



‘A wide deserted waste’? Rediscovered views of Ballyfin by William Ashford, c.1784

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THE REDISCOVERY OF TWO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIEWS OF BALLYFIN BY WILLIAM Ashford (1746-1824), and the correct identification of a third, rather neatly coincides with the publication of an architectural history of Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison’s great classical house and the demesne’s glorious rebirth after eight years of painstaking restoration.¹ Taken together, the three works illustrate the divergent approaches that Irish landscape painters could bring to bear on related subject matter, and nicely evince some of the cross-currents, circularities and coincidences which determine how demesne landscapes were conceived and perceived, how they were portrayed in paint and print, and how these representations were subsequently collected.

A landscape, signed by Ashford and dated 1784, was published some years ago, labelled as ‘A Pastoral Scene; said to be in County Sligo with a distant view of Cummin House, the residence of John Ormsby Esq’ (Plate 2).² When revisiting the work in the course of researching the history of Ballyfin, striking similarities were noted between the house included in the distance, and a view of Ballyfin engraved by Thomas Milton after a missing work by Ashford, and published in 1787.³ The uncertain nature of the title of the Cummin House painting further heightened speculation.

The inscription on the picture frame – referring to ‘the residence of John Ormsby Esq’ – was correct insofar as when the picture was painted; Cummin (or Cummeen) House, set above Cummeen Strand in Sligo Bay, was the seat of Lieutenant-Colonel John Ormsby who, in 1782, became president of the Loyal Sligo Volunteers. However, there is nothing in Ashford’s view to relate it to the Ormsby seat, once rather grandly claimed as the ‘Hibernian Versailles’.⁴ Cummin was described more prosaically in 1739 as ‘a very pleasant seat of the Ormsbys [which] stands beautifully on the strand ... has fine gardens and is well wooded’.⁵

1 – William Ashford, *A BOATING PARTY ON THE LAKE AT BALLYFIN...*
c. 1784, oil on canvas, 42 x 61 cm (detail; see Plate 6) (private collection)



2 – William Ashford, *A PASTORAL SCENE WITH A DISTANT VIEW OF BALLYFIN, COUNTY LAOIS*
1784, oil on canvas, 42.5 x 61 cm (private collection)

A view of Cummeen Strand by Daniel C. Grose, which was published, with a corresponding textual account, in the *Irish Penny Journal* of 30th November 1833, provides a glimpse of the residence in the middle distance, though in part obscured by trees.⁶ What is visible confirms Cummin as a relatively modest gable-ended Georgian house given a certain curiosity by a bastion tower on one angle with a conical roof; from this it is clearly smaller and nothing like the building shown in Ashford's view. Furthermore, Grose's view is taken from the so-called 'Rock of Gibraltar' – then a small bathing village near Sligo town – and shows the strand as a 'considerable tract of dry sand, that shifts with every blast, rising in thick clouds for ever making encroachments on the low lands within its range'. Beside it, the somewhat grotesquely depicted bulk of Knocknarea, the 'Hill of the Kings', is an easily identifiable prominence that rises in 'bold majesty over the ocean, presenting a bluff and rugged surface to its impetuous blasts'. Nothing of this landscape is suggested in Ashford's view.⁷

That the 1784 painting represents instead a landscape in the environs of Ballyfin, showing the recently inherited seat of the Hon. William Wellesley-Pole in the background, is demonstrated by Thomas Milton's reproduction of Ashford's view which shows the Georgian house in greater detail (Plates 3, 5). By the end of the seventeenth century, the manor of Ballyfin, with its castle built by Sir Piers Crosby, had become a seat of Periam Pole, whose son rebuilt the castle in the early eighteenth century.⁸ When the house was



3 – *Thomas Milton after William Ashford, A BOATING PARTY ON THE LAKE AT BALLYFIN*
1787, engraving

first depicted, much later in the century in Ashford and Milton’s work, it had been greatly remodelled and extended by William Pole, who had inherited from his brother, another Periam, in 1748.

In Milton’s widely circulated view, the house is represented from the north-east across the lake: a long, fourteen-bay elevation, comprising a five-bay wing projected on one side of the principal nine-bay block, distinguished by its central canted bay. The appearance of the building altogether conforms to Milton’s impression ‘of neatness and extent’, and his description of the external appearance as possessing ‘nothing very ornamental or magnificent’.⁹ There is little doubt that this is the same house shown in Ashford’s more distant view; here, even the more benign characteristics of the Laois landscape can be confirmed by the recognisable outline of the Slieve Bloom mountains in the background, with the unmistakable small peak of Arderin clearly visible to the left above the house (Plates 2, 4).

Our appreciation of this newly identified view of Ballyfin is now greatly increased by the coincidental discovery of the very painting by Ashford on which Milton based his 1787 engraving. Having long been considered lost, it has recently been traced to a private collection in the United Kingdom as one of a surviving pair of views set in the demesne of Ballyfin; both are published here for the first time. Now that the painting on which he based his print has been identified, it is clear that, in 1787, Milton precisely followed



4 – Detail of Plate 2 5 – Detail of Plate 3

opposite 6 – William Ashford, *A BOATING PARTY ON THE LAKE AT BALLYFIN VIEWED FROM ST GEORGE'S POINT ON THE NORTH-EAST SHORE WITH FOREGROUND FIGURES AND A VIEW OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HOUSE*
c. 1784, oil on canvas, 42 x 61 cm (private collection)

7 – William Ashford, *A PASTORAL SCENE AT BALLYFIN SHOWING A BOATING PARTY ON THE LAKE, VIEWED FROM THE SOUTH-WEST BESIDE THE GROTTO WOOD*
c. 1784, oil on canvas, 42 x 61 cm (private collection)

Ashford to show the Georgian house from St George's Point on the north-east shore of the lake, with foreground figures and a boating party on the water (Plates 1, 6). The companion picture represents the lake viewed from the south-west, beside the Grotto wood, and shows the same boating party together with a pastoral scene of a shepherd tending his flock in the foreground (Plate 7). These pictures correspond closely in size to the distant view, formerly described as Cummin House, and are quite likely part of a set that perhaps included at least one other, as yet unknown, view. Given that the modest canvas size (approximately 16 x 24 ins) was one rarely used by the artist, and that for most of his principal patrons he executed more than one demesne view, it seems safe to assume that, together, Ashford's pictures formed part of a single commission.

William Ashford, who was born in Birmingham, had come to Ireland in, or shortly before, 1764. In that the year he took up the post of Clerk to the Comptroller of the Laboratory section of the Ordnance, a position he held until 1788, serving in effect as an inspector of armaments throughout Ireland. Ashford's early painting career was confined to the genre of still life and flower pieces, and he exhibited a variety of these between 1767 and 1772 at the Society of Artists in Ireland. He emerged as a landscape painter in 1772 when he won the Dublin Society's second premium to Thomas Roberts' first. His seriousness as a rival was marked the following year when he took the Society's first prize, and after 1777, when the younger, and more accomplished, Roberts left Ireland to die,



‘there was no serious competition and as a landscape painter Ashford reigned supreme for thirty to forty years’.¹⁰ If the relationship between Ashford and Roberts was marked by a professional rivalry, it was also, almost certainly, based on mutual respect and indeed friendship. They seem to have worked side by side at Powerscourt in 1774, and Ashford was profoundly influenced by the slightly younger artist.¹¹

Professor Crookshank has suggested that the constant travelling necessitated by his day job in the Ordnance Department was the reason for Ashford’s shift from still life to landscape. If this was indeed the case, it was opportune that his engagement with the genre occurred when it did, because, as Crookshank notes, ‘the fashion of commissioning sets of views of one’s house and park was in full flood in Ireland during his lifetime’.¹² Among the earliest of such works commissioned from Ashford was a series of views of Moore Abbey, county Kildare (1775, private collection), painted for the 5th Earl of Drogheda (and later 1st Marquess), whose sister Sarah had married William Pole of Ballyfin in 1748. However, as both Lady Pole and her husband were deceased by 1784 (in 1780 and 1781 respectively), Ashford’s views of Ballyfin were unlikely to have been commissioned by them. Instead, it seems likely that the commission came from Wellesley-Pole, elder brother to the Duke of Wellington, who, as William Pole’s heir, had taken the additional name Pole on his inheritance.

Even though the size of the Ballyfin pictures is considerably smaller than most of Ashford’s works in this genre, they do correspond to a pair of views of Mount Kennedy, county Wicklow (1785, private collection), one of which was also engraved by Milton. Thomas Milton’s *Collection of select views of different seats of the nobility and gentry in ... Ireland* has been described as ‘the most important advertisement of the splendours of the Irish landscape’, and its role in propagating knowledge of the Irish landscape school has long been acknowledged.¹³ In addition to Ashford, several other Irish landscape artists provided compositions to be engraved by Milton, the original oils for some of which survive, including Thomas Roberts’ view of the Boyne at Beau Parc, county Meath (c.1783, private collection) and Francis Wheatley’s of Tarbert, county Kerry (c.1783, private collection). It is pleasing now to add Ashford’s *Boating Party at Ballyfin* to this list. Ashford evidently had a close relationship with Milton, as a number of his works formed the basis of the latter’s *Views*, and there is further evidence that they were involved in other business relationships: a letter from Ashford mentions the engraver in connection with arrangements for transporting pictures.¹⁴

If Milton’s engravings were vital for advertising the merits of landscape painters such as Roberts and Ashford, their own work, like his, had a role in spreading knowledge of the refined elegance of contemporary Irish architecture and landscape design, and, in so doing, demonstrating the taste and sophistication of their patrons. As Pasquin noted, Milton’s work ‘conveyed an indirect compliment to patrician vanity’, and so was ‘much encouraged’.¹⁵ Even allowing for Pasquin’s ‘characteristic sour radicalism’, it is clear that the spirit of emulation that inspired patrons and artists to outdo each other – and the dissemination of ideas through the circulation of paintings, prints, books and craftsmen

which enabled them to do so – formed the backdrop to Milton’s enterprise.¹⁶ Similarly, Ashford’s work at Ballyfin illustrates the close, and often circular, links between architecture, designed landscapes and landscape painting in eighteenth-century Ireland. Ashford would have known the area near Ballyfin, and at some now unknown date he painted a view of nearby Emo Court, ‘looking toward the temple and Spire hill’ (private collection).¹⁷ Emo had, of course, been designed by Ashford’s great friend James Gandon, who later designed the artist’s own house in Sandymount. Coincidentally, at a later date, Emo was to be a fundamental influence on the evolving architecture of the Cootes’ Regency mansion at Ballyfin.¹⁸

Ashford is known to have worked closely with his clients. He travelled on horseback with Lord Aldborough to select views of his estates around Baltinglass – one of Ashford’s views of Aldborough’s house of Belan was also engraved by Milton – and it is certain that Wellesley-Pole would have influenced the views that Ashford painted of his newly acquired estate.¹⁹ Naturally, the great man-made lake at Ballyfin is prominently included. This feature had famously been admired by Lady Kildare in 1759, and was an inspiration for her ‘Sheet of Water’ at Carton.²⁰ In a reverse influence, it is clear that Ashford’s views of the Ballyfin lake in the 1780s are dependent on those painted by Thomas Roberts at Carton in the middle of the previous decade. Roberts’ Carton series, which includes a view of Lady Kildare’s ‘Sheet of Water’, was completed by Ashford after Roberts’ untimely death.²¹ Indeed, Ashford’s expansive views of Ballyfin are much closer to Roberts views of Carton than the more enclosed paintings that he himself produced to complete that series. While Ballyfin influenced Carton in the creation of its landscape, the influence was in the other direction in its portrayal on canvas.

In Ashford’s views set within the Ballyfin demesne, the main figures are, through their dress and participation in leisurely pursuits such as boating and fishing, unmistakably genteel, giving a singular, introverted view of a cosseted world. In this respect they support Crookshank and Glin’s assertion that Ashford was ‘happiest as the painter of the country house, its surroundings, its owners and their civilized pastimes’.²² The more distant view, by contrast, offers a wider perspective of the same place and its more humble inhabitants, with industrious figures dominating the foreground near a depiction of a vernacular house; Ballyfin itself is only glimpsed in the distance. Again, correspondences with the work of Thomas Roberts are manifestly clear, particularly so when compared with his view of the River Dodder and Rathfarnham Castle (1769, private collection). In Roberts’ work, what ostensibly forms the principal subject of the painting – the country seat – is reduced to a detail in the far distance, while the foreground is dominated by figures drawn, if at some remove, from everyday rural life. Clearly, the patron was equally content to have his estate portrayed either as an idealised pleasure ground with genteel company disporting themselves around the lake, or else as a part of a more quotidian landscape. If the impression that Ashford’s view presents is perhaps paternalistic – the ‘Big House’ as an integral component of a benignly ordered landscape – the desire for its portrayal in this manner complicates the received perception of a secluded eighteenth-

tury Ascendancy ‘with Ireland outside the gates’,²³

To complicate matters further, there is contemporary evidence that Ashford’s views – and Milton’s careful copy of one of them – do not necessarily tell the whole story, and that under William Wellesley-Pole the demesne at Ballyfin was perhaps not quite the idyllic paradise portrayed in oil. In a letter of 3rd March 1787, the very year that Milton’s engraving was published, the antiquarian Edward Ledwich paints a rather different picture, one that supports Pasquin’s assertion as to the inherent flattery – indeed, on occasion, mendacity – underlying Milton’s enterprise and, by extension, demesne landscape painting in general. Writing to Joseph Cooper-Walker, Ledwich notes: ‘Pole has gambled away the house, woods and everything, and left ye whole a wide deserted waste. But poor Milton must not say so.’²⁴

A further, unintended, circularity gives an agreeable conclusion to this tale. The pleasing forces of serendipity had already brought Ashford’s 1784 view back to Ballyfin sometime before it was correctly identified. Acquired solely on its merits as a landscape by one of Ireland’s finest eighteenth-century artists, the painting had found its way into the collection that was being assembled to furnish the newly restored house. Now on display in the library of the 1820s mansion that replaced the Pole house it portrays, Ashford’s painting enjoys the position it deserves as a document for the evolution of Ballyfin.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kevin V. Mulligan, *Ballyfin, The Restoration of an Irish House and Demesne* (Tralee, 2011).
- ² The picture was first published in William Laffan (ed.), *The Sublime and the Beautiful: Irish art 1700-1830* (London, 2001) 119. Having been identified by Kevin Mulligan, it was published under its correct title in William Laffan (ed.), *A Year at Churchill* (Tralee 2003) 187.
- ³ Thomas Milton, *A collection of select views of different seats of the nobility and gentry in ... Ireland* (London and Dublin, 1783-93; fifth set, 1787) pl. XIX.
- ⁴ Quoted in Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven and London, 2004) 58.
- ⁵ National Archives of Ireland, MS 2533, Hints towards a Natural and Topographical History of Sligo ... 1739, by Rev. William Henry, cited in John McTernan, *At the foot of Knocknarea: a chronicle of Coolera in bygone days* (Strandhill, 1990) 132.
- ⁶ *The Irish Penny Journal*, I, 48, 30th November 1833. The view was engraved by ‘Lewis’, probably the Cork-based engraver Frank Lewis. W.G. Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1913) I, 20. The view is reproduced in McTernan, *At the foot of Knocknarea*; an artist’s impression of Cummin House, demolished c.1940, is given in the same source on page 52.
- ⁷ In the late nineteenth century it was stated that ‘the Cummeen and Belvoir Ormsbys have long abandoned their handsome seats, Belvoir being now in utter ruin and Cummeen little better’. Terence O’Rorke, *The History of Sligo: town and country*, 2 vols (1889) I, 459.
- ⁸ Nothing of the character of the earlier buildings is known. Accounts of the property given towards the end of the century state that the early eighteenth-century house was burned down without elab-

- orating on the circumstances, or the date, of the event. In 1794 it is simply stated that William Pole's (d.1727) 'more modern house' replacing the Crosby castle was burnt and rebuilt by one of his sons. Milton, *A collection of select views*, 37, and *Anthologia Hibernica: or monthly collection of Science, Belles letters and History for July 1794*.
- ⁹ Milton, *A collection of select views*, pl. XIX, 37. The elevation is partially screened to the north where a second wing to balance the composition was proposed but does not appear to have been built. Milton, somewhat unhelpfully, states that the house 'is not quite completed, as the old house stands where the left wing is intended to be built...' The absence of another wing here is confirmed by a more naïve view, by William Beauford, accompanied by a somewhat more plausible account, which was published in the monthly magazine *Anthologia Hibernica* in July 1794. Even if a poorer representation with minor inaccuracies, it agrees closely with Ashford's view. See Mulligan, *Ballyfin*, 24-25.
- ¹⁰ Strickland, *Dictionary*, 7; Anne Crookshank, 'A Life Devoted to Landscape Painting, William Ashford (c.1746-1824)', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 11 (Dublin, 1995) 120.
- ¹¹ See William Laffan and Brendan Rooney, *Thomas Roberts, Landscape and Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Tralee, 2009) 190-201.
- ¹² Crookshank, 'William Ashford', 120.
- ¹³ Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters* (New Haven and London, 2002) 148.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 152.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Ronald W. Lightbown, *An Architect Earl, Edward Augustus Stratford (1736-1801), 2nd Earl of Aldborough* (Thomastown, 2008) 105.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Crookshank, 'William Ashford', 129, no. 66.
- ¹⁸ Patricia McCarthy and Kevin V. Mulligan, 'Unfulfilled mediocrity: the hapless career of Dominick Madden in the west of Ireland', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, IX, 2006, 130, and Mulligan, *Ballyfin*, 38-39.
- ¹⁹ Lightbown, *An Architect Earl*, 106.
- ²⁰ Countess of Kildare to Earl of Kildare, 9th May 1759: 'Yesterday I saw a most delightful place indeed, much beyond any place I have seen in Ireland – Ballyfin ... There is a piece of water there very like what I fancy ours will be, only broader; fine plantations and the greatest variety of trees and flowers almost that I saw anywhere.' Brian FitzGerald (ed.), *The Correspondence of Emily, Duchess of Leinster, 1731-1814*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1949) I, 76, no. 60.
- ²¹ Laffan and Rooney, *Thomas Roberts*, 270-303.
- ²² Crookshank and Glin, *Ireland's Painters*, 150.
- ²³ D. Fingall, *Seventy Years Young; memories of Elizabeth, countess of Fingall* (London, 1937) 37.
- ²⁴ Trinity College, Dublin, Cooper-Walker correspondence, Letter from Edward Ledwich to Joseph Cooper-Walker, 3rd March 1787. With thanks to Dr Edward McParland for providing a copy of this correspondence. Wellesley-Pole inherited Ballyfin as a minor in 1781, and it is possible that in the years before his majority in 1784, the estate had declined to such a degree as to warrant Ledwich's assessment. However, there is evidence that Wellesley-Pole was an astute business manager and that eventually he honoured William Pole's wishes to have his improvements to the demesne completed. The suggestion of gambling and waste did, however, offer a portent for the dissolute life of Wellesley-Pole's son, also William. Mulligan, *Ballyfin*, 25-27.