



The lost landscapes of Castletown: a note on Edmund Garvey's views of Castletown

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On the walls of the Green Drawing Room at Castletown hangs a painting by the Irish landscape painter Edmund Garvey, *A view of the River Liffey with the ruined tower of St Wolstan's Abbey, Celbridge, on the left bank and figures on the right*. On 22nd May 1784, Garvey wrote to Tom Conolly concerning four views of Castletown that he had recently completed:

Sir

I beg leave to inform you, the four views of Castletown are finish'd. The Earl of Strafford did me the great honor to come to see them and also Lady Ann Conolly. They (with great condescension) were so good as to approve of and seem much pleas'd with them. Notwithstanding I should wish to submit them to your and Lady Louisa Conolly's well known accurate judgement. I beg'd of my Lord to leave them a few days to show some Gentlemen I had the honor to be employ'd by you. My Lord seem'd anxious to know whether you intend to send them to him framed, I made bold to say I believ'd you did, and have had very neat frames for them, which dont come to 5 Gs each, if you should not approve of them, I have other pictures they will fit.

I am with great respect Sir most humble most obedient

Edm Garvey
22 May 1784

I beg to know your commands how the other two are to be disposed of.¹

¹ – Edmund Garvey, *A VIEW OF THE RIVER LIFFEY WITH THE RUINED TOWER OF ST WOLSTAN'S ABBEY...* 1780s, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 135 cm (detail; full image overleaf)

Born in Kilkenny in 1738 or 1740, Edmund Garvey studied painting under Robert Carver in Dublin. He then spent much of his working life abroad, studying in Italy before settling in England.² Moving from Bath to London in 1777 probably brought Garvey into circles where he could have come into contact with Tom and Louisa Conolly. Commissioning such a series of demesne portraits was popular at the time, and Jonathan Fisher had completed a similar series of Belvoir Castle, county Down, in the 1760s. Thomas Roberts completed his pre-eminent series of Carton and Lucan demesnes in the 1770s. The letter's discussion as to whether Conolly intended 'to send them to [the lord] framed' indicates that he intended two of the paintings for his uncle, William Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford the 'Lord' mentioned in the letter.³ Garvey's query as to 'how the other two were to be dispos'd' suggests that the four views were never intended to be hung together and that some may have been copies.

In February 1797 Tom Conolly's mother, Lady Anne Conolly (née Wentworth) died. Her effects were auctioned on 13th June 1797 by Christie's in London. Among them were 'two views taken on Mr Connolly's estate' sold to a Mr. Ewen.⁴ Lady Anne Conolly had moved back to England when her husband, the Speaker's nephew William Conolly II, died in 1754. She bequeathed two views of Castletown to her daughter-in-law, Lady Louisa Conolly, in her will, and these two were probably sent to Ireland in the aftermath of her death.⁵ The painting described in Castletown's 1893-94 inventory as 'Large Landscape River and Woodland scene with a tower rising to left, figure on right bank'⁶ is probably one of them. No other inventory entry seems to relate to any of Garvey's other views. It still hangs at Castletown, forming part of the Castletown Foundation's collection. The Foundation bought it from Desmond Guinness in 1984, who had in turn purchased it privately from Lord Carew in 1966.

Lady Anne Conolly was by some accounts a 'strong-willed, volatile, meddlesome, domineering woman'.⁷ As one of Thomas Conolly's guardians during his minority and a trustee of her husband's will, she had some control over the family estate until all her



2 – St Wostan's Abbey
(photo: the author)

opposite

3 – Edmund Garvey, A VIEW OF THE RIVER LIFFEY WITH THE RUINED TOWER OF ST WOLSTAN'S ABBEY, CELBRIDGE, ON THE LEFT BANK AND FIGURES ON THE RIGHT 1780s, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 135 cm
(photo by David Davison; courtesy Castletown Foundation)



daughters were married in the 1770s. She and Tom Conolly were on good terms until around 1795, when various lawsuits and misunderstandings to do with land settlements began to embitter their relationship. They also soured Tom Conolly's relationship with his sisters for the remaining period of his life. Family estrangement intensified when the contents of Lady Anne's will were made known to her children.⁸ Why did Lady Anne leave the views to Louisa and not to Tom? Her son, despite censorious correspondence from his uncle regarding his gambling habits and inability to save money, expected a substantial inheritance from Strafford, which if forthcoming would have alleviated his financial affairs. A picture of Wentworth Castle, received from the earl, hung in his dressing room at Castletown,⁹ suggesting that the two paintings by Garvey may have been a reciprocal gift from Tom Conolly to his uncle. Despite this, his efforts to win favour with his uncle were spectacularly unsuccessful: he received £300 rather than the £3,000 he had been expecting.¹⁰ It seems likely that Lady Anne bequeathed the two Grosvenor Square Garveys to Louisa, and that the two she had inherited from her brother, the Earl of Strafford, were sold at auction. Of the four views of Castletown, three are now lost.

John Warren, the Irish portraitist, praised Garvey 'for truth, colour, and Effect', finding 'his Aerial perspective' to be 'remarkably good & his Effects natural and Simple'. He could paint water and rocks 'mighty well' but his trees were 'rather rude and unfinished', and generally he was 'rather negligent in his execution' with his 'foregrounds often too heavy in Colour'. As a painter he had a 'great deal of merit' while his 'faults may be call'd those of a Genius', an assessment that appears more than a little glowing.¹¹ The one remaining Castletown view is of the riverside Liffey walk near the cottage ground,

looking across to the ruins of St Wolstan's Abbey. There are accounts and map extracts detailing the purchase of the cottage ground (formerly belonging to St Wolstan's, although on the northern bank) and the purchase of land in Parsonstown in the 1770s.¹² The Castletown view displays some of the characteristics referred to in Warren's letter, particularly in respect of the foreground's water and rocks. Garvey clearly made some effort to distinguish the trees by species on the left river bank, although the dog/foal beside the figure on the right-hand river bank is less than convincing. The tree-planting depicted is consistent with eighteenth-century maps and surveys. Discovering the three lost views would contribute to the understanding and conservation of Castletown's eighteenth-century landscape design.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ National Library of Ireland, Conolly Papers, MS 41,341/9/1. See also Patrick Walsh and A.P.W. Malcomson, *The Conolly Archive* (Dublin, 2010) 326.
- ² A. Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters, 1600-1940* (Yale, 2002). The authors make no reference to the Castletown paintings. See also Nicola Figgis (ed.), *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Volume II: Painting 1600-1900* (Royal Irish Academy and Yale, 2015) 271-72.
- ³ Had the paintings been given to the Earl of Strafford in 1784, they would then have passed to the earl's sister, Anne, after his death in 1791 under the terms of the earl's will. See A.P.W. Malcomson, 'The fall of the house of Conolly 1758-1803', in Allan Blackstock and Eoin Magennis (eds), *Politics and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1850: essays in tribute to Peter Jupp* (Belfast, 2007) 107-156: 125.
- ⁴ I am grateful to Nicola Figgis for this information. See also Figgis (ed.), *Painting 1600-1900*, 272.
- ⁵ Public Record Office, National Archives, Kew, Probate 11/1286, 'I give and bequeath to my daughter-in-law the picture of the said Thomas Conolly and the two views of Castletown in Ireland which are in my house in Grosvenor Square in London.'
- ⁶ Irish Architectural Archive, Castletown Papers, J/11, Inventory 1893-94 (amended in 1898) of Castletown, 203; see also Elizabeth Mayes, *Castletown, Decorative Arts* (OPW, Trim, 2011) 126.
- ⁷ Malcomson, *The Fall of the House of Conolly*, 111.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, 107-56
- ⁹ *ibid.*, 125.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ P. McEvansoneya, 'An Irish artist goes to Bath: letters from John Warren to Andrew Caldwell, 1776-1784', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, II, 1999, 156 and 161-62.
- ¹² Irish Architectural Archive, Castletown papers, E/13/1-8, Deeds relating to St Wolstan's, Celbridge, and Parsonstown Leixlip, 1706-1773.