zoomorphic detail, while MacMahon’s 1986 interpretation of dragons is preceded by his description in 1962 of flamingos picking at grapes.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this earlier account is more apt, considering the function of the premises beneath as that of a public house.



11 – 83 Church Street, Listowel:  
zoomorphic detail

(from Bryan MacMahon, ‘Pat McAuliffe of Listowel’, *TYPOGRAPHICA*, no. 6, 1962)

*The Emporium, 15 Church Street*

The town’s post office was once located in this terraced single-bay, three-storey building, with residential quarters over. There is currently a beauty salon on the ground floor. McAuliffe’s work may be dated to 1905-10, on a building constructed in the 1840s (Plate 12). Bryan MacMahon wrote: ‘The Emporium, as it is still lovingly known, was an informal meeting place of young men and women associated with the national ideals of the earlier decades of the century.’<sup>30</sup> Symbolism on the building’s façade established the address as a place of such encounters. As at Daly’s (p.49), McAuliffe portrays an icon of nationalist unity, the Great Seal. The American eagle perches, wings spread, on the top of the building, again with the motto ‘E PLURIBUS UNUM’ (‘out of many, one’) below. This motto, placed on the upper stories of several McAuliffe façades, declares a nationalist propaganda for townspeople to, quite literally, look up to. Small lion-heads terminate a curved plaster scroll below the American eagle. Two horses, as if attempting to escape the confines of the building’s structure, are placed on each side. Close inspection suggests that these horses had well-articulated wings on their midriff to lift them upwards from the earthly confines of architecture. Such delicate plaster detail has disappeared over the years, with only a fragment of the design left on each horse. This equestrian detail may be identified as a representation of Pegasus, the mythical flying horse. Below him, on each side, is a block of incised arabesque tracing. The

placement of a characteristic nationalist sunburst below more ostentatious elements cleverly unites the upward movement of both American eagle and Pegasus to the horizon of a strongly defined bracketed cornice. The Emporium's crown is one of McAuliffe's most successful arrangements; the nationalist narrative is unambiguous.

The sculptural crown enlightens the fluid, yet structured, architectural composition beneath. The second storey consists of detailed arabesque decoration incised into pilaster strips on each side of a window. Above each pilaster are capitals with more incised renderings of alternate motifs, lavishly recalling the grace and movement of what appear to be winged creatures, possibly a swan and two flamingos. Further down, the first storey features Celtic guilloche pilasters and zoomorphic detail of a distinct Celtic nature at either side of a curved fascia. The word 'EMPORIUM' was once present, rendered as relief plaster on the fascia. The constant progression in detail continues into the ground floor, with egg-and-dart moulding and another cartouche with scroll terminations above an entrance door and shopfront.

In 1997 residents of Church Street launched a campaign to preserve and repaint the building. White wooden window and doorframes were removed and replaced with brown PVC. The repainting replaced the original yellow and white, as the façade succumbed to pale cream. A precariously positioned eagle was reinforced with steel. This restoration job did not attempt to repair the lost detail of each Pegasus, while part of the first-floor cornice has since come away from the building.

The Emporium building is perhaps the best example defining McAuliffe's later work in terms of an entire façade embellishment, as an autonomous work of art demonstrating its own internal dynamics, symbolism and allegory. With such formal extremes, the practical difficulties of resolving an artistic intervention in a streetscape are highlighted. Everyday realities affect the façade: two chimneys lessen the impact of zoomorphic detail on the upper cornice, while the building's guttering system eliminates any accurate symmetry. If anything, such juxtapositions only reinforce the nature of McAuliffe's later practice as one of rich expressive ideologies, rather than a rational act of architecture.

### *The Maid of Erin Bar, 12 Main Street (Small Square)*

In 1912 McAuliffe renovated the wooden shopfront of Potter's public house and inn, and rendered 'J.M. GALVIN' on the fascia for new owner Jeremiah M. Galvin. The sculptural appendage above an elaborate cornice has become the most widely known example of McAuliffe's work (Plate 13). The current premises is renamed the Maid of Erin in its honour, resulting in the destruction of the original McAuliffe lettering from the fascia board in the mid-1980s. The location of the building at the





*12 – The Emporium, 15 Church Street, Listowel*

*opposite 13 – The Maid of Erin, 12 Main Street, Listowel: upper-storey detail*



primary entrance to Listowel's main square was an appropriate place for what is a monumental work, reflecting then-prominent nationalist desires.

McAuliffe's arabesque symmetry, Scandinavian strapwork, urns and acanthus-leaf motifs adorn consoles, cornice and first floor. These embellishments are used to frame the symbolic sculptural rendering between first-floor fenestration. A sunburst motif rises from the horizon of a scroll featuring the title 'CENTRAL HOTEL'. Below this, the figure of Erin leans on her harp, with a wolfhound at her feet and a round tower beside her. Consider the round tower as the place of refuge from the foreign invader, the wolfhound as the protector arisen from the Fenian cycle, the Harp as the means to our muse. The Maid is portrayed as topless, a heavy-set woman, barefoot, clearly of and for the land, resting on a mound that is the island of her destiny.<sup>31</sup> This massed shape has shamrock embellishments, loose Celtic interlacing and the text 'ERIN GO BRAGH' ('Ireland forever') on its surface.

Over the years, the Maid, as with much of Listowel's other plaster rendering, has endured many different colour schemes. Presumably McAuliffe himself would have chosen the original shades. While we can only estimate what those original tones were, some degree of layered similarity must have been continued in redecoration since. The representational nature of the Maid means the issue of colour continuity is a paramount concern. What becomes obvious, as in all other cases, is that

the precise tones employed are a fluctuated result of personal taste of a premises' owner or painting contractor, rather than that of historical stability. In 1999 new owners, in the spirit of political correctness, painted a less revealing gown upon the body of the Maid. However, after much public outcry, the bosom of Erin was restored to its former glory.

While contemporaneous representations of Erin in the public domain often demand of her presentation a characteristic of canonical beauty, or related aesthetic engagement, McAuliffe's negation of such norms in his sole large-scale figurative work is aesthetically akin to the realm of folk art.<sup>32</sup> The rest of McAuliffe's practice reveals an awareness of classical narratives, and surely he would have carefully thought of such means when working on this straightforward execution of typical nineteenth-century iconography. However, it feels uncomfortable to label his Erin 'folk art'. The term simply cannot explain the sculptural, architectural, political and social implications present.<sup>33</sup> Instead, it might be more apt to consider this artwork as a definite refusal of classically influenced aesthetical preponderates; its nature may be that of immediate political comment rather than tailored aesthetic consideration and consolation.

#### *Harp and Lion, 44 Church Street*

McAuliffe's last major work was completed on the public house of Patrick M. Keane, a terraced two-bay, three-storey house. Today the bar is named the Harp and Lion, after its sculptural detail. As with the Maid of Erin, an attempt at an entire façade embellishment is overlooked in favour of a more focused installation above a rendered pubfront (Plate 14).

MacMahon describes the installation of the sculptural shield on the first floor, placed between the window openings there:

Ah! No.44 is the Harp and Lion. Over the years, I hear the voice of Mrs. Keane telling me of Pat McAuliffe's arrival to decorate the shopfront. This would be about 1914 or so. 'He didn't tell me what he was putting over the door', she used to say, 'and I dared not to ask.' He arrived with a shrouded figure in an ass cart ... The Lion on the Irish harp caused some worry for this was a time of national awareness. 'Not at all, Mrs. Keane', Pat replied – 'the Lion is a sign of strength and is guiding the harp.'<sup>34</sup>

The composition on the first floor consists of this lion upon an entablature, surmounting the harp beneath (Plate 15). The lion gazes out towards the street, indeed seemingly protective of the emblem of Ireland. This arrangement is enclosed by scrolled mouldings, with Latin, French and Irish slogans; 'SPES MEA IN DEO' (in God

14 – P.M. Keane, 44 Church Street, Listowel,  
c.1940

(from Bryan MacMahon, 'Shopfronts', *IRELAND OF THE  
WELCOMES*, XX, 3, 1971)



we trust), 'Maison de Ville' and 'ERIN GO BRAGH'. The shield is completed with rendered heads at each end of the entablature and zoomorphic motifs clutching onto shamrocks around the harp.

Pilasters at each side of the pubfront consist of symmetrical strapwork patterns above capitals, each of which features incised plaster impressions of a songbird. Consoles jut forward, each embellished with arabesque decoration (Plate 16). The original cresting above the cornice has since disappeared, as, over time, metal armatures encased in the plaster have oxidised and expanded, splitting and cracking the plaster around it. In the late 1960s a renovation job was required after such difficulties were encountered. A delicate skeletal-pattern infill was replaced by a more pronounced arrangement of harped motifs and round-headed dividing blocks, fabricated in metal. As regards the fascia board, 'P.M. KEANE' lettering disappeared during a change of ownership in the 1980s, along with the destruction of arrow motifs at either side. The loss of all this detail is very unfortunate, considering its vibrant Celto-Byzantine and Art Nouveau-led styling.



*P.M. Keane, 44 Church Street, Listowel  
15 – Harp and Lion: first-floor detail; 16 – Harp and Lion: console detail*

## THE NATURE OF McAULIFFE'S ART

For Pat McAuliffe's practice to be appreciated in terms of the rich legacy it has left, there are several immediate considerations. Tom Duddy noted: 'Romantic concepts of place, atmosphere, native sensibility, native impulse, local genius, and the Celtic imagination are given priority over much "dirty" materialistic concepts as economy, market, commodity, visual ideology.'<sup>35</sup> A careful balance of both strands of this discourse is vital to an understanding of McAuliffe's practice. The political, economic and prominent social ideologies of his time all influenced the development and composition of his façades, as much as more romanticised issues such as the mental, moral and physical satisfaction of local craftsmanship. In developing

this substantial body of work in the social theatre of the townscape, McAuliffe is best seen as a complex case of regionalism. This fits seamlessly into the National Romanticism that presented itself through regional expression in much European turn-of-the-century design. Nicola Gordon Bowe, on the ideals of National Romanticism, has observed, 'few architectural entities ... are unique in their revelation of the practical workings of the contemporary concept of *gesamkunstwerk* where all the quarried threads are woven into an integrated idiom.'<sup>36</sup> In this context, McAuliffe, as designer, plastermason, and architectural sculptor, might be identified as a prominent and innovative practitioner.

As throughout much of Europe, a growing historical interest developed in Ireland under the stimulus of Romanticism, often taking a nationalist turn. Specifically indigenous Irish motifs and symbolism, commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century, found its most exuberant expression in the applied arts and the artisan tradition rather than within the fine arts. The most obvious use by McAuliffe of this subject matter is the Maid of Erin and the Harp and Lion. However, it is clear when one examines the entirety of his work that McAuliffe was not a straightforward exponent of a Celtic Revival style. For example, only one interlaced pattern appears in a series of pilaster strips rendered by him. Scandinavian strapwork appears in later embellishments, along with series of exotic arabesques. This is not to imply, however, that McAuliffe had no interest in Celtic Revival style, and it is obvious that zoomorphic detail employed by him in later works was carefully derived from such influences.

The relationship between fantastic ornament and a conventionally designed building suggests a tension in any attempt to resolve a single viewpoint of McAuliffe's output. Firstly, consider the historicist tendency presented through an interest in the tradition and academicism of classical styles and decorative principles originating from the Italian Renaissance. Compare this with the avant-garde, stylistically dissolved tendencies of turn-of-the century decorative principles – another important element in McAuliffe's work. Clearly, there is little opportunity for inner cohesion and unity in the resulting practice. A clearer interpretation emerges when a focus is placed on the fluid dynamics of his work and the assimilation of eclectic sources. Here, stylistic characteristics might be seen not as direct quotations of specific styles, but rather as allusions to specific elements. Such parody in relation to an architectural canon has many of its roots in the decorative qualities of Art Nouveau. One important aspect of the movement was the regional characteristics and stylistic differences manifest throughout its main locations – Paris, Belgium, Glasgow and Austria-Germany. Within this framework, north Kerry and west Limerick may be comfortably considered an outlying setting for McAuliffe's work. The location of his practice in what is essentially an architectural backwater away from any *fin de siècle* avant-garde has allowed for a body of work that would initially appear even

more curious in terms of its context and message. However, these façades should be realised for what they are: a large collection of well-articulated architectural features that fit seamlessly into a European-wide tradition and spirit.

The region has shown some degree of fidelity to the plastermason practice. Shop and house-owners have, without any conservation guidance or financial aid, endeavoured to keep the local plasterwork legacy alive. The actual façades are quite robust and long lasting, and in most cases need little maintenance except for repair of broken details and repainting. There is a clear opportunity for the restoration of several McAuliffe works, particularly in the case of disappeared detail, often integral to the original design of a façade. For such activity to be carried out in a correct manner there must be a valid and genuine interest and input from the heritage and architectural sectors. A practical realisation needs to occur to value these façades both on a local and national level. It is to be desired that day-to-day interaction with these public artworks happens in a positive and meaningful way. The general awareness of decorated frontages and shopfronts of the region appears to be that of sidelined decoration rather than of successfully integrated artworks into the built environment, a view that needs to be overturned. There is obvious potential in a concerted attempt at reviving perceptions of this accomplished stuccowork, and in invigorating a civic pride towards these townscapes and Pat McAuliffe's work.

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> B. MacMahon, 'Pat McAuliffe of Listowel', *Typographica*, 6, 1962, 27.
- <sup>2</sup> Notably, *ibid.*; S. Rothery, *Shops of Ireland* (Dublin 1978) 68-69; Rothery discussed McAuliffe's practice with two informative sketches of façades in Abbeyfeale; S. Rothery, *A Field Guide to the Buildings of Ireland* (Dublin 1997) 127-28. While Rothery's writings considered McAuliffe within an architectural context, they did not comprehensively develop this, due to the brevity of each article; S. White, 'Plaster Images in Listowel', *The Irish Times* (4 August 1979) noted, 'you see this man at the end of his long career, an unlikely revenant of Robert West and Michael Stapleton, the Dublin stuccodores'; J. Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past, The Celtic Revival 1830-1930* (London 1980) 76, photos on 77, 80; AnCo survey team, S. McCarthy and B. MacMahon, *Streets of Listowel* (Tralee 1986); J. Williams, A

*Companion Guide to Architecture in Ireland, 1837-1921* (Dublin 1994) 262, 396; L. White, 'Remembering Pat MacAuliffe,' *Ireland of the Welcomes*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1999, 36-40.

- <sup>3</sup> This catalogue was compiled from August 2003 to April 2004. Recognition of the time and place of McAuliffe's craft was based on a series of circumstantial assumptions. Local histories and traditions were an important element in establishing criteria for attribution; many interviews and informal conversations guided any conjectures. Stylistic comparison has been used to acknowledge sites of McAuliffe activity. Plasterwork no longer existent has been accounted for by photographic evidence and through the remembered history of the locality. While his trade involved rendering ornament both inside and outside, this catalogue focused specifically on façade embellishment.
- <sup>4</sup> Census General Reports recorded the growing population of Listowel – 1851: 2,199; 1861: 2,273; 1871: 2,199; 1881: 2,965; 1891: 3,566; 1901: 3,605; 1911: 3,409.
- <sup>5</sup> Census General Report, 1881, recorded 32 carpenters, 4 bricklayers, 13 masons, and 3 slaters. No plasterers were noted. One male sculptor is recorded in Listowel, possibly McAuliffe. Census General Report, 1891, recorded 2 builders, 26 carpenters, 8 masons, 2 slaters, and 4 plasterers in the town. Building tradesmen would have performed a wide variety of tasks and jobs, so the use of specific categorised statistics is perhaps not reflective of the diversity of artisan trade. However, these numbers give a valuable insight into the number of people involved.
- <sup>6</sup> Travelling plastermasons plied their trade in the region, especially before McAuliffe gained a reputation for the nature of his work. Of local craftsmen who were McAuliffe's contemporaries, Michael Reidy from Killarney designed the wooden shopfront of J.J. Galvin's public house c.1918, while travelling Italian craftsmen who came to Listowel to work on the Roman Catholic church were responsible for the mosaic rendering of O'Geaibain on the fascia board. This Arts and Crafts work is one of the best-kept shopfronts in the town, following restoration in the 1990s. Known locally as 'The Cement God', Paddy Whelan worked a long career as a plastermason during the first half of the last century. An amount of straightforward console plasterwork using Celtic motifs can be seen throughout Listowel. Whelan developed a strong compositional sense with Corinthian-detailed pilasters, segmental fascia panels and a saw-tooth patterned cornice on Whelan's fruit and vegetable shop at 33 William Street. Egyptian influences are at work within a refined classical context at the end-of-terrace two-bay, three-storey townhouse at 19 The Square. There, the upper stories' decorative frieze gives way to pediments and colonettes on the ground floor.
- <sup>7</sup> Two articles presented concise observations on classicism's influence on Irish façade decoration. J. Piper, 'A Cubist Folk Art', *Architectural Review*, 559, July 1943, described diamond-shaped rustication on buildings in Omagh, Cork, Donegal and Roscommon. O. Lancaster, 'Celtic Highlights', *Architectural Review*, 613, January 1948, discussed and illustrated painted diamond-pattern façades and pyramidal-faced rustication on public houses in Dublin. Both authors refer to the fifteenth-century Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, as the origin of the diamond style, which was part of McAuliffe's repertoire.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Sheehy, in P. Harbison, H. Potterman, J. Sheehy (eds), *Irish Art and Architecture, from Prehistory to the Present* (London 1978) 128. G. Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer* (London 1953) 59-81, discussed parge decoration (exterior plaster onto timber-framed buildings) in fourteenth-century England.
- <sup>9</sup> Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, 61, illustrates and discusses Sparrow's House in Ipswich, dated to 1557. 'The chief part of the ornament is as usual out of reach on the first floor, between and



under the windows, and is evidently the work of the native craftsmen.’ The building bears a resemblance to some McAuliffe façade embellishments. Recessed patterns, diaper work and volute shapes were shaped through the use of templates, technically akin to many McAuliffe renderings.

- <sup>10</sup> A. Gailey, *Rural Houses of the North of Ireland* (Edinburgh 1984) 221. ‘Window and door styles borrowed from classical formalism are an example, but the overall concept of visual symmetry took longer to manifest itself on the façades of vernacular houses.’ It should be emphasised that vernacular traditions also placed an importance on stressing and embellishing the frontage of a building. The technique of ‘galleting’ consisted of pressing small stones or pieces of coloured glass into mortar between stoned walls. This occurred mainly on the front façade of the building.
- <sup>11</sup> Rothery, *Shops of Ireland*, 34-35, illustrates examples of small, wooden-framed shopfronts in Askeaton, county Limerick, and Kildorrery, county Cork. They feature a simple fascia, wood pilasters, and colonettes with foliated capitals.
- <sup>12</sup> *Guy’s Directory of Munster* records ‘the Science and Art Committee (South Kensington)’ in Listowel in 1886 and 1893. Its chairman was Thomas Francis Rahilly. It was involved in postal correspondence courses with South Kensington, with an actual technical school later established in 1913. It is likely that lectures were presented on a regular basis and that McAuliffe might have attended.
- <sup>13</sup> K. Keseru, ‘Vernacularism and Its Special Characteristics in Hungarian Art’, in Nicola Gordon Bowe (ed.), *Art and the National Dream, the Search for Vernacular Design in Turn of the Century Design* (Dublin 1993) 127. This spirit of design shares similarities in Hungary, Norway, Russia, and Ireland, countries where political independence was limited.
- <sup>14</sup> J.A. Gaughan, *Listowel and its Vicinity* (Cork 1973) 129, notes ‘Some Listowel families were engaged in particular trades for three or more generations.’ The McAuliffes (masons and builders) are mentioned, amongst other families of weavers, carpenters, dyers and blacksmiths.
- <sup>15</sup> Ray and Thelma McAuliffe, interview, 27 August 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> 1901, 1911 census.
- <sup>17</sup> Maurice McElligott, interview, 1 November 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> A collection of the remaining moulds and casts, once part of his workshop, are now in the possession of great-grandson Ray McAuliffe.
- <sup>19</sup> Ray McAuliffe, interview, 12 September 2003. Now retired, Ray worked as a builder in the family trade, and is familiar with many of the technical intricacies of the McAuliffe craft.
- <sup>20</sup> ‘Limestone is found in several parts and quarried chiefly for burning.’ S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London 1837), Listowel entry (no page number). Lime was used instead of cement-based renders, which were more common in other places. A lime render could ‘breathe’, absorbing moisture under wet conditions and releasing it again when the weather dried. In contrast, cement renders were less permeable since water absorbed through tiny cracks and fissures, leading to possible problems of damp within a building.
- <sup>21</sup> There are resemblances between McAuliffe’s console detail at 15 Main Street and a mould, detailing floral embellishment and facial detail that intertwine in elaborate detail, in an advertisement in *The Irish Builder*, 1 August 1890. This promotion illustrated a similar *beaux arts* console, one of the samples of fibrous plasterwork by T. Cordingly & Sons Bradford, Yorkshire. The company’s Dublin agent was William Thorburn, 15 Talbot Place. The company advertised throughout the 1890s in *The Irish Builder*.

- <sup>22</sup> Damien Daly, interview, 22 November 2003.
- <sup>23</sup> P.A. Sheehan, *The Literary Life and Other Essays* (Dublin 1921) 52.
- <sup>24</sup> W.B. Stanford, *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (Dublin 1979) 45-46.
- <sup>25</sup> A sketch of the disappeared decoration in Rothery, *A Field Guide to the Buildings of Ireland*, 127; see also Rothery, *Shops of Ireland*, 68. A photograph of O'Mara's façade accompanies K. Sheridan, 'Shopping Around', *The Irish Times*, 20 June 1980.
- <sup>26</sup> Nuns at the nearby convent translated the text some years ago. Bobby Molyneux supplied the translation, which can be traced to manuscripts from the tenth century and is linked to the cult of the earth mother goddess prevalent among ancient Germanic peoples. R.K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London 1954) 86, notes of such charms that 'the passages in them untouched by Christian beliefs are probably among the oldest lines in the English language'. Gordon describes this three-line text as part of a longer 'land-remedy', a ceremony performed onsite in a farmer's field. 'First the ceremonial is explained. This is followed by a prayer that the land will be blessed. Then come more ceremonial; and then the chief incantation – an address to Mother Earth. The first furrow is then to be made, and Mother Earth again entreated.'
- <sup>27</sup> MacMahon, 'Pat McAuliffe of Listowel', 32, 'In Abbeyfeale a wall-stay undermined the fine figure of an angel and necessitated its removal. Apropos of this, old Pat's grandson smilingly remarked: "My grandfather got £7 for creating an angel, and my father and I got £14 for destroying him."' McAuliffe had completed at least two versions of an angel figure for different commissions. All have disappeared.
- <sup>28</sup> MacMahon, *Streets of Listowel*, 13.
- <sup>29</sup> MacMahon, 'Pat McAuliffe of Listowel', 32, photo on 28.
- <sup>30</sup> MacMahon, *Streets of Listowel*, 11.
- <sup>31</sup> White, 'Remembering Pat McAuliffe,' 37, notes, 'How the parish priest is reported to have been asked, as he paused to examine the newly installed work, what he thought of the central figure. His considered reply was that, should misfortune in the form of a famine revisit Listowel, she would probably be able to suckle the entire population of the parish.'
- <sup>32</sup> Compare McAuliffe's strong woman to the delicacies of a weeping Erin on Burnet and Comerford's Irish House at Wood Quay (1870), or the lifted ambition and classically influenced composition of Erin presented by Pearce and Sharp for the National Bank in College Green (1889).
- <sup>33</sup> In this sense, the difficulty in critical formulations of the term 'folk art' has been noted by Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art* (New York 1995) 88. 'Choose from three different definitions of "folk" (the nationalistic, the radical or the existential), then choose from among three different definitions of "art" (by medium, function or process), and combine them. All of the possible combinations have been used. And many people have not bothered with definitions at all, preferring to label folk art things that look like the things that other people call folk art.'
- <sup>34</sup> MacMahon, *Streets of Listowel*, 11.
- <sup>35</sup> T. Duddy, 'Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism of the Right?' in F. Cullen (ed.), *Sources on Irish Art: a Reader* (Cork 2000) 95.
- <sup>36</sup> Gordon Bowe, *Art and the National Dream*, 7.