



1 – St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh

(illustration from HANDBOOK FOR QUEENSTOWN CATHEDRAL BAZAAR (Cork 1903))

The building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh

ANN WILSON

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL OF ST COLMAN IN COBH IS A LARGE, ELABORATELY detailed neo-Gothic building (Plates 1, 24). It is prominently sited, overlooking Cork harbour (Plate 23), and visible for quite a distance. Local people are generally very proud of it, and tourists often climb the steep hill to admire and photograph it. The historian Emmet Larkin has called it 'the most ambitious building project undertaken by the Church in nineteenth-century Ireland', and Frederick O'Dwyer states that it was 'certainly the most costly Irish ecclesiastical building of the Victorian era'.¹

In 1868, when the cathedral was begun, Cobh, or Queenstown as it was then called, was a relatively prosperous place. This was because it was Ireland's principal emigration outlet. More than five million people emigrated from Ireland in the nineteenth century – mainly to the United States, Australia and Canada – and a large proportion of them left from Queenstown. The town's existing Roman Catholic church, which was constructed in 1808 and added to afterwards, began to seem inadequate. A meeting of the Queenstown parishioners was therefore called in January 1858, and the following resolution was passed:

Considering the very insufficient and in several respects unsatisfactory accommodation which our present parish church is capable of affording; and considering also the rising importance and increasing respectability of this town, it is incumbent on us as Catholics who revere our religion and are anxious to see it respected to provide a more suitable Church for the celebration of the Divine Worship.²

By 1864 it had been decided that the proposed building would function not only as a parish church, but as a cathedral for the diocese of Cloyne. The original thirteenth-century cathedral of the diocese, situated in the small east Cork town of Cloyne, was

owned by the Church of Ireland. Queenstown, as the largest town in the diocese, seemed a better location for the modern Roman Catholic cathedral. The building would be dedicated to the diocesan founder, St Colman (560-610).³

The old church was demolished, and construction of the new building was begun in February 1868.⁴ The preparatory work was difficult and expensive: the widening of the roadway on the seaward side required the construction of ‘a high, long, and thick wall of solid mason work’, and, because the foundations were dug from steeply sloping rock, ‘it was necessary in some parts to sink 24 feet below the level of the future floor of the church, while in other parts a firm bottom was found at a depth of only 4 feet’.⁵ The first sod of the foundations was turned on 25 April 1868, and the foundation stone was laid on 15 July 1868. The foundations were completed by June 1869.

THE ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION

The cathedral committee, composed of respectable local citizens, was the official decision-making body in the building of the cathedral.⁶ The bishop usually presided at meetings, the parish clergy attended, and the current administrator acted as secretary. The committee decided in January 1867 to hold an architectural competition, and George Goldie (1828-1887), J.J. McCarthy (1817-1882), and the architectural partnership of E.W. Pugin (1834-1875) and G.C. Ashlin (1837-1921) were invited to submit plans. The bishop of Cloyne, William Keane, who was a friend of the Ashlin family, had been communicating already with Pugin and Ashlin about the proposed church, and Stephen Ashlin, a brother of the architect, was a priest in Cobh.⁷ Not surprisingly, therefore, both McCarthy and Goldie were worried about possible favouritism. Goldie wrote to Bishop Keane:

I have not the advantage of being acquainted with the members of the Committee as Mr. Ashlin has and I will presume they intend fair play, but firstly I have good ground to know that the large portion of its members, with perhaps one exception, are men utterly incapable of judging on a question of art such as the design of this competition demands.⁸

He also hoped that the committee did not intend ‘a flagrant act of scandalous dishonesty’, as happened in the case of the Church of SS Peter and Paul in Cork. This competition had taken place in 1859, and E.W. Pugin’s office had been awarded the commission, in spite of the fact that the drawings of another architect, John Hurley, had won first prize. George Goldie was given second prize, while Pugin’s design was not even placed.⁹ Before they committed themselves to the submission of draw-

ings for Cobh cathedral, therefore, McCarthy and Goldie insisted that changes be made to the terms of the competition, which would 'promote strictly fair play'.¹⁰ Pugin and Ashlin refused to agree to this, and a dispute resulted which was publicly aired in letters to *The Irish Builder* of 1 November 1867.¹¹ McCarthy and Goldie were eventually asked by the building committee to accept the terms of the competition or withdraw. They withdrew, and preliminary plans for the cathedral by Pugin and Ashlin were passed by the bishop and the committee on 10 October 1867.

E.W. Pugin, eldest son of the famous Gothic Revival architect A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852), had taken over his father's practice after his death, but found Irish commissions difficult to organise from his base in England. In 1859, therefore, he decided to take on his young Irish pupil, G.C. Ashlin, as a partner, to run the Irish side of the business.¹² The partnership lasted from 1859 until August 1868, dissolving 'while the firm were at the height of their negotiations concerning St Colman's Cathedral'.¹³ After the split, Ashlin took over their unfinished commissions. E.W. Pugin died suddenly in June 1875, aged only forty-two; Ashlin, however, lived to supervise the building to completion.

THE BISHOPS

Ashlin worked with three different bishops on Cobh cathedral. William Keane (1857-1874), instigator of the project, was determined to build a grand Gothic cathedral. This was probably partly due to his many connections with France, where he would have seen the great French medieval cathedrals, such as Notre Dame de Paris. He studied for the priesthood at the Irish College, Paris, became a professor there, and later vice-president. More significantly, perhaps, he would have noted that Catholic churches in Ireland had long suffered from inadequate funds, making do with cheap buildings for large congregations. He was ordained in 1828, the year before Catholic emancipation. Under the Penal Laws, Catholic churches were required to be plain and unobtrusive, whereas Anglican ones were usually prominently sited. Obviously, the temptation for Catholics to build large and extravagantly when they finally could was very strong. As Richardson comments, the newly confident and prosperous post-emancipation generation, 'far from being furtive about the location of their places of worship ... began to build their churches near the top of a hill ... if not actually on the crest, with a new sense of pride'.¹⁴

Bishop Keane's successor, John McCarthy (1874-1893), seems to have been much less enthusiastic about the building. He admitted in 1877 that he thought the cathedral had been 'commenced on too magnificent and costly a scale for the resources of the Diocese', and continued 'but it was too far advanced when it fell

into my hands that I could make no change without spoiling it'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite having to undertake extensive fundraising during the depression of the late 1870s and 1880s, he managed to get the cathedral to a state where the first mass could be celebrated in it in 1879.

Robert Browne (1894-1935) took over the diocese after Bishop McCarthy's death. As president of Maynooth College he had received great praise for completing the decoration of the college chapel, and arrived in Cobh keen to achieve similar results. He seems to have maintained his enthusiasm and personal involvement through to the end of the project.

COST

In 1868 Cobh cathedral was expected to cost about £25,000. This estimate was for a much more modest church than was eventually built, however, and one which was also not expected to take so long. According to *The Cork Examiner*:

when the contractors had carried up the external walls of the cathedral to an average height of about 12 feet the Most Rev Dr. Keane began to look upon the building as being of entirely too plain a character, and in this view he was supported by the clergy and committee who thought that a cathedral ought to have greater embellishments than an ordinary parish church, and that at whatever expense a change in the character of the structure should be made.¹⁶

In 1879, when the first Mass was celebrated in the newly roofed building, the expenditure totalled over £80,000.¹⁷ Due to the difficulty of raising further funds, work on the building was temporarily suspended that year, and was not resumed until 1889.¹⁸ According to a plaque in the south transept, the final cost of the church was £235,000.

FUNDRAISING

From information based principally on reports in *The Cork Examiner*, it appears that about two-thirds of the total cost was collected from the clergy and laity of the diocese.¹⁹ Approximately eleven percent came in via bequests and special donations, and just under twelve percent from abroad. The remaining amount came from various sources; for instance, support was received from prominent Catholic clergy such as Archbishop Croke of Cashel.²⁰ Letters soliciting funds were sent to practically all the landowners and businessmen in the area, as well as to the shipping companies

who used the harbour. A significant target for fundraising was the Irish community abroad. As Bishop Keane stated in his 1869 pastoral letter:

We ... feel justified in extending our present appeal beyond the limits of the Diocese, and even to those now settled in America or elsewhere, who, when about to embark in Queenstown for their distant home, come in thousands to prepare for the dangers of the Atlantic by receiving for the last time on Irish soil the sacraments of the Church.²¹

One of the first priests sent to fund-raise in America was Fr William Foley in 1870. He wrote from San Francisco to Bishop Keane:

San Francisco has had a very bad year. Money is more scarce than it used to be. The local priests are everlastingly collecting to liquidate the debts on their own churches and religious institutes ... There are thousands of Irishmen just now without employment and destitute in this city and in the neighbouring towns. However, I intend to spare no pains to make my mission as successful as it may be made.²²

His next letter reports both on his successful collecting – ‘on average, £70 per week’ – and his rather less successful introduction to the Archbishop of San Francisco, J.S. Allemany:

His Grace’s reception of me was anything but cordial. He did not ask me to sit down, but at once launched into language most intemperate on the unreasonableness of Your Lordship’s sending a priest here when the religious institutions are all in debt ... he accused me, as though I were a burglar, of taking away money which belonged to the church of the diocese.²³

In February 1871 Archbishop Allemany wrote to Bishop Keane requesting the removal of Fr Foley, and a telegram was later sent with the same message.²⁴ Bishop Keane was slow to respond. Fr Lynch, also sent to America, was less persistent than Fr Foley, but he too received a poor reception in some areas. He wrote from New York in 1870 complaining that ‘the Bishop of Brooklyn ... treated me as if I were a criminal’.²⁵ In Cincinnati in 1871 he was forbidden to collect or lecture anywhere in the area because the people were ‘mostly Germans and poor’, but he privately concluded the real reason was that the bishop was ‘anti-Irish’.²⁶ Nevertheless, by 22 September 1872 Fr Lynch had collected £1,946 and Fr Foley £1,320.²⁷ While the church authorities in America were often not impressed with the Irish collectors, it seems that many of their congregations, once appealed to, were very happy to give.

Things were similar in Australia. In 1875 Fr P.J. O’Callaghan reported from Kadina, in south Australia, that the bishop there ‘had some hesitation’ about grant-

ing permission to collect, 'as they are very much in debt themselves and are badly circumstanced in regard to churches and schools'.²⁸ Similarly, Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide, in 1876, was unenthusiastic: 'Every pound I got, after I had made £300, was, I have been told, as much regretted by him ... as if I were drawing away their hearts' blood.'²⁹ In 1876 Fr O'Callaghan wrote from Tasmania that he had received a kind reception there but could not get much money, as they had only begun to take down their own cathedral last week, on which they had spent about £20,000. It had been closed for some time because it was dangerous to worshippers due to poor construction.³⁰

However, many other clergy were favourable towards the collectors: Dr Quinn, Bishop of Brisbane, Australia, wished the project 'a hearty success, because it is likely to be a worthy monument of the Faith and Charity of the old land', and included a donation of one hundred pounds.³¹ Bishop Twigg of Pittsburgh was very helpful in 1883 to newly arrived Cobh fundraisers. The collectors generally depended on clergy with Cloyne or Cork connections for hospitality and introductions.

There was obviously a feeling among nineteenth-century Irish people that emigrants in America and elsewhere owed a certain loyalty and generosity to their country of origin. As R.F. Foster says, there was a sense of 'being part of an international community, centred on a small island that still claimed a fiercely and unrealistically obsessive identification from its emigrants'.³² While Irish emigrants were expected to be loyal and grateful to their adopted country, they were never supposed to lose their Irish identity, and a big part of that Irish identity was by then perceived to be their Catholic faith.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL DECORATION BUSINESS

The fundraising in Cobh was no different, except perhaps in scale, to that throughout the country. In every part of Ireland, Roman Catholic churches were being built, renovated or extended at a phenomenal rate; it has been calculated that during the nineteenth century an average of two Roman Catholic churches a week must have been built in Ireland.³³ This meant that church decorating could be a very profitable business. As Catholic Ireland became more prosperous, the demand grew for church furniture and decoration.

These needs were often met by large specialised firms such as John Hardman & Company (Plates 10, 14), based in Birmingham, and Mayer & Company of Munich (Plates 11, 13, 15). Most of the stained-glass windows in Cobh were produced by these two firms, but there are also examples of windows by the Irish-based firms Early & Company of Dublin (Plate 12), and Watson & Company of Youghal.

The chancel floor (1892) and shrine mosaics (1898) are by Ludwig Oppenheimer of Manchester; the more basic mosaic work of the nave, aisles and transepts (1894-97) by T.C. Edwards, of Ruabon in Wales; and Angelo Ferretti of Carrara in Italy carved the twelve marble statues of angels behind the high altar (1898). The high altar itself (1892) (Plate 8), however, is by Earley & Powell, and most of the other altars were made by J.A. O'Connell (Plate 2), a stone sculptor operating from 'St Patrick's Art Marble Works' on the Lower Glanmire Road in Cork. O'Connell's letterhead stated that he could provide 'statues, groups, busts, pulpits, fonts, etc, monuments, mural tablets, and carving of all descriptions, executed in the best style of art'.³⁴ From 1892 to 1898 O'Connell was responsible for quite a bit of work in Cobh cathedral, including the carving on the nave capitals (Plate 4).

Most of the major decorative work in Cobh was designed by Ashlin, and commissioned on a one-off basis. However, cheaper, off-the-peg religious objects could also be imported via mail order. Mayer provided this sort of product: a letter to Bishop Browne in 1898 describes a ready-made, life-size Calvary group, 'painted in natural colours', which could be placed on a real or artificial rockery, for £95. This price did not include the rockery, but did include a twelve-foot oak cross, cases, packing and carriage. Mayer also suggested to the bishop that other items on their list – a Holy Family at £35, or a Resurrection for £29 – might be useful to fill empty niches, and at the same time be 'distinct objects of devotion'.³⁵ The bishop ordered a 'Calvary group' (decorated in light tints), a 'Sacred Heart Apparition' and a 'Holy Family' (both in fuller colours).³⁶

Use was made of local and Irish materials in the cathedral. The red sandstone for the foundations came from local quarries, as did limestone dressings for the later extensions to the building.³⁷ Inside, a range of coloured Irish stones was used, mainly in the columns, including Connemara, Kilkenny, Fermoy and Middleton marbles.³⁸ However, the inner walls of the church are faced almost entirely with Bath and

2 – Advertisement for
John A. O'Connell sculptor
(from *HANDBOOK FOR QUEENSTOWN
CATHEDRAL BAZAAR (Cork 1903)*)

ΣΕΛΣΩΝ Ο'ΚΟΝΝΕΛΛ, ΣΕΛΣΤΟ ΕΛΛΑΔΩΝ,
 ΠΕ ΟΜΑΡΤΙΣ ΝΑΟΩΝ ΠΑΤΡΙΑΣ. * * * ΣΠΙΤΟ ΑΝ ΡΙΟΣ, Ι ΣΚΟΤΛΑΙΣ.

JOHN A. O'CONNELL
SCULPTOR.

✦

St. Patrick's Art Works, King Street, CORK.

THE Entire of the internal Carvings, Shrines, etc., in St. Colman's Cathedral, have been executed by the above, and other important works carried out by him include Waterford Cathedral; Lismore, Nenagh, Castlebar, Templemore, Mountmellick and Emly Parish Churches; Holy Cross Church, Tralee; Abbey Church, Clonmel; and various Convents and other Chapels.

Monumental and Church Work of every description in Stone and Marble.

✦ **MOST EXPENSIVE WORKS IN SOUTH OF IRELAND.**



3 – St Colman's Cathedral,
sculpture of St Dominic in
the north transept (sculptor
and date unknown)
(photograph: Jasper Wilson)



4 – St Colman's Cathedral,
nave capital, sculpted by J.A.
O'Connell between 1892 and
1898
(photograph: Jasper Wilson)

Portland stone, the ceiling and seating are made from California pitch pine, and the screens, throne, canons' stalls and pulpit from Austrian oak.³⁹ White Italian marble is used in all the altars and their reredos, and in the communion and baptistery rails. Later in the nineteenth century, due to improved transport, it became much easier and cheaper to obtain imported materials for building and decoration, and Cobh is not at all unusual in employing such a variety of them.⁴⁰

THE DESIGN BRIEF

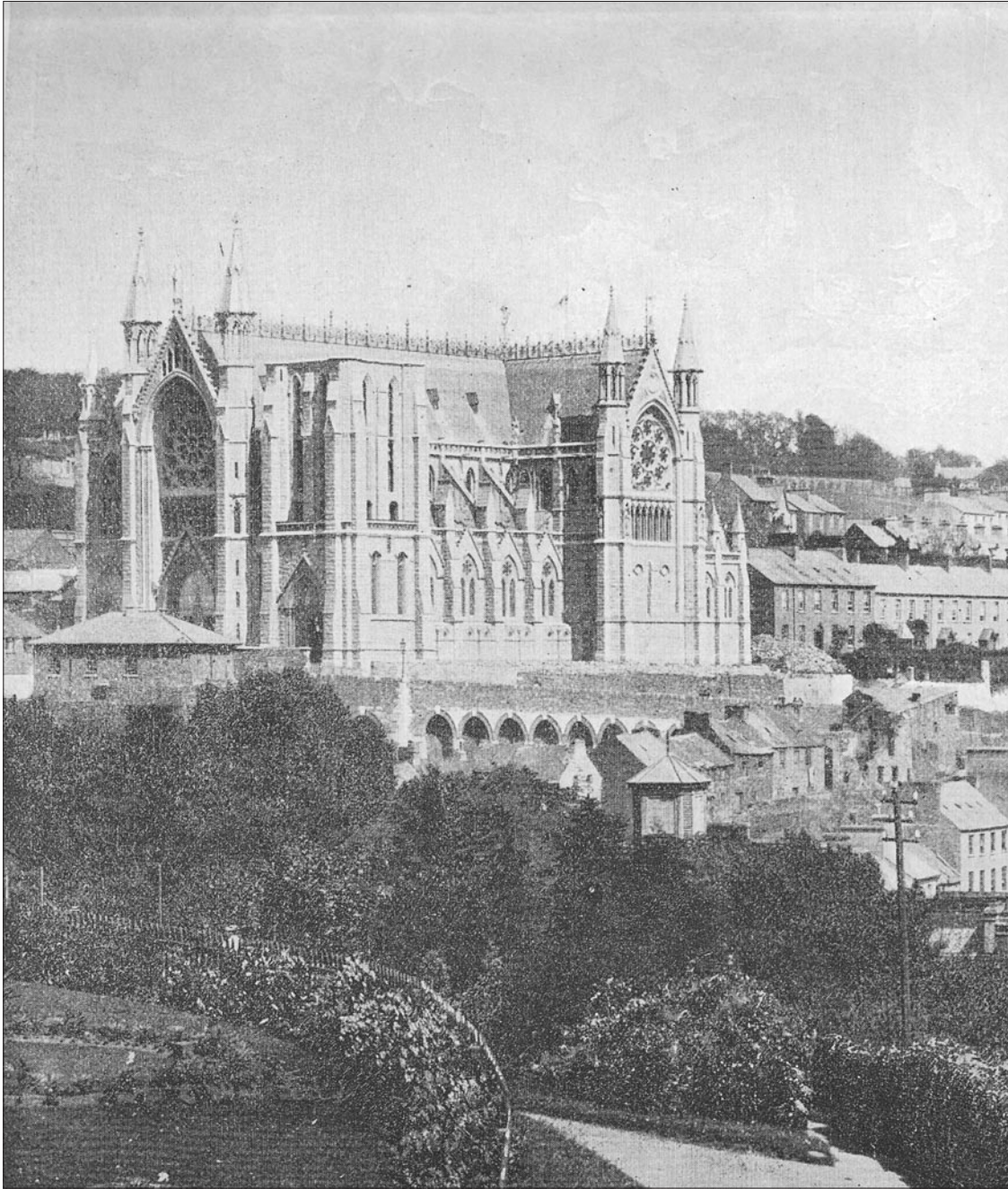
From the start of the project, Cobh cathedral was planned as a neo-Gothic church, large, lavish, unapologetically Roman Catholic and Irish in its decoration and imagery. Its style is mainly based on late-twelfth and thirteenth-century French Gothic models, such as those in Chartres, Amiens and Rheims. Medievalism provided a link for Roman Catholics, and, indeed Anglicans, to pre-Reformation Christianity. Medieval cathedrals had been 'conspicuous symbols of the might and cohesion of Western Christendom, the flagships, so to speak, of the Church Triumphant'.⁴¹ The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland saw itself as a continuation of this same Church, triumphant again after centuries of oppression.

If Pugin and the Ecclesiologists saw the medieval period as a golden age, the temptation to do so was even greater among Irish Catholics, who looked back to a hazy era of religious and political freedom when Ireland was an 'island of Saints and Scholars'.⁴²

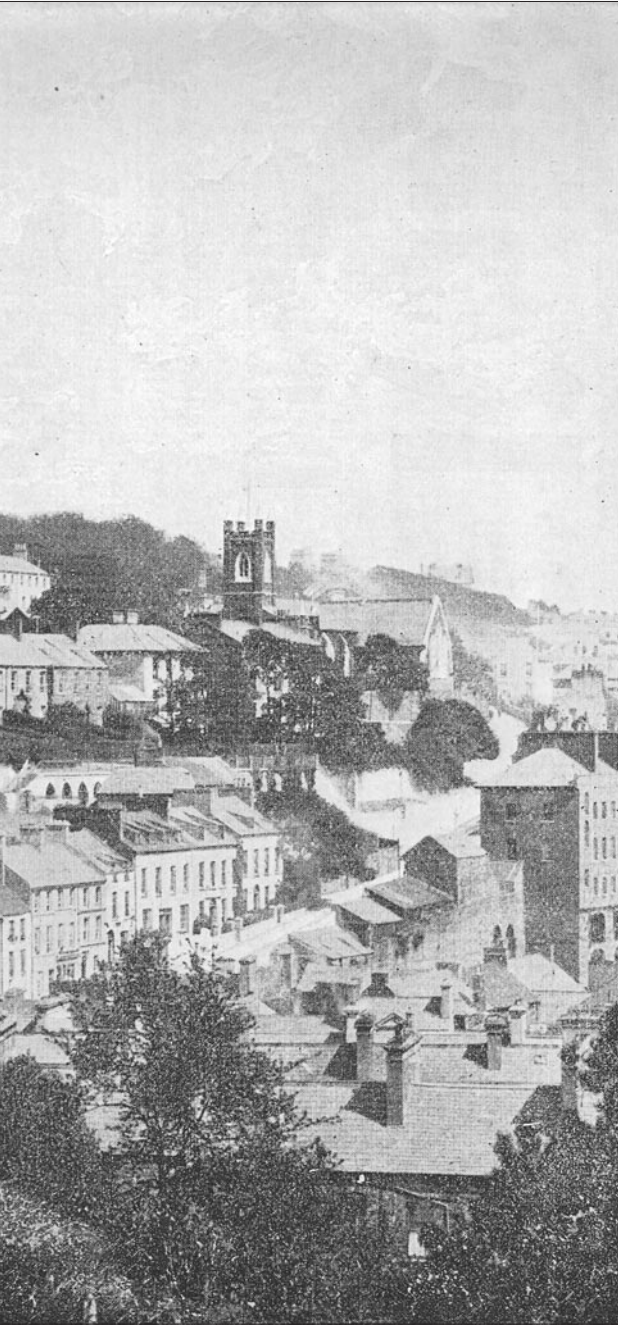
Cobh was also designed to look as richly decorated and elaborate as possible, and this involved opting for a profusion of ornament in order to create the maximum impact. This approach is characteristically Victorian; as Jervis says, 'few Victorian designers saw any virtue in total plainness: on the contrary, they revelled in richness, elaboration, ornament and colour.'⁴³ Throughout the Victorian period the major method of achieving richness of effect was through decoration. Decoration was, in fact, treated by many theoreticians as synonymous with art; a plain object could be rendered artistic by the addition of decoration.⁴⁴

This seems to have been the attitude of the designers of Cobh cathedral, and an 1879 article in *The Cork Examiner* commented approvingly on the building:

It may be observed that nowhere that ornament can be judiciously employed will it be neglected, the design of the architects in this respect, showing a minute ingenuity and fine taste that are admirable. Nowhere is monotony found. Moulding and cornice ... and medallion are multiplied endlessly; what would else be blank spaces will be inlaid, or jewelled.⁴⁵



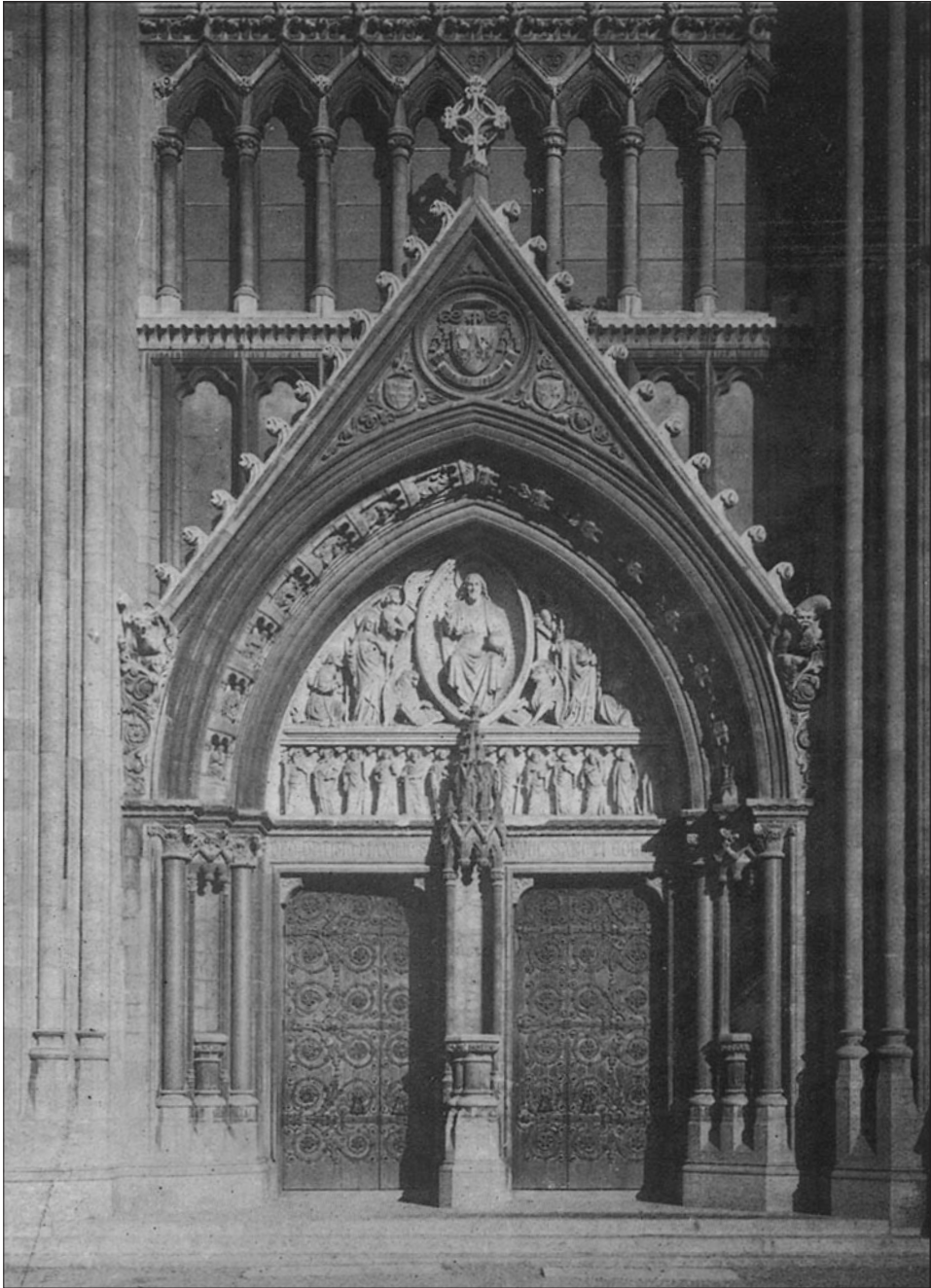
5 – View of Cobh in 1903, before completion of the cathedral's tower and spire; the Church of Ireland is on the right. (from HANDBOOK FOR QUEENSTOWN CATHEDRAL BAZAAR (Cork 1903))



The function of this large, elaborately ornamented building was of course to praise God and offer him a worthy sacrifice. It was also undoubtedly meant to be seen as a spectacular visual symbol of the new status and confidence of the Irish Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. A 1903 postcard of Cobh shows the massive new Catholic cathedral, even without its tower and spire, completely overshadowing its Church of Ireland neighbour (Plate 5). The sort of competitiveness displayed in Cobh occurred throughout Ireland. Armagh, for instance, was originally dominated by its thirteenth-century Church of Ireland cathedral, but in 1840 the foundation stone was laid for a new Catholic cathedral. By the time it was finished to J.J. McCarthy's design, it completely dominated both the town and the older church.

The frequency with which the Virgin Mary and numerous saints are depicted in various media on and in Cobh cathedral is typical of Roman Catholic churches. There are many representations of Irish saints, such as Patrick, Brigid, Brendan and Ita, and also of popular European ones, such as Dominic (Plate 3), founder of the Dominicans, who was thought to have instituted the Rosary, and the post-Reformation Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila. In the Star of the Sea rose window in the south transept, Mary is pre-

*Text continues on page 257,
after colour plates*



6 – View of main entrance on the west elevation
(from *HANDBOOK FOR QUEENSTOWN CATHEDRAL BAZAAR* (Cork 1903))



7 – View of interior from side aisle
(from HANDBOOK FOR QUEENSTOWN CATHEDRAL BAZAAR (Cork 1903))



8 – St Colman's Cathedral, high altar, 1898, by Earley & Powell
opposite 9 – Interior view looking towards the high altar
(all photos by the author unless otherwise stated)





St Colman's Cathedral

10 – South transept windows, 1899, by John Hardman & Company

(Namaan washing in the Jordan; Elisha dividing the Jordan; the Ark carried over the Jordan; the Creation of water; the passage of the Red Sea; Noah's sacrifice after the flood; David pouring out the cup of water to the Lord)

11 – Aisle window, 1901, by Mayer & Company (Moses in the bullrushes)

*opposite 12 – Detail of window, 1911, by Early & Company in Blessed Thaddeus Chapel
(Death of St Fin Barre at Cloyne)*







St Colman's Cathedral

*15 – Baptistry window,
1899, by Mayer & Company
(Patrick baptising the daughters of
the King of Ireland)*

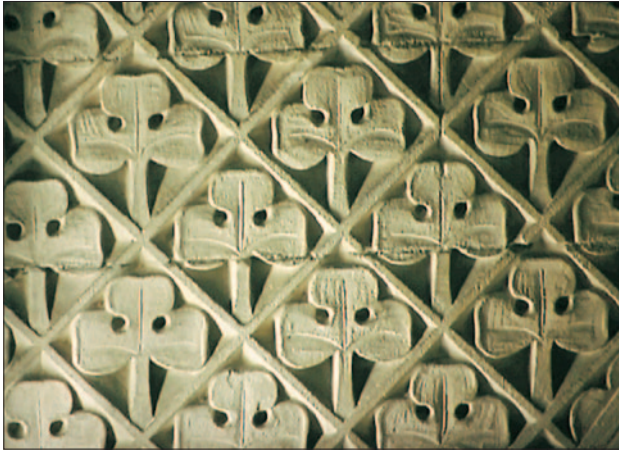
opposite

*13 – Centre detail of south
rose window, 1880-93, by
John Hardman & Company
(Mary, Star of the Sea)*

*14 – Detail of baptistry
window*

(photographs: Jim Wilson)





St Colman's Cathedral

16 – Carved shamrock diapering, 1895, by J.A. O'Connell

17 – Detail of nave floor, 1894-97, by T.C. Edwards

18 – Detail of sanctuary floor, c.1872, by Ludwig Oppenheimer

opposite



19 – Carved wall panel, 1895-96, by J.A. O'Connell
(Daniel O'Connell presenting Ireland with Catholic emancipation)

20 – Carved wall panel, 1895-96, by J.A. O'Connell
(Bishop Browne presenting the Cathedral to God)

(photographs: Jim Wilson)







St Colman's Cathedral

*21 – Roof cresting, 1881,
by A. Webb
(photograph: Jim Wilson)*

*22 – Exterior shamrock
carving, 1872 (sculptor
unknown)
(photograph: Jim Wilson)*

*opposite
23 – View of south elevation
from the quayside*







sented as a vision appearing to sailors (Plate 13). She has the child Jesus in her arms, both of them looking down on the supplicants, who gaze up at them. She wears a crown, and is surrounded by radiating golden projections on a red background like a huge fiery star. Her feet are not visible. A white marble statue of Mary on the exterior of the south gable, however, while it also represents the Star of the Sea, treats the subject rather differently: she is shown without the child, with a star-shaped halo rather than a crown, arms outstretched, standing on an upturned crescent moon, her feet on a snake (Plate 25). This image of the Virgin treading on a snake represents her triumph over evil and is associated with post-Reformation images of the Immaculate Conception – the doctrine that Mary alone, of all human beings (other than Christ), was conceived without sin. The crescent moon is an ancient symbol of chastity, although it also indicates rule over the tides.⁴⁶ Thus, the statue manages economically to incorporate several Roman Catholic beliefs about Mary in one image – her intercessory status, her triumph over evil, her conception without sin, and her chastity, apart from her role as a special help to sailors.

The interior layout of St Colman's also emphasises its Roman Catholicism. It is simply planned, spacious and open (Plate 7), and offers a relatively unobstructed view of the most important part of the church – the altar (Plate 9). The chancel arch is extremely high and unobtrusive, and shrines, confessionals and side chapels are arranged in a way that does not interfere with this openness, nor distract from the eastern focus of the building. Capitals and string courses create horizontal lines that lead the eye to the chancel, and the nave arcade, triforium passage and clerestory all pass in front of the transepts, hiding them and emphasising the powerful visual sweep towards the altar. The altar itself, of a type known as the Benediction Altar, is also extremely elaborate, and characteristic of the churches of E.W. Pugin and also of Ashlin.⁴⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century there was a growing sense in Ireland of a specific national cultural identity, and it was often felt necessary to emphasise this on cultural products. The first and most obvious way of proclaiming the Irishness of a work was for an artist to use recognisable symbols, such as the shamrock, the round tower and the harp.⁴⁸ By the middle of the nineteenth century these symbols had become fairly pervasive, and

by the end of the century it would have been difficult to turn around in Ireland without being faced, in one form or another, by shamrocks, harps, round towers and wolfhounds – on tea services, glass, jewellery, book covers, work-boxes, on banners, in graveyards, and even, if you were a Catholic, in church.⁴⁹

24 – *St Colman's Cathedral, view from south-west*



25 – *St Colman's Cathedral
Star of the Sea,
marble, 1879 (sculptor unknown)*

Cobh cathedral is no exception to this trend. Shamrocks appear all over the building, on the roof cresting and exterior carvings, on the nave walls, the nave and sanctuary floor mosaics, the stained glass and the capitals (Plates 16, 17, 18, 21, 22). In 1879 *The Cork Examiner* commented that

a prevailing ornament in the edifice consists of frequent carvings of the national emblem – the shamrock – the late revered Bishop Keane having expressed a particular desire to have this ornament abundantly employed, remarking that it is the only plant which is emblematical at once of Christianity and nationality and, therefore, most appropriate to be used in the decoration of a church typical of a nation.⁵⁰

A great interest in Ireland's past, both historical and legendary, developed in the nineteenth century, and a number of societies dedicated to its investigation were formed. Cobh cathedral contains many examples reflecting the results of these studies. Four heads on the corbels of the organ gallery, for instance, represent some of the earliest Irish composers of sacred music: saints Sedulius, Ethne, Deirluadha and Sechna. In the sanctuary, angels hold up the words from the first verse of the Eucharistic Hymn of St Secundinus, a contemporary of Patrick.⁵¹ Irish saints, of course, are represented throughout the building, especially St Patrick. One particu-



St Colman's Cathedral

26 – Central west tympanum
by C.W. Harrison & Sons,
1898 (detail showing Christ with
the four evangelists)

27 – Central west tympanum
(detail showing St Ita, St Colman's
mentor, beside the symbol for
St Matthew the Evangelist)



larly striking and richly detailed image in stained glass (1899), by Mayer, is in the baptistry, where it is paired with a window showing the scene of Christ's baptism (1899). Patrick is shown baptising the two daughters of the High King of Ireland, King Laoghaire (Plates 13, 15). Lady Gregory included this story in her *Tales of Irish Saints*, written in 1906, relating that Patrick baptised the two princesses, Eithne and Fedelm, and gave them Holy Communion, after which they died.⁵² The same story is illustrated on one of the aisle windows of the Roman Catholic cathedral at Armagh, which was decorated mostly between 1887 and 1904.

Carved scenes on the nave capitals of Cobh cathedral present the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland as perceived by those who built and decorated the church. This history begins with the arrival of St Patrick, and continues with scenes from the lives of early Irish saints such as Brigid, Columcille and Columbanus. Brigid is depicted curing a leprous boy, Columcille writing the Book of Kells, and Columbanus, along with St Gall, rids Switzerland of paganism. A depiction of a dean and canons trampling under foot a 'presumptuous warrant' of Henry II heralds an era of persecution and penal laws, and is followed by scenes such as the deportation in chains of a local bishop.⁵³ The capitals were carved in the 1890s, as were a series of small sculpted panels on the nave walls. These spandrels tell the same story as the capitals, beginning also with the saints of the early Irish Church. Persecution is again dwelt upon in such scenes as 'the trial of Dr. Hedian, Archbishop of Cashel, for appointing Irish priests', the 'martyrdom of Archbishop O'Hurley', and 'Bishop McEgan hanged at Carrigadrohid'.⁵⁴ There are also images of 'peasants praying before a headstone in a graveyard', showing a ruined church and a broken crucifix, and 'a priest celebrating Mass in a cave during the Penal times'.⁵⁵ The last two panels show Daniel O'Connell literally giving Catholic emancipation to Ireland (a female figure with a harp), and Bishop Browne presenting the cathedral, completed, to God (the latter depicted as a hand issuing from a cloud) (Plates 19, 20). These carvings have a somewhat naïve appearance; their execution is rough but detailed, with rather clumsy compositions resulting at times from attempts to convey large amounts of narrative information within small spaces.

The historical imagery in Cobh cathedral reflects the self-image of the nineteenth-century Irish Catholic Church, which Desmond Keenan has noted had three major components. Firstly, there was a view of 'an alleged glorious and holy past'.⁵⁶ This is represented in the spandrel and capital carvings of the saints of the early Irish Church, where Ireland is shown as a 'land of saints and scholars', sending missionaries to re-Christianise Europe. It was also expressed verbally in the sermon which was preached at the first Mass in the cathedral:

When the light of the Gospel was introduced into this country by our national

Apostle, he found a people who seemed prepared by nature and a special Providence for the reception of the Catholic faith. Intelligent, pure, generous they quickly learned to know God, to love Christ, and to make many sacrifices for him ... The fame of her cathedrals, of her abbeys and her schools travelled to distant lands, and never was there a people more devotedly attached to their churches than the Irish.⁵⁷

The second element Keenan mentions is a strong sense of oppression, and many of the later historical scenes on the capitals and spandrels depict suffering and persecution.⁵⁸ At a cathedral meeting in 1876, Mr J.P. Ronayne, a member of the Cathedral Committee, was applauded for his statement that

Ireland had been deprived of everything by English oppressors. They were persecuted for centuries, but they never parted with their faith which was the only thing that the sword and persecution, bribery and corruption could not affect.⁵⁹

The third facet of the self-image is expressed in the phrase 'Catholic Ireland'. Although the population of Ireland was, in fact, only about three-quarters Catholic, the terms 'Irish' and 'Catholic' had become interchangeable by the end of the nineteenth century. Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism had become increasingly linked throughout the century. This began with the struggle for Catholic emancipation, which dominated Irish politics until 1829, when Daniel O'Connell, with the support of the Church, mobilised Catholics for political action through his Catholic Association. The result was the emergence of what Hempton calls 'a powerful fusion of religion and identity', which continued after emancipation had been achieved.⁶⁰

Within Irish Catholicism the views and aspirations of bishops, priests, gentry families, tenant farmers, landless labourers, merchants, professionals and artisans were scarcely ever harmonised, but what they had in common was a shared set of grievances about the operation of the Protestant hegemony.⁶¹ Thus, the Irish Dominican preacher, Fr Tom Burke, could say in 1872:

Take an average Irishman. I don't care where you find him – and you will find that the very first principle in his mind is, "I am not an Englishman, because I am a Catholic".⁶²

In 1887 the Queenstown Town Commissioners formally addressed a visiting papal representative, assuring him of

the devoted attachment, unchanged and unchangeable, of Ireland to Rome ... Our whole history for fifteen hundred years as a Catholic people has been

marked by an attachment to our holy faith and a loving loyalty to our Holy Father that has seldom, if ever, been equalled in any country, and never certainly been surpassed.⁶³

This conflation of Irish and Catholic is as pervasive as shamrocks throughout Cobh cathedral. The history of Ireland is presented as the history of the Church, and the Church's early glory is Ireland's glory, its oppression also Ireland's oppression. Unbroken continuity is established between the Christian Church founded by Patrick and that presided over by Bishop Browne. In the sequence dealing with persecution, Catholic bishops are portrayed as local heroes, risking their lives to minister to the people. The scenes of suffering conclude with the panel showing Ireland accepting Catholic emancipation from Daniel O'Connell. Finally, the story of Christianity in Ireland, after years of oppression and hardship, reaches its climax with the presentation to God of Cobh cathedral, this rich, magnificent, and Roman Catholic building.

The close relationship between the Irish Church and that of Christ is also established. Biblical scenes are shown as part of the same grand narrative as images of local events. The baptistery windows pair Patrick's baptism of the princesses (Plates 13, 15) with Christ's by John, giving both equal status, and the main tympanum partners Christ and the four evangelists companionably with a selection of native saints (Plates 6, 26, 27). Thus, the faithful were given a glimpse of their place in the grand scheme of things, and a sense not only of belonging to, but forming an important strand of a great international religious movement.

As well as providing a practical, attractive and dignified space, Cobh cathedral clearly makes certain statements on behalf of the Irish Roman Catholic Church. As already mentioned, its Gothic design harnesses the cachet and power of medieval Christianity, and lays claim to direct links with a glorious past, both Irish and European. It is a symbol of the new position of the Roman Catholic Church in Irish society, and its imagery repeatedly emphasises Roman Catholic teaching, as well as presenting a particular narrative of the Irish as a staunchly Catholic people, chosen by God to suffer great hardship (such as persecution by the English and famine) but due for equally great reward, emerging finally as a specially blessed and spiritual nation.

ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

Cloyne Archives	Cloyne Diocesan Archives, Cathedral Papers, Diocesan Centre, Cobh, county Cork
Thompson, <i>Cobh Cathedral</i>	Patrick Thompson, <i>Guide to Cobh Cathedral</i> (publisher and date not indicated)

- ¹ F. O'Dwyer, 'A Victorian Partnership – The Architecture of Pugin & Ashlin', in John Graby (ed.), *150 Years of Architecture in Ireland* (Dublin 1989), 55-62, 55.
- ² Cloyne Archives, account of decision to build cathedral written by Fr J. Cullinan, 1858.
- ³ Colman, son of Lenin and a member of a powerful Munster family, was a royal poet at the Court of Cashel who later embraced religious life. He became a disciple of St Brendan the Navigator, and was granted a site for a monastery at Cloyne by the King of Cashel. Rick Prendergast, *East Cork in Early Christian times, secular and religious trends* (Cork, n.d.), 116. According to Thompson, *Cobh Cathedral*, 6, Colman founded the monastic foundation at Cloyne in 560AD. His feast day is on 24 November. He is usually shown, as in the statue on the west side of Cobh cathedral, with a crozier and holding a model of a church.
- ⁴ P. Twomey, 'A Chronicle of the Building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh' (author's copy, 1999), 9.
- ⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁶ *ibid.*, 38.
- ⁷ Cloyne Archives, G.C. Ashlin to W. Keane, 14 November 1864.
- ⁸ Cloyne Archives, G. Goldie to W. Keane, 27 February 1867.
- ⁹ F. O'Dwyer, 'A Victorian Partnership – The Architecture of Pugin & Ashlin', in John Graby (ed.), *150 Years of Architecture in Ireland* (Dublin 1989), 55-62, 60.
- ¹⁰ Cloyne Archives, J.J. McCarthy to G. Ashlin, 29 January 1867.
- ¹¹ *The Irish Builder*, 1 November 1867
- ¹² E.W. Pugin had already had an Irish-born partner from Armagh, James Murray, between 1856 or 1857 and 1859, but he had not specifically dealt with the Irish practice. For information on this see Mildred Dunne, 'The early career of George Coppinger Ashlin (1859-1869), Gothic Revival architect' (unpublished M. Litt thesis, Trinity College Dublin 2001) 60-61.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, 71-72.
- ¹⁴ Douglas Scott Richardson, *Gothic Revival Architecture in Ireland*, 2 vols (New York and London 1983) 222.
- ¹⁵ Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Dublin 1984) 26-27.
- ¹⁶ 'St Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown', *The Cork Examiner*, 6 August 1898.
- ¹⁷ 'Opening of the Queenstown Cathedral. Grand ceremony yesterday', *The Cork Examiner*, 16 June 1879.
- ¹⁸ 'St Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown. Meeting of the cathedral committee', *The Cork Examiner*, 11 December 1879.
- ¹⁹ Reports on the amount of money collected from various sources for the building are incomplete, inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory. The records in the Cloyne Diocesan archives are patchy, with very little information preserved for some periods of the building. The very approximate figures which I have used are based mainly on the following reports, all published

- in *The Cork Examiner*: 'Queenstown Cathedral', 10 January 1876; 'St Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown. The annual cathedral meeting', 3 February 1879; 'St Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown. Resumption of the works', 12 February 1889; 'St Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown. The Completion of the Sacred Edifice', 5 February 1902; 'Opening of the Queenstown Cathedral. Grand ceremony yesterday', 16 June 1879; and 'St Colman's Cathedral Consecrated', 25 August 1919.
- ²⁰ Archbishop Thomas William Croke (1824-1902), born in county Cork, ordained in 1849, became president of St Colman's College, Fermoy, in 1858. He became Bishop of Auckland in 1870 and Archbishop of Cashel in 1875; R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London 1988) 418. He was a friend of Bishop Keane, which may partly explain his interest in the Cathedral project; letter from Archbishop Croke to Bishop J. McCarthy, *The Cork Examiner*, January 26, 1878.
- ²¹ Cloyne Archives, Pastoral Letter, printed by John Lindsey, King Street, 1869.
- ²² *ibid.*, W. Foley to W. Keane, 6 October 1870
- ²³ Cloyne Archives, W. Foley to W. Keane, 29 November 1870.
- ²⁴ Cloyne Archives, Archbishop J.S. Allemany to Bishop Keane, 13 February 1871.
- ²⁵ Cloyne Archives, Fr Lynch to W. Keane, 8 October 1870.
- ²⁶ Cloyne Archives, Fr Lynch to W. Keane, 20 January 1871.
- ²⁷ P. Twomey, 'A Chronicle of the Building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh' (author's copy, 1999), 13.
- ²⁸ Cloyne Archives, P.J. O'Callaghan to J. McCarthy, 1 December 1875. Fr William Rice, Administrator, Fermoy and Fr P.J. O'Callaghan, C.C., Fermoy, were sent out to Australia and New Zealand in 1875.
- ²⁹ Cloyne Archives, P.J. O' Callaghan to J. McCarthy, 20 March 1876.
- ³⁰ Cloyne Archives, P.J. O'Callaghan to J. McCarthy, 26 August 1876.
- ³¹ Bishop Quinn of Brisbane, extract of letter to Bishop McCarthy, *The Cork Examiner*, 26 January, 1878.
- ³² R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London 1988) 372.
- ³³ Richard Hurley and Wilfrid Cantwell, *Contemporary Irish Church Architecture* (Dublin 1985) 22.
- ³⁴ Cloyne Archives, headed notepaper.
- ³⁵ Cloyne Archives, Mayer & Co. to R. Browne, 8 January 1898.
- ³⁶ Cloyne Archives, Mayer & Co. to R. Browne, 4 July 1898.
- ³⁷ Pdraig O'Maidin, 'A Cathedral for Cloyne', *The Cork Examiner*, 15 July 1968; also 'Topical Touches', *The Irish Builder*, 6 April 1907, 233.
- ³⁸ Thompson, *Cobh Cathedral*, 28.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, 40.
- ⁴⁰ Matthew J. Mc Dermott, *Ireland's Architectural Heritage, An Outline History* (Dublin 1975) 103.
- ⁴¹ Christopher Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral, The Architecture of the Great Church 1130-1530* (London 1990) 189.
- ⁴² Jeanne Sheehy, *J.J. McCarthy and the Gothic Revival in Ireland* (Belfast 1977) 14.
- ⁴³ Simon Jervis, *High Victorian Design* (Suffolk 1985) 11.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁵ 'Opening of the Queenstown Cathedral. Grand ceremony yesterday', *The Cork Examiner*, 16

- June 1879.
- ⁴⁶ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London 1984) 327. The statue was erected over the south transept gable during Bishop McCarthy's reign (around 1889).
- ⁴⁷ For a discussion on the interior layouts of Pugin and Ashlin churches in relation to the requirements of nineteenth-century Irish Roman Catholicism, see Mildred Dunne, 'The early career of George Coppinger Ashlin (1859-1869), Gothic Revival architect' (unpublished M. Litt. thesis, Trinity College Dublin 2001) 98-102.
- ⁴⁸ Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's past, The Celtic Revival 1830-1930* (London 1980) 9.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 92.
- ⁵⁰ 'Opening of the Queenstown Cathedral. Grand ceremony yesterday', *The Cork Examiner*, 16 June 1879.
- ⁵¹ Thompson, *Cobh Cathedral*, 25.
- ⁵² Lady Gregory, *The Voyages of Saint Brendan the Navigator and Tales of the Irish Saints* (Gerrards Cross 1973) 52.
- ⁵³ Thompson, *Cobh Cathedral*, 22-23.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Desmond Keenan, *The Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, a Sociological Study* (Dublin 1983) 29.
- ⁵⁷ 'Opening of the Queenstown Cathedral. Grand ceremony yesterday', *The Cork Examiner*, 16 June 1879.
- ⁵⁸ Desmond Keenan, *The Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, a Sociological Study* (Dublin 1983) 25.
- ⁵⁹ 'Queenstown cathedral', *The Cork Examiner*, 10 January 1876.
- ⁶⁰ David Hempton, *Religion and political culture in Britain and Ireland, from the Glorious Revolution to the decline of Empire* (Cambridge 1996) 72.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.*, 79.
- ⁶² Desmond Keenan, *The Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland, a Sociological Study* (Dublin 1983) 28.
- ⁶³ Cork Archives Institute, Queenstown Commissioners Minute Book, 06/11/1865-12/03/1890, entry 14 September 1887.
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