



Robert West, Christopher Myers and St James's church, Whitehaven

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MUCH OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF ROBERT WEST (D.1790), ARGUABLY THE DOYEN OF the stuccodores of the Dublin School of the mid-eighteenth century, comes from the writings of C.P. Curran, whose initial essay, published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* in 1940,¹ was greatly expanded in 1967 by his major work *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*.² Further insights into his oeuvre can be gleaned from the more recent writings of Joseph McDonnell,³ Christine Casey⁴ and Conor Lucey, whose magisterial study of West's probable pupil and successor, Michael Stapleton, appeared in 2007.⁵ In the popular imagination, Stapleton is associated with rational Adamesque neoclassicism, while West's frothy free-flowing work is characterised by what Casey has described as the combination of 'the outmoded Baroque style of the Lafranchini [with] fashionable Rococo elements'.⁶ However, as Lucey notes, the revelation (by Casey) that Belvedere House on Great Denmark Street (1774-86), whose ceilings have long been attributed to Stapleton, was in fact built by West 'raises questions regarding authorship of this richly decorated house'.⁷ It is now clear that while West was admitted as a freeman of Dublin in 1752 as a 'plasterer', by the end of that decade he was more of an entrepreneur; indeed, he subsequently described himself as not just a stucco worker but also, at different times, as either an architect or a master builder. Questions have thus arisen as to how many of the ceilings in the buildings built by West are actually by his own hand, particularly as there are stylistic variations. In their 1999 study *An Insular Rococo*, Mowl and Earnshaw wrote of 'a Robert West team of plasterers', suggesting Richard Williams as one of them.⁸ West's brother John was also a plasterer, admitted as a freeman in 1758.

The other enduring mystery is of West's origins, and no real progress has been made on this issue since Curran wrote in 1940: 'The truth is we are regrettably short of facts about Robert West.'⁹ While Curran claimed that West was unrelated to his name-

1 – *St James's Church, Whitehaven, Cumbria, 1752/53, here attributed to Christopher Myers: entrance front showing the tower and Doric doorcase* (all photos by the author)

sake, the drawing master Robert West, who came from Waterford stock, he also speculated that the stuccodore was descended from a line of seventeenth-century Dublin bricklayers and plasterers, and, indeed, from fifteenth-century freemen of the city. Documentation to support either assertion or, indeed, any alternative origin is lacking. West's earliest recorded plasterwork in Dublin, at the Rotunda Hospital staircase, dates from 1756. His best-known work, at the house he developed and then sold at 20 Lower Dominick Street, is just a little later (1758-60). This article suggests that the earliest ceilings attributable to him are not in Dublin, but at Whitehaven in Cumbria, where the name of Robert West occurs in the vestry minutes of St James's church, built in 1752/53 (Plates 1, 2). In endeavouring to cast some further light on this connection, it also notes some of the linkages between Ireland and Cumberland in an era when Dublin imported most of its coal from Whitehaven and probably exported finished and unfinished building materials on the returning ships.

The present writer was led to the study of Whitehaven architecture when researching the career of Christopher Myers (1717-1789), appointed architect to the Barrack Board in Dublin in 1766, and his role in the development of the early Gothic revival in Ireland, particularly in Ulster, where he worked from about 1753. Myers was born in Lancashire (probably in Backbarrow, near Cartmel, in the northern part of the county that is now incorporated into Cumbria), but his early career was in Whitehaven (then in Cumberland), where he worked on the harbour improvements. My essay on Myers' origins and his role in the Gothic revival was published in 2008.¹⁰ In that paper, I pointed out links between details of the design of Holy Trinity church, Ballycastle, county Antrim (completed in 1756 and attributed to Myers by the late Sir Charles Brett),¹¹ and St James's church, Whitehaven, in which I suggested Myers may have played an architectural role. The form of St James's church, with a central tower at the west end and nave and aisles incorporated into a single rectangular block, is derived from earlier Cumberland churches like Holy Trinity, Whitehaven (1714/15, demolished), where Myers was married, and St Andrew's, Penrith (1720-22). Further research, undertaken since the completion of my earlier article in 2007, has thrown up more information on both Myers and on St James's church. St James's has traditionally been ascribed to Carlisle Spedding (1695-1755),¹² who was not an architect, but colliery steward to the town's proprietor Sir James Lowther, and a trustee of Whitehaven harbour. Spedding's older brother John was Lowther's principal steward. The traditional attribution seems to be grounded on the fact that Carlisle Spedding is recorded in the vestry minutes as presenting the plans to the board of trustees in April 1752, but it is arguable that he did this as a trustee and as Lowther's representative rather than as a designer, and that Myers was the real architect. While the minutes are now lost, they are quoted in a 1972 booklet by D.P. Sewell on the history of St James's church.¹³ It is recorded that Spedding and Peter Peile, who had been nominated as church-

2 – *St James's Church, Whitehaven: nave ceiling by Robert West, with roundels depicting the Annunciation and the Ascension*



wardens, were appointed cashiers, while Daniel Benn was to act in the role of clerk of works. Myers, who had other commitments on harbour works at Whitehaven and Ramsgate, would not have been in a position to provide continuous supervision. While Lowther donated the site, the church was built by private subscription. Significantly, the minutes reveal that Myers was one of the subscribers to the building fund; elsewhere it is recorded that he was among the top group of twenty-two subscribers (including Carlisle Spedding) who gave an initial £50 each.¹⁴ The accounts do not include any payment for the plans, and it seems reasonable to conclude that Myers, as a subscriber, would not have charged for any drawings he might have prepared.

Myers always claimed to have been properly trained in the professions of engineering and architecture, but was rumoured to have started his career as a cabinetmaker. The earliest reference to him in Whitehaven was his marriage in the town on 21st March 1744/45 to Jane Graham, apparently from a prosperous family, who I speculated were members of the town's middle class. The 1746 baptismal certificate of their eldest son Graham, since located, lists the father's profession as 'joiner', confirming the contemporary speculation. Other research appears to indicate that Jane Graham was the recently orphaned daughter of a local merchant and shipowner and that one of her guardians was Carlisle Spedding's son James, who was himself a wealthy timber trader. James's brother, the Revd Thomas Spedding (1722-83), who had been educated at Trinity College, Dublin, was the first incumbent of St James's church, consecrated on 25th July 1753. James Spedding had built a new, if somewhat retardataire, house and office at 30 Roper Street, Whitehaven in 1745. The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) attributes its design to Carlisle.¹⁵ However, given the date, it was probably in fact the work of Myers; he must have been very highly regarded by the Speddings to have got Jane Graham's hand in marriage.

St James's is celebrated for the quality of its internal plasterwork, particularly two ceiling roundels over the nave depicting the Annunciation and the Ascension. The Annunciation (Plate 3), placed nearest the ecclesiastical west end, contains a number of figurative groups – the Holy Spirit at the top, framed by pairs of cherubs and clouds; a pair of angels on clouds holding branches on either side of the swirling acanthus pendant centrepiece (Plate 4); and a rustic scene depicting the Blessed Virgin, flanked by a tree on one side and a church and a lamb on the other. The Ascension (Plate 5), placed nearest the chancel, has at its top the figure of the Risen Christ, surrounded by a sunburst of light. Again, the centrepiece pendant is flanked by a pair of angels on clouds, while below are a pair of cherubs hovering over clouds, each holding an instrument of Christ's passion – the crown of thorns and the scourge (Plate 6).

Sewell noted that the roundels were claimed in an earlier parish history to have been 'the work of two Italians named Arturo and Bagiotti'.¹⁶ This is clearly a reference to Giuseppe Artari and Giovanni Battista Bagutti, who were not in fact Italian, but Swiss, born, like the Lafranchini brothers, in the canton of Ticino. While Sewell urged caution since neither is mentioned in the accounts (in fact Bagutti was long dead), this attribution

has persisted. What the accounts record is that on 30th June 1753, just before the church opened, a Robert West was paid £23 17s 4d 'in full for his bill for the middle ceiling with the cornice and ornaments', which must refer to the nave ceiling and its roundels. A tally of expenditure, dating from May 1756, records that a total of £63 1s 10d had been spent on 'plasterers work and ornaments etc' (exclusive of the cost of materials). Sewell highlighted West's role (over that of the other plasterers on the project, Samuel Pool, Henry Hutchinson, Robert Sanderson and John Waugh), but he clearly did not know of the Dublin stuccodore Robert West or of the stylistic similarities with his Irish work. None of these names are on the lists of Dublin stucco workers compiled by Curran and Lucey; three of them, Hutchinson, Sanderson and Waugh, appear to be local to the Whitehaven / Carlisle area. Given the stylistic similarities of the St James's roundels to West's Irish work, particularly in the cherubs (which are similar to several he executed in his Dublin schemes) and in the general modelling of plasterwork, I believe the 'two' Wests are one and the same. There are other Irish connections with the church. The flags used in its building (no longer *in situ*) were imported from Dublin, though they must have originated elsewhere,¹⁷ while the mason Andrew Brown, who turned the nave columns, was later associated with Myers in county Antrim. There is no evidence that West came from Cumberland, and I think it likely that he was brought over to do the job. Myers had not begun his Irish career at this time, but it may be that West was recommended by one of Thomas Spedding's contacts from his days at TCD. It is also significant that there were West-like ceilings in 109 Scotch Street, Whitehaven, the home of Thomas and James's father, Carlisle Spedding. It was pulled down around 1960. The RCHME illustrates one of them, which has a ceiling roundel with cherubs like those at St James's, but holding a cupid's bow and festoons of flowers rather than the instruments of Christ's passion.¹⁸ The decorative scheme also includes flying birds similar to Dublin examples. The house had apparently been rebuilt in the 1740s; the RCHME suggests that the ceilings were modelled in the 1760s, but seeing as the house was then occupied by Carlisle's widow, it seems more likely that they date from around the same time as the church, Carlisle having been killed in a mine explosion in 1755.

Another Irish feature that can be found in Cumberland houses are polished Kilkenny limestone (also known as black marble) chimney pieces. The Black Quarry, just outside Kilkenny city, was operated by William Colles from around 1732. In 1748 it was noted that he was sending 'yearly several shiploads to England'.¹⁹ It is unclear if these went via Dublin, where Colles had a warehouse, or via Thomastown and thence by river to the port of Waterford.²⁰ A couple of such chimney pieces in Whitehaven are illustrated by the RCHME, including one in James Spedding's house on Roper Street, attributed here to Myers. Another can be found in the drawing room of the birthplace of William Wordsworth in nearby Cockermouth, rebuilt by Joshua Lucock in 1745/46.²¹

Beyond the question of West's employment on projects in Whitehaven lies the further question of possible collaborations with Myers in Ireland. Two houses attributable to Myers are worth considering in this context – Belvoir Park, the seat of Viscount



Annunciation roundel

3 – General view, showing the Blessed Virgin at the base and the Archangel Gabriel on the left



4 – Detail showing the swirling acanthus leaves of the pendant, with the figure of a supporting angel above



Ascension roundel

5 – General view surmounted by the risen Christ. The pose of the angel on the right provides a link to the first roundel.

6 – Detail showing a pair of cherubs carrying two of the instruments of Christ's passion – the crown of thorns and the scourge



Dungannon, outside Belfast, of the 1750s (now demolished), and Mornington House, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin, of the late 1760s, built for Dungannon's son-in-law, the Earl of Mornington. The major extension made to Belvoir Park between 1755 and 1759 was designed in a somewhat heavy-handed Palladian manner, but it appears, from surviving photographs, to have been the first house in Ireland to have the ceilings of all its principal rooms decorated in the newly introduced Rococo style.²² These photographs remain to be critically studied. The Rococo ceilings of Mornington House are currently unattributed, though one might caution that Casey does not consider them 'of the first rank'.²³ In looking at the Whitehaven connection, I have revisited the question of West's origins first raised by Curran seventy years ago. I have found nothing to indicate that West was English. However, I am not convinced that he was born in Dublin since both he and his brother John were admitted as freemen under the category of 'grace especial' which implies that they were not natives of the city.²⁴ Curran suggests that West was unmarried; the relatives named in his will are his nephew Robert, the son of John, and a niece, Catherine Gaven, married to a Monaghan merchant, James Burgess.²⁵ Unfortunately this information does not really help us in determining his background. It may be that West was from another part of Ireland, and it might be worth looking for potential early work in the provinces.²⁶

The St James's ceiling roundels are certainly without parallel in Irish ecclesiastical architecture of the period, and it is doubtful if anything so bold and demonstrative of religious faith would have found acceptance in the low-church milieu of the Church of Ireland of the day. It is easy to see how the myth grew up in England that they were the work of Italians.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ C.P. Curran, 'Dublin Plasterwork', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (JRSAI)*, LXX, pt. 1, 1940, 1-56.
- ² C.P. Curran, *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1967).
- ³ J. McDonnell, *Irish Decorative Stuccowork and Its European Sources* (Dublin, 1991).

- ⁴ C. Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin* (New Haven and London, 2005).
- ⁵ C. Lucey, *The Stapleton Collection: designs for the Irish neoclassical interior* (Tralee, 2007). Stapleton was executor of West's will.
- ⁶ Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin*, 41.
- ⁷ Lucey, *The Stapleton Collection*, 13.
- ⁸ T. Mowl and B. Earnshaw, *An Insular Rococo: Architecture, Politics and Society in Ireland and England, 1710-1770* (London, 1999) 243 et seq.
- ⁹ Curran, 'Dublin Plasterwork', 35.
- ¹⁰ F. O'Dwyer, 'In search of Christopher Myers: pioneer of the Gothic revival in Ireland' in M. McCarthy and K. O'Neill (eds), *Studies in the Gothic Revival* (Dublin, 2008) 51-111.
- ¹¹ C.E.B. Brett, *Buildings of County Antrim* (Belfast, 1996) 31.
- ¹² H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, 4th edn. (New Haven and London, 2008) 971.
- ¹³ D.P. Sewell, *St. James's Church, Whitehaven* (Whitehaven, 1972). Despite a recent public appeal, the minutes unfortunately remain lost.
- ¹⁴ Carlisle Record Office, Registry of Richard Osbaldeston, Bishop of Carlisle. I owe this reference to Stuart Nicholson, honorary archivist of the parish of Whitehaven.
- ¹⁵ S. Collier with S. Pearson, *Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England – Whitehaven 1660-1800* (London 1999) 78.
- ¹⁶ Revd. R. Duncan, 'Parish Notes' in *St. James's Church Monthly*, 1, no. 7 (August 1904).
- ¹⁷ This is suggested on the basis that Dublin limestone was unsuited for the manufacture of flags.
- ¹⁸ Collier with Pearson, *Whitehaven 1660-1800*, 134.
- ¹⁹ Anon. [W.R. Chetwood], *A Tour Through Ireland in Several Entertaining letters ... by Two English Gentlemen* (London, 1748) 192.
- ²⁰ Because of duties on finished goods in the early nineteenth century, Kilkenny marble was exported in blocks from Waterford to Liverpool and Glasgow. However, it is unclear if such a tariff was applied to chimney pieces transported to Whitehaven in the mid-eighteenth century. See T. Hand, "'Doing Everything of Marble wch can be done with it": some descriptive accounts of Kilkenny Marble Works', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, XI, 2008, 91.
- ²¹ Illustrated in M. Miers, 'Wordsworth House, Cumbria', *Country Life*, 26th July 2007, 66-69. This house has elaborate internal joinery, though it cannot be said with any certainty that Myers had a hand in it. The carving of the chimney piece looks similar to Irish examples. My thanks to Rachel Painter of the National Trust for allowing me to inspect it.
- ²² The photographs of these rooms are in the National Archives, Kew, WORK 27/15.
- ²³ Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin*, 592.
- ²⁴ Ex. info. Mary Clark, Dublin City Archivist.
- ²⁵ The present whereabouts of the will, cited by Curran in *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 65, is unknown, but the names are confirmed by a study of Betham's Abstracts in the National Archives, Dublin.
- ²⁶ Hitherto, all West's documented work has been in Dublin. However, the present writer has noted a couple of ceilings in his style in the provinces, including an example in the Bridge House, Kilkenny (see 'Making Connections in Georgian Ireland' in *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, XXXVIII, 1996-97, 19-20), and a very large example, reminiscent of 20 Lower Dominick Street, in Castlemartyr, now a country house hotel, in county Cork.