



Obituary

WILLIAM LAFFAN

DR DESMOND FITZGERALD, 29TH KNIGHT OF GLIN, MRIA, WHO DIED ON 15TH September 2011, served for the past two decades as president of the Irish Georgian Society. Desmond was a scholar of international significance who made important contributions to a wide range of academic disciplines, publishing extensively on architecture, gardens, painting and furniture – mostly, but by no means exclusively, Irish. He will be deeply missed by his family, by his many friends around the world, and by all members of the Society.

Educated at Stowe, where began his love of architecture and the designed landscape, and later in Canada and at Harvard, the Knight inherited his ancient Geraldine title at the age of twelve. Paddy Healy, the estate carpenter at Glin, and a local chemist, Stan Stewart, helped nurture his early love of family history and local lore. In London, Desmond worked for eleven years in the furniture department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and, in 1970, married the beautiful debutante Olda Willes, before returning to Ireland where, for many years, he acted as Christie's representative. Over the years, clients of Christie's benefited enormously from the Knight's scholarly eye and unimpeachable integrity. To take but one from literally hundreds of examples, his was the brilliantly instinctive attribution of a snowy winter scene, by an unknown hand, to the Irish landscape painter Thomas Roberts – an artist then only recognised for his crepuscular summer views – which had been purchased, unattributed, in a Los Angeles flea market and which subsequently netted an enormous windfall for the vendors.

One of the Knight's constant ambitions was to repatriate as much Irish art and material culture as possible, and he was responsible for finding suitable Irish homes for paintings, furniture and works of art which, in earlier decades, had been sold for export from the Dublin quays. During his time on the board of the National Gallery of Ireland, he argued passionately for the purchase of significant Irish works for the State; he was par-

*The late Desmond FitzGerald, 29th Knight of Glin photographed at Glin Castle, Co Limerick, in 2008
(photo by Amelia Stein)*

ticularly pleased when Adam Buck's *Edgeworth Family Group* entered the national collection on his recommendation. A collector from childhood, the remarkable group of topographical views of Ireland which he formed on a shoestring budget was published in 2006 as *Painting Ireland*. The fine furniture and works of art which circumstances forced him to sell at Christie's in 2009 were all his own acquisitions, and, in most instances, his own discoveries too; the furniture and family portraits which he inherited still grace the walls of Glin Castle. Just how many of the items sold at Christie's that spring day have entered significant institutional collections bears testament to his great discernment as a collector.

Desmond's collaboration over several decades with Anne Crookshank was of particular significance to Irish scholarship. It was in Professor Crookshank's room in the Rubrics of Trinity College that modern history of art in Ireland was pioneered. Very much a research centre *avant le lettre*, there was an open door for anyone interested in the subject to drop in and discuss their findings. While visitors were fussed over and made welcome (the choice of beverage was Bovril or whiskey), the disagreements were legendary, with the Knight often to be found pacing New Square in a sulk (as I recall, defining the oeuvre of Jonathan Trotter led to a particularly fractious session) while Anne continued to expostulate, oblivious. Despite, or, no doubt, because of, their working methods and passionately held views, the three major books they produced together, supplemented by a series of articles, were and remain vital and compelling scholarship. The Knight and Professor Crookshank generously left their enormous archive of photographs of Irish art to Trinity College, and Desmond's contribution to the university, and to Irish scholarship generally, was recognised with the conferment of a Doctorate in Letters. In 2009 he was also elected – some felt belatedly – to membership of the Royal Irish Academy.

In addition to his work on Irish painting, Desmond, with two of his closest friends, the late Maurice Craig and Edward McParland, pioneered the study of eighteenth-century Irish architecture; he had particular knowledge of the work of Richard Castle and Davis Ducart. It was, however, in the study of Irish furniture that he made what is perhaps his most original contribution. The monumental work on the subject, written with his friend and colleague James Peill, and published by Yale University Press in 2007, was quite simply a revelation, and, perhaps because of its long genesis over several decades, the critical acclaim which it attracted gave Desmond particular satisfaction. (The Knight's extensive bibliography is recorded in volume X of *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, published in 2007.) The Knight's unique contribution to scholarship has been well summarised by his friend Professor Roy Foster:

He isn't a professor, though if he had stayed at Harvard he would no doubt have become one. However, he would probably have published much less and much less excitingly, and we would not be in such great debt to him as we are. Desmond FitzGerald would not have been contained by a university department. By following his furrow, he has contributed an enormous amount to Irish scholarship.

Desmond's immense kindness and generosity to other – and especially younger – scholars is legendary. Many a time, an earnest young researcher left a meeting at Glin or Waterloo Road clutching a bulging file from the Knight's office, freely handed over, on a topic that they had mistakenly thought they were the first to consider. For decades he had been advocating a comprehensive exhibition of all aspects of the Irish fine and decorative arts, and, over the last two years of his life, the knowledge that this vision would finally be realised with a major show at the Art Institute of Chicago, to be curated by his old friend from the V&A, Christopher Monkhouse, gave him lasting satisfaction, and, I hope, solace. The Knight had been providing us with information and ideas on this show until very recently, and at a series of meetings with some two dozen Irish scholars to discuss the exhibition in the week after his death, the feeling of loss was palpable indeed, but was balanced by fondly remembered tales of kindnesses – a congratulatory note on a publication, a tip-off to an unsuspected source – that it seemed each and every scholar had to recount. The spirit of collegiate cordiality and the free exchange of information which, generally, defines Irish architectural and decorative studies, owes much to the Knight's example, and, inevitably, the Chicago exhibition and its accompanying catalogue will be a testament to his scholarship and that which he has encouraged in others.

While still at Harvard, the Knight joined the inaugural committee of the Irish Georgian Society, and collaborated with the Society's founder, Desmond Guinness, on several publications. The Knight took over from Desmond as president of the Society in 1991, continuing, despite his illness, to attend board meetings until just a few months ago. The achievements of the Society under the Knight's leadership need little rehearsal here, and have been well chronicled in Robert O'Byrne's engaging anniversary volume. Perhaps he most enjoyed the opportunity to take the message overseas, and the 'Two Desmonds' Dinner' became a notable highlight of the New York social scene and the source of much-needed funds for conservation projects at home. The Knight was also deeply involved in the Castletown Foundation, the Irish Heritage Trust, the Irish Architectural Archive and the Irish Landmark Trust. Somehow amidst all this frantic activity, he and Olda found time to restore – or, rather, finish – Glin Castle which, for many years, ran as the most elegant small hotel in the country.

Although most at home in Ireland – the subject of so much of his work – the Knight was a true cosmopolitan. He loved London, where, indeed, he had lived for so long, and also the United States, whose great collections he knew intimately. A member of the Society of Dilettanti, he had travelled in the Far East ever since winning a scholarship to the University of Malaya in 1959; indeed his very first article, published that year, was entitled – with something of a young man's swagger – 'Palladio Delineated: Colonial Architecture in Malaya'. Glin, however, where his ancestors had lived for some 700 years, held him enthralled, and his final great achievement was the enormous book that he compiled with Tom Donovan, *The Knights of Glin, Seven Centuries of Change* (2009). In a letter which the Knight cherished deeply, Séamus Heaney described the volume as 'a beautiful act of *pietas* and a mighty act of scholarship', and acutely identified its strengths

as reflecting what can be seen as the core of Desmond FitzGerald's life – a combination of his love of people, of place and of learning. Adapting Horace, Heaney wrote to the Knight: '*momumentum exegis*' ('you have created a monument'), leaving unsaid the ode's continuation '*aere perennius*' ('more lasting than bronze').

Desmond battled cancer with the courage of his armour-clad forebears. His innate charm, mischievous wit and, at times, mercurial geniality never deserted him. Throughout his illness he was uncomplaining, always concerned for others, and sometimes even serene. His reading in his last months was prodigious, and a flood of ideas was scribbled and, while he could speak, dictated. He is survived by his beloved wife Olda, his remarkable daughters Catherine, Nesta and Honor, in whose achievements he took such pride, and his grandchildren Martha, Dora, Senan, Francis and Rose. Rarely can it be more aptly said than of Desmond FitzGerald, 29th Knight of Glin: '*ní bheith a leithid arís ann*'.
