



1 – No. 12 Merrion Square, Dublin (1764-68): stairhall

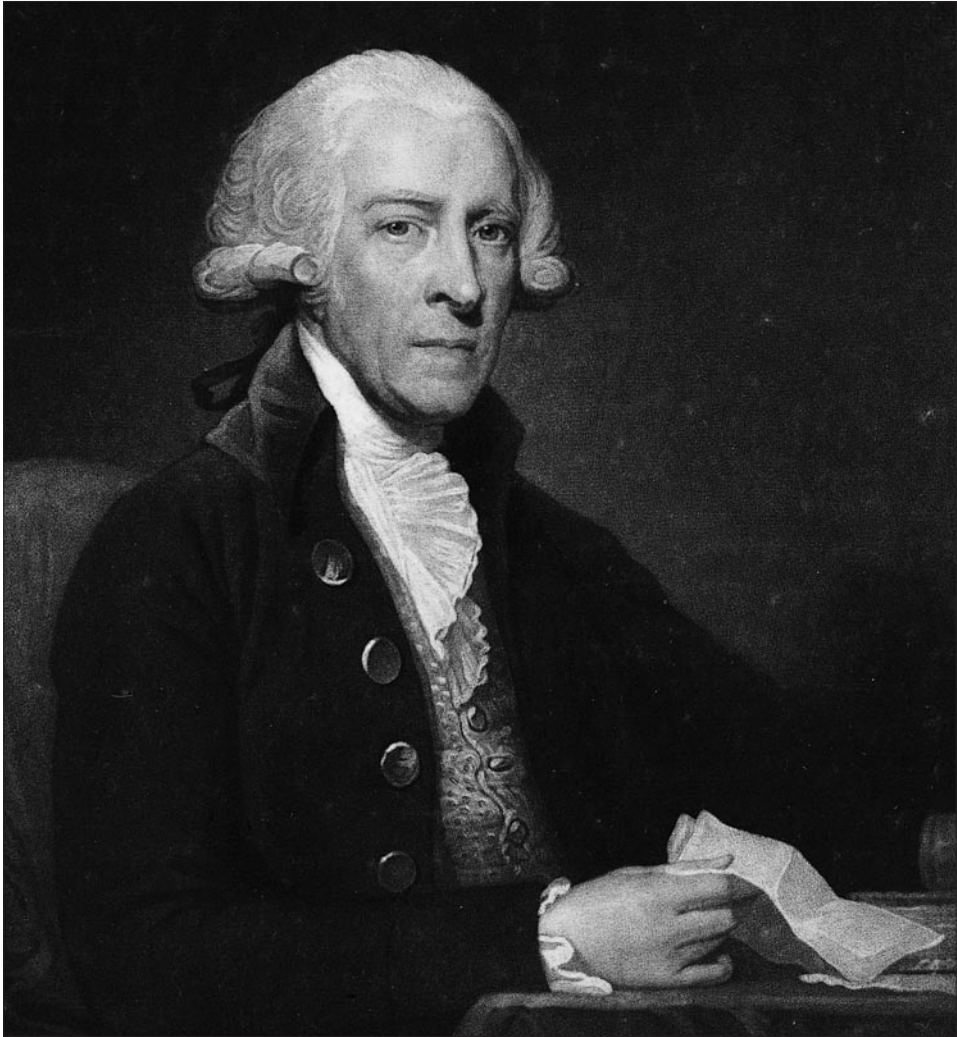
*(Note that the wall colourings shown in this article are twentieth century.
The original shades would probably have been different tones of white and stone)*

Number 12 Merrion Square: townhouse of the Right Honourable William Brownlow

LORETO CALDERÓN AND CHRISTINE CASEY

NUMBER 12 MERRION SQUARE, BUILT BETWEEN 1764 AND 1766 FOR THE RT Hon William Brownlow, is a little-known house of considerable scale and pretension. Brownlow (Plate 2) was a landowner, linen manufacturer, and MP for Lurgan, county Armagh, from 1753 to 1794. A respected and influential member of the House of Commons, he was narrowly defeated by a mere four votes in the election of Speaker in 1771.¹ Lord Charlemont described him as ‘one of the most independent members that ever sat in the House of Commons of Ireland. Whenever he spoke, he was heard with peculiar attention and respect. To oratorical powers he laid no claim; but he delivered his sentiments with uncommon perspicuity, great neatness, great elegance, and occasionally, with a tempered fire and spirit, which were felt by everyone about him...’² Brownlow was also a musician of considerable talent, trained in Florence by the Abbé Felice Dona, and with his friend Lord Mornington was a member of the Charitable Music Society. He is reputed to have played the harpsichord at the first performance of Handel’s *Messiah*.³ Brownlow was twice married, first to Judith Laetitia Meredyth of Newtown in county Meath, with whom he had four children, and secondly to Catherine, daughter of Roger Hall of Narrowater in county Down (a first cousin of the Duke of Leinster), who bore him three sons and seven daughters. Three daughters by his second wife married peers.⁴ Brownlow was a fastidious record-keeper, and his surviving papers vividly record the detail of domestic and business affairs in Lurgan and Dublin during the 1760s.⁵ His building accounts for No. 12 Merrion Square expand our limited knowledge of domestic building in the city during the period. More importantly, however, by identifying the author of the house’s ornate plasterwork decoration, they add a new and distinctive persona to the remarkable but largely anonymous Dublin school of plasterwork of the 1760s.

No. 12 was Brownlow’s second Dublin house in less than a decade. The first, on Leinster Street, was built in 1755 at a cost of £2,000, and following the death of his first wife in 1764 was sold for £2,200 to the Bishop of Clogher.⁶ In April 1764



2 – Engraved portrait of William Brownlow by Charles Howard Hodges (after Gilbert Stuart)
(courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)

the foundations of No. 12 Merrion Square were dug. During the next two years payments were made through a Mr Welldon to Wall the bricklayer, Morgan, stonecarver, Gilliard, carpenter, and Clement, bricklayer, and 721 feet of window glass was provided by Turner & Lilly of London. Between April 1764 and December 1765, £3,205 18s was spent on the house. On his marriage to Catherine Hall in 1765, the house was at an advanced stage of construction, and, after travelling in France, the couple took up residence at Merrion Square in 1766.

Brownlow was the second owner-occupier to build on the square. The first

ten 'lots' on the north side were taken by a group of tradesmen and surveyors who built a row of houses of varying dimensions and plans. Though John Ferrar's *View of Dublin* of 1796 attributes a design for the square to John Ensor and Ralph Ward, there is no evidence to support this claim, and the surviving documentation suggests that Lord Fitzwilliam had no architectural pretensions for the square other than that the houses be 'good and substantial ... three stories and a half high above the cellars', with a front area of eight feet and a flagged pavement of ten.⁷ In November 1764, the engineer Charles Vallancey reproached Fitzwilliam because a level had not been struck for the houses on the north side, and each builder raised 'his street door and his attics without rule or guide'.⁸

While there is considerable variety in the door, window and parapet levels, the north side of the square is remarkable by Dublin standards in that most of the houses have granite rustication to the hall floor. This was evidently not the result of obligatory building clauses, and may reflect a standard promoted by Fitzwilliam, who provided lessees with stone from his quarries at a reduced price. He did, however, insist on unbroken terraces, and refused permission to open carriage arches to several distinguished prospective buyers. Brownlow's neighbour at No. 11, Columbine Lee Carré, was the first owner to construct his own residence on the square – a four-bay house which is considerably larger than Nos 1 to 9. Surprisingly, given the increase in scale, the front is of plain brick with no stone embellishment other than a Doric doorcase. Brownlow followed suit, eschewing the rustication employed in the adjacent speculative building and opting for a plain front of stock brick.

The site was a little under 70ft in breadth, and on it Brownlow built a house of 44ft and a carriage arch of 24ft. In February 1766 the coach-house lane was gravelled at a cost of fifteen shillings. Significantly, Brownlow was the only leaseholder to obtain permission from Fitzwilliam to construct a carriage arch. His friend and fellow musician Lord Mornington cited this favour in an unsuccessful bid to gain frontage on the south side of the square, flanked by two carriage arches. No. 12 is larger than all other houses on the north side of the square, and the interior is palatial in scale and decoration. A three-bay house over 44ft in breadth allowed for generous proportions. The plan, however, is the standard two rooms flanked by a hall and entrance hall. A long narrow concealed space flanks the entire east wall, and originally contained a service stair to the rear. This attenuated compartment is decidedly odd, and suggests perhaps that Brownlow intended to build a larger house of four or even five bays, but changed his mind mid-stream. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of an eighteenth-century basement vaulting under No. 13 – a narrow nineteenth-century house built on the site of Brownlow's coveted carriage arch.⁹ Certainly the scale and grandeur of the interior sits oddly with a two-room plan.

The single-bay entrance hall is exceptionally broad and tall, and is the only



3 – Doorcase on first-floor landing

*opposite
4, 5 – No. 12
Merrion Square:
detail of the stairhall
plasterwork
ornament by James
Byrne*

*(all photographs by
David Davison unless
otherwise stated)*

hall in a Dublin terraced house to have an Ionic pilaster order. The stairhall (Plate 1) is lit by an enormous round-headed window, the glazing now altered but retaining its carved frame with remarkably high-relief soffit decoration. The walls have large rectilinear panels with large and idiosyncratic birds perched on acanthus scrolls, and floral festoons and pendants (Plates 4, 5). While the window frame is Corinthian, the entablature is of an enriched Doric order with gigantic flowers in the metopes. Above the three pedimented doorcases on the first-floor landing are stucco over-door panels with vine festoons, while between the large wall panels and the doors are frameless pendants of fruit and flowers suspended from fictive ribbons (Plate 3). This spectacular if somewhat gauche plasterwork scheme was the work of James Byrne, who in 1765 was paid just over £446 for plasterwork in the house. This sum included the purchase and carriage of coals, and payments to Tim Mahon for lime burning, Robert Wheeler for nails, and Byrne's workmen for labour. Brownlow was evidently well pleased, as on 15 May 1766 Byrne received £7 13s 8d as a 'present for doing his work well'. Though noting its elaborate and ambitious nature, the

NUMBER 12 MERRION SQUARE



Georgian Society Records were less appreciative, concluding it was ‘late rococo of inferior design’.

To date, and following extensive research, no biographical information has surfaced on the plasterer James Byrne, who is not recorded by Con Curran. However, a number of plasterers with the surname Byrne are noted as appearing on the Freeman’s roll – Edward Byrne in 1692 and William Byrne in 1727. A Michael Byrne, who was not a freeman, is recorded in 1785. All that may be said with certainty is that in 1764 James Byrne had been working as a plasterer for at least a decade, as he had also decorated the interior of Brownlow’s previous house on Leinster Street.¹⁰ That Byrne was within the circle of Robert West is also beyond doubt, as his work displays marked similarities to decoration in houses associated with West.¹¹

The front ground-floor room of No. 12, possibly the original dining room, has similarities to its counterpart at No. 86 St Stephen’s Green – a house long attributed to Robert West. The walls have large moulded plaster panels which, while plain in character, are undoubtedly related to a group of contemporary Irish interiors inspired by French rococo *boiseries*, including the dining rooms at No. 86 St Stephen’s Green (1765-) and Charlemont House (1763-), and the saloon at Dowth Hall in county Meath (c.1765).¹² Brownlow’s room lacks the narrow vertical panels and foliated embellishments of those more elaborate schemes, having large plain rectangular panels with gadrooned borders. The first-floor rooms at No. 12 have stucco ceilings which relate closely in style and decorative repertoire to contemporary stuccowork at No. 86 St Stephen’s Green. The ceiling of the front room bears comparison with its counterpart at Newman House, having an outer arabesque border and an inner border of flower garlands and birds (Plates 6, 7). However, in contrast to the fluidity and sophistication of the ceilings at St Stephen’s Green, Byrne’s work displays a hesitancy in design and a fondness for rich and gargantuan detail. That said, the stairhall of Brownlow’s house is undoubtedly one of the most opulent interiors produced by the Dublin school of plasterwork.

The upper floors of No. 12 retain eighteenth-century joinery and coved ceilings, but are now reached by a cast-iron spiral stair over the entrance hall, which replaced the original service stair. All of the eighteenth-century chimney pieces bought in Dublin and in London were removed in the early twentieth century. While no inventories survive to record the furnishings of the house, Brownlow’s account books allow some measure of imaginative reconstruction.¹³ Some of the furnishings were brought from Leinster Street, including a six-foot walnut four-poster bed, and perhaps some of the pier-glasses and Chinese chairs carved for Brownlow by Thomas Oldham in 1756.¹⁴ Oldham, a cabinet maker in Moore Street from 1768 to 1778, was the principal supplier of furniture for Leinster Street, but appears to have

been supplanted by Thomas Gunston at Merrion Square.¹⁵ Wallpaper for No. 12 was supplied by John Gordon of Temple Bar, and mirror and picture frames by (Richard) Cranfield. The floors were covered with Wilton carpets, and the windows with damask curtains. Lustres, six-branch candlesticks, and three-branch chandeliers were brought from London. Between 1764 and 1766 payments were made for a range of household items, including a toothpick case, a silver writing stand, a kettle, a coffee-pot, a carnelian seal and silver cutlery. Green tea, chocolate and dried ginger were among the household food-stuffs.¹⁶ The Brownlows evidently dressed well: Brownlow's petty cash book kept during a tour in France in 1775-76 records the purchase of embroidered silk waistcoats, silk stockings and gloves, net ruffles, silver buckles, and reams of velvet, lace and silk serge.¹⁷

The splendour and magnificence of William Brownlow's new townhouse in Dublin reflected his perceived status in Dublin society and fitted the increasing needs of his advancing political career. On 11 March 1766, even before the house was completed, he was sworn into the privy council.¹⁸ That Brownlow opted for a French-inspired interior is not surprising. Not only was rococo very much in vogue, he also had strong personal connections with France. In 1739, at the tender age of 13, having lost in quick succession two sisters and his father, he was brought to France on doctor's orders by his mother Elizabeth Hamilton, daughter of the 6th Earl of Abercorn. He was to spend some time in France, where his widowed mother married Martin, Count de Kearny.¹⁹ Later on as an adult he would revisit the country on several occasions. Brownlow was also sent to Italy to further his education. Between 1744 and 1748 he lived in Florence, Naples and Rome. There he took lessons and perfected harpsichord-playing skills. Music was to be an important part of Brownlow's life. He is said to have played an significant role in the creative gestation of *Midas*, a *burletta* or comic opera in the Italian fashion written by Kane O'Hara. It premiered at Crow Street Theatre in Dublin on 22 January 1762, and subsequently at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, in 1764 to great popular acclaim.²⁰

William Brownlow was passionate about music, and passed this passion to his children. His daughters received a thorough education which included the learning of several musical instruments. In 1799, following the death of the youngest daughter Louisa, in Devon, aged only 17, Brownlow's widow Catherine made a claim on the estate for expenses.²¹ These included not only physician's fees and medicines, but also various fees paid to a French governess, Mademoiselle Benandin, to an Italian master, a geography master and a drawing master, as well as expenses for 'musick and instruments', tambourine and piano lessons and transport of a harp.

William Brownlow's background was a learned one.²² Both his father and grandfather had been educated at Trinity College. His grandfather Arthur Chamber-



6 – No. 12 Merrion Square: ceiling of first-floor front room
(photo David Davison)

lain of Niselrath, near Ardee, county Louth, adopted the surname Brownlow on inheriting the estate of his maternal grandfather Sir William Brownlow, situated in Lurgan, county Armagh. (Sir William had married Eleanor O’Dogherty of Inishowen, county Donegal.) Arthur Brownlow accumulated extensive wealth by wise management and investment.²³ His personal interest in the Irish language was widely known. He was a discerning collector of old Irish manuscripts, and also a translator. ‘He took [O’Dornin] into his house to instruct his family, revise his Irish records, enrich his library with Gaelic poetry, and above all to infuse into his own



7 – No. 12 Merrion Square: detail of ceiling of first-floor front room
(photo David Davison)

mind a deep and lasting love of the literature of his native country.’²⁴ He was a patron of the scribe Pádraig Mac Oghannán, and had in his possession the Book of Armagh (custody of which was entrusted to the Royal Irish Academy for the best part of the nineteenth century. The Book of Armagh is presently in the possession of the library of Trinity College, Dublin.)²⁵

During his residence in Ireland, the celebrated American painter Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828) painted a half-length portrait of William Brownlow (c.1790). It shows him seated, directing a serious gaze to the spectator. He is wearing a pow-

dered wig and holding a letter in his right hand. In spite of the formality of the portrait, the sensitive face offers a glimpse of the character of the man. Stuart was a prolific painter, and in the six years he remained in Dublin he produced a considerable number of portraits. He also painted other members of the Irish parliament: John Foster (Speaker), Henry Grattan, William Robert, Duke of Leinster, Charles Powell Leslie and Robert Shaw of Terenure.²⁶

The political career of William Brownlow spanned four decades. In his last election in 1790 he published an address to the freeholders of the county of Armagh.²⁷ In it he exhorted his countrymen: ‘Look back at my conduct and see how you have been served; for whether I have not been forward to promote every advantage that the nation has received since I have been your representative; the freeing of her constitution from the dependence in which it was so long held; shortening the duration of the parliaments, which is a proper check on the conduct of the representative; extending the freedom of trade, and encouraging the Linen in every branch; in short, everything that was done or attempted for the advantage of this country had my warmest support. However, if you are of the opinion, that you can be better served by any other man, avail yourselves of your privilege, and elect him...’ He ended his address by adding: ‘Let my situation in life be what it may, I shall ever remain a steady friend to my country, and never forfeit the character of an honest uncorrupt man, which I thank God I have firmly established.’ That was his last election and he won it.

Brownlow’s will, made in the following year and proved in November 1794, displays a sobriety and restraint quite at odds with the opulent interior of his Dublin house. In it he directed that his body be ‘decently buried privately and without any ostentation or superfluous expense either in the parish where I shall die or in such other convenient place as my executors shall appoint, it being to me a matter of the utmost indifference’.²⁸

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ E.M. Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament 1692-1800*, 6 vols (Belfast 2002) iii, 294.
- ² Charlemont to Dr Haliday, 20 October 1794, in Francis Hardy, *Memoirs of the Political and Private Life of James Caulfield Earl of Charlemont* (London 1810) 370.
- ³ John and Edward Lees, 'Handel in Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record*, xiii, 1953, 3-4, 75. This seems unlikely as Brownlow was only 13 years old. However, a contemporary portrait with his parents (Lurgan House) depicts the young teenager playing the harpsichord.
- ⁴ Elizabeth married 1791 John, 4th Earl Darnley; Isabella married 1796 Richard, 4th Viscount Powerscourt; Francis Laetitia married 1796 John, 2nd Viscount de Vesci (source: *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage*)
- ⁵ Public Records Office, Northern Ireland, Brownlow Papers, D1928.
- ⁶ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/4/3.
- ⁷ National Archives, Dublin, Pembroke Papers 97/46/2/39.
- ⁸ National Archives, Dublin, Pembroke Papers 97/46/1/2/6/70.
- ⁹ Information courtesy of David Griffin.
- ¹⁰ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/H/1.
- ¹¹ In this regard it is perhaps worth noting that in 1777 a James Byrne of Loughlinbridge married Catherine Archdall of Mount Eccles and built a number of houses on Great Denmark Street adjacent to Belvedere House, which was designed by West.
- ¹² Christine Casey, 'Boiseries, bankers and bills: a tale of Charlemont and Whaley' in Michael McCarthy (ed.), *Lord Charlemont and his circle* (Dublin 2001) 47-59.
- ¹³ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/H/2.
- ¹⁴ Armagh Museum, Patterson MSS; National Library of Ireland microfilm pos. 208.
- ¹⁵ The Knight of Glin, 'A directory of the Dublin furnishing trade 1752-1800', in Agnes Bernelle (ed.), *Decantations: a tribute to Maurice Craig* (Dublin 1992) 47, 54.
- ¹⁶ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/H/3.
- ¹⁷ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/A/2/3.
- ¹⁸ Armagh Museum, Patterson MSS; NLI microfilm pos. 208.
- ¹⁹ Richard Hayes, *Biographical dictionary of Irishmen in France* (Dublin 1949) 136.
- ²⁰ Charlemont to Dr Haliday, 20 October 1794, '...he had many accomplishments; music he understood accurately, and the agreeable opera of Midas was, in some measure, planned, the airs rehearsed, and altogether prepared for the stage, at his house', in Hardy, *Memoirs*, 370.
- ²¹ NLI, De Vesci Papers, L/3. Claim made by Catherine Brownlow, widow of W.B., to the Brownlow estate for expenses incurred relating to her daughter Louisa Brownlow.
- ²² *Alumni Dublinenses, A register of the students, graduates, professors and provosts of Trinity College in the University of Dublin* (Dublin 1935) 106, 144.
- ²³ R.G. Gillespie, *Settlement and Survival on an Ulster Estate: the Brownlow Leasbook 1667-1771* (Belfast, 1988)
- ²⁴ J.B.L., 'Arthur Brownlow and his MSS', *The Irish Book Lover*, March-April, 1936, 26-8.
- ²⁵ Royal Irish Academy minutes, vol 2, January 1827 – March 1849, 424.
- ²⁶ L. Park, *Gilbert Stuart, an illustrated descriptive list of his works*, 1 (New York 1926) 183-4
- ²⁷ NLI, De Vesci Papers, *The Freeholders of the County of Armagh*, 17 April 1790.
- ²⁸ PRONI, Brownlow Papers, D1928/T/315