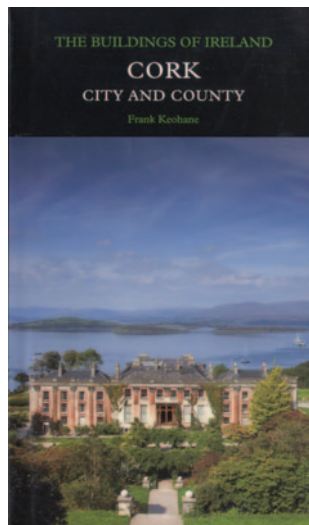# LOOKING IT UP IN PEVSNER:
REFLECTIONS ON *THE BUILDINGS OF IRELAND* SERIES

review article by Tadhg O'Keeffe

THERE IS NO ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN – WELL, NO middle-aged architectural historian anyway – in these islands, particularly in England, who would not understand immediately the main title of this review article. And there are many who, if they do want to look something up in *Pevsner*, have simply to turn to their own bookshelves. Until the late 1970s, 'a *Pevsner*' automatically meant a volume in *The Buildings of England* series of shire-by-shire architectural guidebooks, small enough for the glove compartment of a car but authoritative enough to be trusted by researchers in their studies. The series was the brainchild of Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), the esteemed architectural historian. It is only right that his name should be attached in this manner to the books, for over a period of about thirty years, starting at the end of the Second World War, he researched almost single-handedly, and wrote entirely on his own, thirty-two of them. He had collaborators for a further ten. In 1974 – coincidentally the year that the long-established English counties and county boroughs were abolished, and a new administrative geography introduced – the final volumes were published; at the moment when they said goodbye to their own past, every English county or shire had a book recording its own built heritage.

Today, of course, 'a *Pevsner*' can also mean a volume in one of three other series – *The Buildings of Scotland*, *The Buildings of Wales* and *The Buildings of Ireland*. Pevsner himself died in 1983, a few years after the launch of these series. The Wales set was not completed until 2009, the Scotland set was incomplete until 2016, and the Ireland set is still less than half-finished in 2024. There are doubtless lots of reasons for the slower progress of completion and publication of the Celtic *Pevsners*; the difficulty of finding financial support to fund travel and research has evidently been the most significant factor for the Irish series, despite the best efforts of the Buildings of Ireland Charitable Trust. I mention these timelines not to suggest any Celtic sluggishness, but to highlight Pevsner's great achievement, particularly in an age when research resources were hard copies which needed physical handling in an archive or library.

The Irish series was initiated by Alistair Rowan and Pevsner himself in the 1970s. Six volumes have been published (*North West Ulster*, 1979; *North Leinster*, 1993; *Dublin*, 2005; *South Ulster*, 2013; *Central Leinster*, 2019; *Cork city and county*, 2020).[1] A decision was made at the outset to divide the country into regions, each formed of a small number of counties. Accordingly, the first volume, published in 1979 and authored by Rowan on his own, kicked off the series with coverage of four counties in north-west

Ireland, with the political boundary between the Republic and Northern Ireland properly ignored. The only Irish county with its own *Pevsner*, completed or planned, is Cork (2020), its stand-alone selection justified by its size and by the architectural richness of its main city. County Dublin could not be treated similarly, so the city was given its own volume (2005), and there is a projected volume for the rest of the county on its own. The decision made almost half-a-century ago to cluster counties into single volumes must have had some financial rationale: no disrespect to Leitrim, but the cost of producing a Leitrim volume would not have been recouped by sales. But the decision to cluster must also have been because, unlike in England, most individual Irish counties would not be regarded as having the architectural stock to justify, by Pevnersian standards, stand-alone volumes.

Review articles are critical essays. Critical does not mean negative; to be a critic is not necessarily to criticise. It is easy for a specialist in any field to find fault with almost every book in which they have a specialist interest. The acid test of a book's real value will always be the frequency with which it is taken down from the shelf and consulted, for that is a measure of trust in it. Each of *The Buildings of Ireland* books certainly passes that test with respect to its factual content. The level of historical and (especially) descriptive detail in each of the volumes is remarkable. High-quality writing has been a hallmark of the Irish *Pevsners* right from the start, and it makes them a joy to read. Many of the entries are short, and are triumphs of elegant compression, but there are also long descriptions of Ireland's premier buildings. And because architectural furnishings are also presented, those descriptions are much longer for those buildings which are still occupied (great houses) or in use (such as cathedrals) than for buildings which are ruined (generally the medieval ones). Description-writing is a taken-for-granted skill, but that should not be: the Irish *Pevsner* authors marry a command of an extensive technical terminology with an ability to communicate with clarity. As an architectural historian of the period up to the mid-seventeenth century, I am very familiar with the stock of buildings of pre-Restoration-era date which feature in the published volumes, and I would regard the content of the entries on buildings of that long period as uniformly excellent. They are models of brevity and clarity; the salient features are correctly identified, and the dates are accurate. Based in Dublin and teaching a graduate-level module on urban history and heritage, Christine Casey's *Dublin* volume is naturally the volume which I consult most frequently, but I consider them all immensely useful, and I browse them for sheer pleasure and in the expectation of discovery; Casey's is simply the one for which I could demonstrate rather than just assert indispensability.

For all this, though, there are issues raised by the series. Some critical engagement with it is long overdue. Here are some questions which, I think, require asking. What does the series tell us about architecture, what it is and what it does, beyond telling us facts about different buildings? The series' authors might not desire to tell us anything, and simply regard their volumes as passive, but accurate, conveyors of information. But that will not do. Texts are never passive, and texts which speak of things with which we have non-stop interactions – buildings – are certainly not passive. I will discuss below the language used in the volumes, for that is certainly not passive language. I will not discuss the omissions, except to note that very mundane structures do not feature, even

1 – Garage, Kilworth, county Cork
Structures like this typical mid-twentieth-century garage, Main Street, Kilworth do not feature in THE BUILDINGS OF IRELAND. This is an inadvertent nod, perhaps, to a famous – though wrong-headed – Pevsner opinion: 'A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.'[17] The stepped gable of the main garage and, especially, the crenellations of the side garage are unnecessary elaborations which speak of some aesthetic sense. This is carscape architecture.[18] It is important built heritage.

if their social-historical importance compensates for their lack of (conventional) architectural interest (Plate 1). What does the series say about architectural history as a discipline, and about the constituent elements of architectural-historical knowledge? Do bite-size summaries of complex buildings, skillfully written though they are, reflect how information on historical buildings is consumed (or should be consumed), or have such summaries conditioned us to think that every work of historical architecture has an essence which can be so captured? Is the *Buildings* model, which was developed in early post-war England, appropriate for continued use in an Ireland which bears no resemblance to that England of the 1950s-70s for which Pevsner produced his original series? Indeed, this raises a more fundamental question, which brings us back to Pevsner himself. He was an ideologue, whose deep emotional and intellectual attachment to the concept of Zeitgeist was forged in his youth. It had informed his scholarly output prior to the launch of the *Buildings of England* series, and it infiltrates those inventories. In telling his readers in that series what they should know about architecture's history, was he also telling them what to think about architecture's instrumental role in shaping social and moral values? Are the Irish volumes detached from that? Is their Pevsnerian genealogy confined to their common format or does it manifest itself in content and language?

The Irish *Pevsner* series merits critique along two axes: as works of architectural history and as works of architectural criticism. Regarding the former, the volumes offer a particular type of architectural-historical discourse, unchanged for Irish readers from volume to volume since 1979. If we understand 'history' to imply a sequential narrative, the parts of the volumes which most fit that bill are the introductory chapters. But the individual gazetteer entries are small architectural-historical essays in themselves, for they all give dates, and they all note significant changes to fabric or fixed-furnishings. Rarely, though, do the authors offer either contextual information or contextual explanation within those entries. And when they do, they sometimes leave us wanting to know a little more than the restricted space allows them to tell us (Plate 2). The *Dublin City* volume has the most architectural-historical gazetteer of the series by virtue of the fact that all of the city's buildings make sense through their spatial-historical relationships with other buildings within that shared topographical setting. But – and this is no criticism – the volume is used most profitably alongside urban histories, such as the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* fascicles, Niall McCullough's wonderful, image-rich survey, and now, most recently, Joe Brady and Paul Ferguson's equally wonderful cartographic history.[2]

Those *Buildings of Ireland* introductory chapters themselves are fairly traditional architectural-historical accounts. For the pre-1650 period (I cannot speak authoritatively of the later periods) they are especially traditional, and they could easily pass as summaries of the relevant chapters of Maurice Craig's survey of more than forty years ago.[3] Here, the fault, insofar as there is one, is much less with the *Buildings of Ireland* authors themselves than with the field of medieval architectural history itself in Ireland, on which field those authors have had to draw. The history of medieval Irish ecclesiastical architecture has had some small adjustments made to it in recent decades, which the authors generally capture. But the privileging of typology, and thus also of teleology, in the narrative of fortified and domestic architecture in medieval Ireland is a problem, and it is one which Irish medieval scholars, and not the authors of these books, have created. The *Buildings of Ireland* texts convey the impression of an insular architectural-functional evolution from fortress to 'fortified house' in Ireland, because that is what is conveyed by the literature which would have been consulted. Insofar as there was any such evolution, it was not determined by militarism, and it was certainly not an insular process but was a pan-western European trend.[4]

2 – Holy Trinity, Cork city, façade (1891)
Its 'lofty triple-arched portico clearly influenced by the w front of Peterborough Cathedral' (Keohane, Cork, 81). Is this a deduction or is the Peterborough influence documented contemporaneously? (Alamy)

The one criticism which I would level at these books, wearing my medievalist hat, is how they have retained in their introductory chapters and in their gazetteers the 'fortified house' as a category of earlier seventeenth-century architecture. For too long, houses like Kanturk (Plate 3) have been gobbled up into that 'fortified house' (or 'semi-fortified house' or 'stronghouse') category simply because the owners of those houses felt safer if they had a few protective features redolent of high medieval architecture; indeed, the crenellating of those houses, a job which was never finished at Kanturk, was probably to signify noble status, just as the acquisition of a license to crenellate in later medieval England signified that its successful applicant was enrolled in the nobility. My objection to the 'fortified house' is not some personal, contrarian idiosyncrasy. These houses are extremely important. They date from Irish architectural history's most elusive century, the seventeenth. They were not transitional buildings. They need to be pulled out of the twilight of the Middle Ages and replanted in the dawn of the modern period. Abandoning the nonsensical terminology would be a start. It is surprising that the Irish *Pevsners*, written by architectural historians with a deep knowledge of Restoration-era and Georgian-era domestic architecture, have not already done that.

3 – Kanturk Castle, county Cork
This earlier 17th-century castle is listed amongst Cork's 'fortified houses' (Keohane, Cork, 16). The pattern of windows reflects the tendency, first encountered in Elizabethan-era houses in England, to prioritise the external symmetry of fenestration over the actual internal lighting requirements. Thus, in a sense, these buildings were conceptualised from the outside in. In the Middle Ages, windows were put where they were needed, without any regard for external symmetry. Confirming Kanturk's status as a great house in the modern lineage is the neoclassical frame of its original doorway.

Architectural criticism is the second axis along which the Irish *Pevsners* demand some critical engagement. Open any page in any of the volumes at random, and there you are likely to find some chummy, maybe rather pompous judgement, sometimes about a building's structure, sometimes about its appearance, and sometimes about, well, it is not always clear. Readers of these books will be very familiar with the many targets of my comments. Here is a random selection. Knocktarna parish church: 'a perfect small Tractarian church, *chunky*, *honest*, and making a little go a long way'.[5] McDaid's Arms Hotel, Middleton: 'an *unforgiving* three-storey Gothic essay'.[6] Kinnegad parish church: 'though nowhere "wrong", this is *dry* and *lifeless* Irish Catholic Gothic'.[7] Bailieborough courthouse: 'a *stocky*, *no-nonsense* two-storey block with a distinguished porch'.[8] Edenderry Bank of Ireland: 'a slightly *uncomfortable* three-storey, seven-bay Italianate block'.[9] There are many more. Some of these judgements are short, comprised of no more than one or two adjectives, but others are longer. Frank Keohane's *Cork* volume probably has the fewest such judgements, Christine Casey's *Dublin* volume probably the most. Some of the comments are rather throwaway, and the professional researcher will pay them little attention. Others are questionable. We are told, for example, that Liberty Hall in Dublin (Plate 4) is 'by no means a beautiful building but ... not a bad one'.[10] Actually, one could argue the exact opposite: that it *was* a beautiful building (until a car bomb in 1972 blew out most of its original glass, after which there were other more benign but equally damaging interferences), and that it *is* a bad building from the point of view of energy efficiency.[11]

These various adjectives are less innocuous than might first appear to be the case. Intentionally or not, they convey connoisseurship. That is not a good thing. Because these adjectives and phrases are not naturally intelligible – how can a work of architecture be *honest*, *unforgiving* or *lifeless*? – and would not be how people normally think of architecture, they suggest, I would argue, some undisclosed set of evaluation criteria from which general readers are excluded. It is almost as if the architectural historians are passing notes to each other, basking in their cleverness. There are many places in these volumes where one wishes for an editorial intervention to curb these indulgences, but by the

4 – Liberty Hall, Dublin
Liberty Hall (with the Loop Line Bridge and James Gandon's Custom House to the right) is adjudged in the Dublin volume to be neither particularly beautiful nor particularly bad. This iconic Dublin building – the city's (still unfairly disliked) first skyscraper – is given only half-a-page of text.

end of each volume one senses that, on the contrary, they are a *sine qua non* of having a text accepted for publication! Am I being harsh? On principle, I think not. Subjective aesthetic judgements about buildings are not problematic by their nature. As observers, historians and critics of architecture, we form such judgements all the time. We *feel* architecture. We engage emotionally with it. But, in print, subjective judgements need qualification or explanation, for they reflect attitudes. In articulating our explanations, we might even discover for ourselves how our attitudes have been shaped by our own backgrounds, or social class, our moral or religious codes, or our politics. In a series to which the Pevsner name is attached, I would argue that such transparency is especially needed. Why is that?

Pevsner was born in Leipzig in 1902. He was of Jewish-Russian descent. Removed from his lectureship in art history at the University of Göttingen in 1933 on grounds of his birth religion (although he had converted to Lutheranism in 1921), he moved to England in 1933 to continue his academic career as an architectural historian, and he never left that country for another academic posting. He was garlanded in England with cast-iron Establishment signifiers – Slade Professor of Fine Art in both Cambridge and Oxford, an expert broadcaster on BBC television, a Fellow of the British Academy, and a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Architectural history is not so fashionable a subject that its practitioners get broadsheet obituaries, much less post-mortem biographies, but Pevsner's death in 1983 was a notable news item, and there have been thoroughly researched biographies. It seems that one of the biographers, Stephen Games, caused some Senior Common Room harrumphing when he published evidence that the young Nikolaus had actually desired to be considered more German than Jewish, that he was more tolerant of his dismissal from Göttingen than the profoundly racist act merited, and that, even as he was planning his move to England, he was not entirely unsympathetic to 'Hitlerism'.[12] But neither Pevsner's background nor youthful tolerances were entirely unfamiliar to members of the art-historical and architectural-historical fraternities during his lifetime. Indeed, his 'Englishness' had once been disputed, with no less a figure than Sir John Betjeman engaging in an unbecoming campaign of besmirch-

ment. Ironically, though, whilst Pevsner was falling victim to some cartoonishly Teutonic stereotyping in the 1950s and 1960s (his work was regarded by some, like Betjeman, as coldly analytical, with a preoccupation for dry classification), his *Buildings of England* series was slowly introducing to the English a sense that there were architectural tastes which defined 'Englishness' through the ages, and that England had buildings which rose to the standards demanded by those tastes. Every period has its own architecture, was his message. And so, he invited his readers to see modernism – a catch-all term for inventive twentieth-century architecture – in the same positive light as earlier styles. Pevsner disliked intensely what he characterised as architectural historicism, by which he meant architecture which expressed the aesthetic ideals of an earlier age rather than of its own time. He objected furiously to pastiche. An admirer of modernism from all angles – aesthetic, structural, functional, intellectual – he famously ignored Sir Edwin Lutyens in *An outline of European architecture*, claiming that 'for the next forty years, the first forty of our [twentieth] century, no English name need here be mentioned'.[13]

Pevsner's series is critical, I would argue, to understanding how English self-identity was reimagined between the end of the Second World War and European Economic Community membership and the Callaghan-into-Thatcher years of the 1970s. This was the very span during which the first editions were published. The books were launched into, and became both fixtures in and shapers of, a newly invented version of England, triumphant after the war, with an expanding car-owning middle class and an expanding system of comprehensive education. The *Pevsners* occupy a space in English cultural history alongside the contemporary *Ladybird* history books, which defined for children of that very same period the pantheon of men (plus Florence Nightingale, a self-proclaimed 'man of action') who had made Britain, but especially England, great. The series gave ordinary (non-specialist, non-academic) readers a sense that there was an expert consensus about the nature, development and meanings of English architecture from the Middle Ages to the modern period. But any such consensus, or sense that there was one, broke down between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. The fracture ran specifically through modernism, and specifically through urban modernism, for the urban space was the locus of most modernist architecture. One can see the retreat to traditional values in the United Kingdom's European Architectural Heritage Year 1975 policies and activities (see Burman and Rodwell for an uncritical and cloyingly Establishment-panegyrizing review).[14] One can see it too in the specific assault on Pevsner's passion for modernism in David Watkin's much-debated *Morality and Architecture*.[15] By 1984, Manchester's huge Hulme Crescent, opened in 1972 as a much-lauded modernist housing project, was being abandoned, its lofty 'streets in the sky' ambition a social and social-order disaster, and Prince (now King) Charles was comparing a proposed modernist glass and steel extension to the National Gallery with 'a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend'.[16] But the real fracture between the later 1970s and the earlier 1980s was of 'Englishness' itself. This was the age of an anti-establishment, mainly urban, youth movement (punk) and urban race riots, and of Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no such thing as society'.

I wondered above whether the *Buildings* model developed by Pevsner is, or has been, appropriate for Ireland. Those English *Pevsners* went into a cycle of revisions and

reprinting after the original series was completed. For Pevsner himself, the original English volumes were, in part, a celebration of a continuity of creative architectural brilliance in England from the Middle Ages up to the present. But my sense is that, from the later 1970s, with the original series wrapped up and with Pevsner's beloved modernism increasingly invoked as a factor in societal disorder, the volumes could no longer promote Pevsner's optimism in, or advocacy of, a Zeitgeist. Their readers might never have viewed them in that way, but from the later 1970s the *Buildings of England* series could only have been perceived as a series about heritage. And that is precisely the point at which the Irish series was launched. It was a good idea for Ireland to have its own architectural guidebooks, but I am not sure that it was a good idea to anchor them to the *Pevsner* model at that time. I fully expect this opinion to be contested, but, to my mind, when the Irish series was conceptualised in the 1970s it was as if Ireland had been magically dropped into the England of the 1940s. The Irish series was born into Ireland's modern age (in a sense, its own post-war equivalent), when the country was a new member of the European Economic Community, and Liberty Hall and Busáras were new buildings in the hitherto alien International Modern style, and fights to save Georgian Dublin were underway. The series was born looking old-fashioned, and it immediately subordinated Ireland's architectural heritage to a form of architectural-historical and architectural-critical discourse created to meet a need in England.

Six books published since 1979, eight more to go. It seems unlikely that the series will be complete by the mid-century point. Unless the average rate of publication over the past forty-five-odd years picks up, the series will be complete when it hits its own centenary. That inevitably raises questions about its future. Its format is hard-copy, its volumes are expensive (although certainly not excessively so), and revised editions, if needed, will require extra work and will have to wait for the original editions to sell out. Meanwhile, the Archaeological Survey of Ireland (ASI) and the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) provide *online* accounts of medieval and modern buildings respectively, they are free to access, and they can be updated quickly (not that they are).

Are comparisons between the Irish *Pevsners* and these online resources fair? They are for medieval buildings, which fall under the ASI remit. In my experience of using them, the ASI entries are no more accurate or reliable than their corresponding *Pevsner* entries, but they are longer and more detailed (which their format permits), and that makes them more useful to scholars. Having said that, more information is not necessarily better information. For what it is worth, I think that there is a qualitative difference between the ASI and *Buildings* entries, and that it is not necessarily a reflection of the affordances of their formats. As an archaeologist by profession, I think that one can tell from their matter-of-fact voicings that the ASI entries are written by archaeologists who happen to know something about buildings, which is a roundabout way of saying that they are stuffed with detail, sometimes without discriminating between essential and inessential information, and that one would not read them for pleasure! The *Buildings* entries, by contrast, are very clearly the work of professionals who identify as architectural historians, and spend a lot of time in the company of historical buildings, thinking about what they are seeing. But comparison between the Irish *Pevsners* and the NIAH would not be fair. The NIAH entries are considerably less substantial, and less useful, than their corresponding

Pevsner entries. They do not purport to be anything more than snapshots, based on the exteriors of buildings, and they include many thousands of buildings, amongst them many which would not merit inclusion in a *Pevsner*. The need to read a *Pevsner* entry, if one is available, is never negated by the availability of a NIAH entry. The same is true in reverse.

The ASI, NIAH and *Pevsner* inventories of historic buildings are not in competition for our attention, but state-backed surveys of our architectural stock are naturally better resourced. Although it is obvious that its progress has been slowed by funding challenges, the *Buildings of Ireland* series still comes across as having a rather leisurely gait. I do wonder whether, had a commitment to join the *Pevsner* series not been made with the 1979 volume, these books would still be in production, given how accessible the online environment now is. It is an uncomfortable question to ask, but, to borrow from BBC television's *Mastermind* ('I've started, so I'll finish'), has the completion of the series now become its principal *raison d'être*?

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ENDNOTES

1. A. Rowan, *North West Ulster* (Harmondsworth, 1979); C. Casey and A. Rowan, *North Leinster* (Harmondsworth, 1993); C. Casey, *Dublin* (New Haven and London, 2005); K.V. Mulligan, *South Ulster* (New Haven and London, 2013); A. Tierney, *Central Leinster* (New Haven and London, 2019); F. Keohane, *Cork: city and county* (New Haven and London, 2020).

2. H.B. Clarke, *Dublin, to 1610: Irish Historic Towns Atlas no. 11* (Dublin, 2002); C. Lennon, *Dublin, 1610 to 1756: Irish Historic Towns Atlas no. 19* (Dublin, 2008); N. McCullough, *Dublin: an urban history. The plan of the city* (Dublin, 2007); J. Brady and P. Ferguson, *Dublin: mapping the city* (Edinburgh, 2023).

3. M. Craig, *The architecture of Ireland: from the earliest times to 1880* (London, 1982).

4. T. O'Keeffe, *Medieval Irish buildings, 1100-1600* (Dublin, 2015); O'Keeffe, *Ireland encastellated: insular castle-building in its European context* (Dublin, 2021).

5. Rowan, *North West Ulster*, 211; emphasis added.

6. Keohane, *Cork*, 514; emphasis added.

7. Casey and Rowan, *North Leinster*, 368; emphasis added.

8. Mulligan, *South Ulster*, 149; emphasis added.

9. Tierney, *Central Leinster*, 333; emphasis added.

10. Casey, *Dublin*, 52.

11. E. Rowley, *More than concrete blocks, Vol. 2., 1940-72* (Dublin, 2018) 308-19.

12. S. Games, *Pevsner on art and architecture: the radio talks* (London, 2002); Games, *Pevsner: the early life, Germany and art* (London, 2010).

13. N. Pevsner, *An outline of European architecture* (London, 1943), 209.

14. P. Burman and D. Rodwell, 'The contribution of the United Kingdom to European Architectural Heritage Year 1975' in M. Falser and W. Lipp (eds), *A future for our Past: the 40th anniversary of European Architectural Heritage Year* (1975-2015) (Berlin, 2015) 262-75.

15. D. Watkin, *Morality and architecture* (Oxford, 1977) 71-111.

16. E. Hollis, *The secret lives of buildings* (London, 2009) 243-69.

17. Pevsner, *An outline of European architecture*, 15.

18. K.A. Morrison and J. Minnis, *Carscapes: the motor car, architecture and landscape in England* (New Haven and London, 2012).