

## Another way of telling the story

Review of:

**Sources in Irish Art 2: A Reader**, edited by *Fintan Cullen and Róisín Kennedy*,  
Cork: Cork University Press, 2021, 424pp., 21 illus., €39.00 hdbk, £20.70  
Kindle, ISBN: 9781782054573

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*Sources in Irish Art 2: A Reader* has appeared at the end of what might be considered a relatively healthy decade in publishing on Irish art history. Important publication projects produced over the last ten years include the Royal Irish Academy's five-volume *Art and Architecture of Ireland*. While the original, large-format and full-colour volumes are expensive, all volumes are available via JStor, and the *Architecture* volume has been made open access for readers.<sup>1</sup> This was a major undertaking and represents the collaborative work of very many scholars of visual art, sculpture, and architecture. It can be used in tandem with the online, open access *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, also produced as a project within the Royal Irish Academy, allowing researchers to marshal authoritative resources quickly and easily for their work.<sup>2</sup> Finola O'Kane's 2013 book on landscape painting, landscape design, and the visual consumption of 'views', is an important book for the field, with an inherently interdisciplinary and international frame of reference.<sup>3</sup> *Irish Fine Art in the Early Modern Period: New perspectives on artistic practice*, edited by Jane Fenlon, Ruth Kenny, Caroline Pegum, and Brendan Rooney is one of the finest and most valuable books from the past decade, including as it does critical perspectives on colonial artistic careers, connections between Ireland and the imperial metropole, and themes of gender, motherhood, and commemoration.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting an important shift in focus across many aspects of cultural studies, this theme of empire and colonialism in relation to Irish art has been examined in *Ireland and the British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality*, edited by Fintan Cullen.<sup>5</sup> Further books by individual scholars published over this period include a history of performance art in Ireland by Áine Phillips, a major new work on the early Christian Irish sculpted cross by Roger Stalley, a monograph on the Cross of Cong by Griffin Murray, a

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the five volumes are available at <https://www.ria.ie/research-projects/archive/art-and-architecture-ireland/about> (accessed 9 July 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Details of the Dictionary of Irish Biography can be found at <https://www.dib.ie/> (accessed 9 July 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Finola O'Kane, *Ireland and the Picturesque: Design, Landscape Painting and Tourism 1700-1840*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Fenlon, Ruth Kenny, Caroline Pegum and Brendan Rooney (eds.), *Irish Fine Art in the Early Modern Period: New Perspectives on Artistic Practice*, Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Fintan Cullen, ed. *Ireland and the British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023.

study of Famine commemorations by Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, a volume on art and the Irish diaspora in America by Éimear O'Connor, a study by Sighle Breathnach-Lynch of the sculptor Albert Power, and a book exploring how artists have painted the city of Dublin by Kathryn Milligan.<sup>6</sup>

Given the historic importance of churches as patrons of the arts in Ireland, the output from the last decade includes a beautifully illustrated study of the work of Wilhelmina Geddes by the late Nicola Gordon-Bowe, and a revised new edition of the *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass* edited by Gordon-Bowe, David Caron, and Michael Wynne.<sup>7</sup> Joseph McBrinn's study of Evie Hone is just about to be published by Four Courts Press.<sup>8</sup> Books exploring and critiquing the histories of art institutions, and the role of the state, include a study of the Rosc exhibition and its significance by Peter Shortt, a fine catalogue with essays on the Society of Artists in Georgian Ireland, edited by David Fleming, Ruth Kenny, and William Laffan, and a critical exploration of the reception of modern art in Ireland by Róisín Kennedy.<sup>9</sup> The visual culture of the Great Famine has also been explored in an edited volume.<sup>10</sup> While the focus here is on the visual arts, it is worth noting that the aligned field of architectural history has been very well served by the study of professional builders and artisans by Conor Lucy, and a book on the *stuccatori* craftsmen of Ticino by Christine Casey – these books on eighteenth-century Ireland were awarded one of the most prestigious prizes in the field, the Alice Davis Hitchcock Medallion, by the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain.<sup>11</sup> Further publications in the field of architectural history over the past decade include

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<sup>6</sup> Áine Phillips, *Performance Art in Ireland: A History*, London: Live Art Development Agency; Bristol: Intellect, 2014, Roger Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture and the Art of the High Crosses*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, Griffin Murray, *The Cross of Cong: a Masterpiece of Medieval Irish Art*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press with the National Museum of Ireland, 2014, Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine; Memory and the Monument*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, Éimear O'Connor, *Art, Ireland, and the Irish Diaspora: Chicago, Dublin, New York 1893-1939*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2020, Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Expressions of Nationhood in Bronze & Stone: Albert G. Power, RHA*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2019, Kathryn Milligan, *Painting Dublin, 1886-1949: Visualising a Changing City*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Nicola Gordon-Bowe, *Wilhelmina Geddes: Life and Work*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015, Nicola Gordon-Bowe, David Caron, and Michael Wynne, *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass: Revised New Edition*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph McBrinn, *Evie Hone and the International Avant-Garde*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2024 (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Shortt, *The Poetry of Vision: the ROSC Art Exhibitions 1967-1988*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016, David Fleming, Ruth Kenny, and William Laffan, *Exhibiting Art in Georgian Ireland: the Society of Artists' Exhibitions Recreated*, Dublin: Irish Georgian Society, 2018, Róisín Kennedy, *Art and the Nation State: the Reception of Modern Art in Ireland*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Marguérite Corporaal, Oona Frawley and Emily Mark-FitzGerald (eds.), *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Conor Lucey, *Building Reputations: Architecture and the Artisan, 1750-1830*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, Christine Casey, *Making Magnificence: Architects, Stuccatori and the Eighteenth-Century Interior*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017.

a study of Irish antiquarianism in relation to Gothic buildings, an interdisciplinary volume on the Victorian gem that is Deane and Woodward's Museum Building at Trinity College Dublin, Richard Butler's analysis of the Irish court house, a book by Michael O'Neill on the buildings of the Church of Ireland, a major study on the role of craft and materiality in architecture edited by Melanie Hayes and Christine Casey, and a multi-faceted exploration of the Georgian house and home.<sup>12</sup>

Encompassing the twentieth century, Kathleen James-Chakraborty and Lisa Godson have published on religious architecture and modernism in Ireland and Germany, and Ellen Rowley's books include two studies of modernist design in Dublin, and a book of housing in Dublin from the 1930s to the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Valerie Mulvin's survey of Irish towns, and Adrian Duncan's humane, elegant study of 'Bungalow Bliss' are also welcome additions.<sup>14</sup> Events like the Venice Biennale have led to important publications on Ireland's built and visual culture, and state agencies like the Office of Public Works also lead the publication of significant books with their curatorial teams.<sup>15</sup>

As part of the Decade of Centenaries (from 2012 to 2023, commemorating a period of events of historic importance on the island of Ireland, from the signing of the Ulster Covenant and the 1913 Lockout to the 2023 Civil War), the Royal Irish Academy also published an excellent, and very well-illustrated book of critical essays exploring aspects of art over a century of political independence, edited by Catherine Marshall and Yvonne Scott.<sup>16</sup> The catalogues produced by Irish galleries and museums continue to be an important part of the publication landscape on Irish art, and notable examples over the past decade include *Elliptical Affinities: Irish Women Artists and the Politics of the Body, 1984 to the present*, curated by Fionna

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<sup>12</sup> Niamh NicGhabhann, *Medieval Ecclesiastical Buildings in Ireland, 1789-1915: Building on the Past*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015, Christine Casey and Patrick Wyse-Jackson (eds.), *The Museum Building of Trinity College Dublin: a Model of Victorian Craftsmanship*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2019, Richard Butler, *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison: a Political History, 1750-1850*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2020, Michael O'Neill, *An Architectural History of the Church of Ireland*, Dublin: W&G Baird, 2023, Melanie Hayes and Christine Casey (eds.), *Enriching Architecture: Craft and its conservation in Anglo-Irish building production, 1660-1760*, London: UCL Press, 2023, Conor Lucey (ed.) *House and Home in Georgian Ireland: Spaces and Cultures of Domestic Life*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen James-Chakraborty and Lisa Godson (eds.), *Modern Religious Architecture in Germany, Ireland and Beyond: Influence, Process, and Afterlife since 1945*, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, Ellen Rowley, *More than Concrete Blocks: Dublin City's Twentieth-century Buildings and their Stories*, Vols 1 and 2, Dublin: Dublin City Council, 2016 and 2019, Ellen Rowley, *Housing, Architecture and the Edge Condition: Dublin is Building, 1935-1975*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Duncan, *Little Republics: the Story of Bungalow Bliss*, LeVergne: The Lilliput Press, 2022, Valerie Mulvin, *Approximate Formality: Morphology of Irish Towns*, Dublin: Anne Street Press, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Boyd and John McLaughlin (eds.), *Infrastructure and the Architectures of Modernity in Ireland, 1916-2016*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, Myles Campbell and William Derham, *The Chapel Royal, Dublin Castle: An Architectural History*, Meath: The Office of Public Works, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Marshall and Yvonne Scott (eds.), *Irish Art 1920-2020: Perspectives on Change*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2022.

Barber and Aoife Ruane, *Adamantine*, on Nano Reid, published by the Highlanes Gallery, *Analyzing Cubism*, and *Becoming: Alice Maher*, both curated by Seán Kissane for IMMA, and *Creating History: Stories of Art in Ireland*, curated by Brendan Rooney, and featuring valuable essays on Irish history painting by Mary Jane Boland and Tom Dunne. The catalogue produced by EVA on a biannual basis is an important part of the landscape, and its historiographical significance is reflected in the fact that all of its catalogues, from 1977 to 2023, are available online.<sup>17</sup> Smaller, vibrant exhibitions and festivals like Askeaton Contemporary also produce significant publications.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it does cover many of the major publications that have focused on Irish art over the past decade. It does not include individual essays or articles in journals and books. The role of the Irish Georgian Society in supporting publication and historiography must be mentioned, with both the long-running and high-quality journal *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, and their online index of Irish theses, as well as the role of the Irish Association of Art Historians in supporting student and early career researchers through their journal *Artefact*. These, together with *Irish Art Review*, the *Visual Artists Ireland Review* and the *Paper Visual Arts* project, are important in what is sadly an increasingly bare art writing landscape. *Circa* magazine, founded in 1981, stopped published a print edition in 2011, and then published online until 2013. From 2016 to 2021, Michaële Cutaya and Marian Lovett spearheaded an online revival of the magazine, but this has since fallen into abeyance.<sup>18</sup> While the work of Cristín Leach, Gemma Tipton, and Aidan Dunne is always appreciated by artists and galleries, there are still very few arts reporters employed by any of the national newspapers, and no national television or radio show dedicated solely to the visual arts or to architecture.<sup>19</sup>

This brief survey over a decade reflects a number of trends and emergent issues in the historiography of Irish art. Firstly, very few of these books are available as ebooks, and neither *IADS* nor *Artefact* are available in digital formats, nor are indexed as academic journals. In an increasingly metrics-driven academic environment, this unfortunately makes them less attractive as publication venues for new scholarship. The stalwart publishers of books on Irish art – Four Courts Press, Irish Academic Press, Cork University Press, and Yale University Press have not yet prioritised the production of ebooks. Exhibition catalogues are not always widely available and are typically produced in small print runs. Even award-winning books like Casey's *Making Magnificence* become out of print relatively quickly. In an era where teachers are required to make materials available online for students working remotely, this risks making much of this scholarship obsolete, or at the very least, harder to access and to use, very quickly. Conversely, the drive towards open access publications, while a welcome and necessary counterweight to the inequitable profit models of academic publishers, poses unique challenges for

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<sup>17</sup> The EVA catalogues are available at <https://www.eva.ie/> (accessed 9 July 2023).

<sup>18</sup> <https://circaartmagazine.net/about/> (accessed 8 May 2023)

<sup>19</sup> Individual radio programmes have been produced, such as *Through the Canvases*, by Cristín Leach for RTÉ Lyric FM in 2021.

those working with visual images. The endless reproducibility of the digital copy is still often a bridge too far for even generous copyright managers. While many Irish galleries have moved to making their collections available online via digital portals, only IMMA and the Crawford Gallery of Art in Cork have contributed their images to *Europeana*. These are structural issues that are real challenges for scholarship on Irish art, and for the continued availability of the many excellent publications in the field for teaching, learning, and comparative research.

I open this review of *Sources in Irish Art 2: A Reader* with this survey of publication patterns and challenges for the field for a number of reasons. Firstly, such surveys are not frequently published, and despite the fact that it is not comprehensive, it aims to provide a useful reference for readers of this review who are less familiar with publishing trends in the field of Irish art. Secondly, like its predecessor, *Sources on Irish Art: A Reader*, published in 2000 by Cork University Press and also edited by Fintan Cullen, this book provides an essential field guide to writings and sources on Irish art that can all too quickly fall out of view and out of use. The book brings together a range of short excerpts from literary and critical sources relevant to the study of Irish art from the mid seventeenth to the twenty first centuries. They are arranged in four thematic sections, titled 'art historiography', 'nationalism and identity', 'the wider world', and 'art and text'. The material prior to 1900 was selected by Fintan Cullen, and the post-1900 material by Róisín Kennedy, both leading scholars in the field, and each excerpt is prefaced with a short explanatory note, introducing the author and the context for the selected text. The editors note in their Introduction that part of the rationale for preparing a second volume was to reflect the vastly increased availability of digitised texts, particularly of material now out of copyright, which can be easily and freely accessed by readers worldwide through Google Books, Internet Archive, or Haithi Trust. Such a glut of digitised materials, however, makes expert selections such as that provided in this book even more important.

Thirdly, this book is usefully read as a companion to contemporary scholarship and scholarly directions, because it makes the roots of current debates visible. One example of this dynamic is an excerpt from Lucy Cotter's 2005 essay in *Third Text*, titled 'Art Stars and Plasters on Wounds: why there have been no great Irish artists?' (pp. 103-108) This piece provides the reader with a short but deep introduction to the range of critical theories, artists, curatorial practices, and exhibitions that were informing art criticism, and Irish studies more generally, in the early 2000s, and attempts to meaningfully situate the Irish example in the context of recent and emerging postcolonial discourse. It is an important precursor current to debates and questions informing scholarship at the moment, around visual culture, art, imperialism, anti-colonialism, and interpretation, and the multiple positions from which Irish art was made, seen, and consumed. The inclusion of texts like Cotter's raises a number of questions – was her critique of surface applications of post-colonial theory in relation to Irish art discourse justified? Was there a response? And if not, what does that imply about the lack of connection between an art journal with a global reach and a fairly small and local art writing scene, or perhaps about the lack of spaces for such threads to be picked up and carried forward. Cotter's piece is an important as a theoretical step on the

way through these debates, allowing an intellectual history to be evidenced. It also, however, provides an important paper trail for discussions on the decolonising of academic disciplines, and 'Irish art discourse' in this instance.

There are other surprises, with the selected texts illuminating facets to individuals that are quite at odds with their broader cultural 'image'. Who would have thought, for example, that the arch-modernist Thomas MacGreevy, friend of Samuel Beckett and poet, would argue passionately for a Catholic approach to art history, in order to supplant what he saw as an inherently Protestant perspective in British and German art criticism, and a British view of painting that had arisen from the 'substitution of the cult of nature for religious belief' (pp. 88-93). The statements of artists themselves are peppered throughout the book, and include excerpts by Evie Hone, Mainie Jellett, Brian O'Doherty, Michael Farrell, Nano Reid, Daniel Jewesbury, John Kindness, and Alice Maher among others. The piece by John Kindness, for instance, is a letter addressed to the American critic Lucy Lippard. It plunges the reader into the pain of living through the realities of the Troubles, and the conversation that took place between artists on the ground, and critics observing from elsewhere (pg. 271-273). These appear across the four sections, and are in forthright conversation with many of the more reflective, interpretative and critical texts included.

The book also includes speeches and exhibition catalogue entries, sources that are more ephemeral in their nature than books or journals. While these are in the minority in terms of the excerpts included, they point to an important layer of evidence in relation to Irish art history, relating to the role of exhibitions, galleries, and festivals as generating attention, critical focus, texts, and opportunities for and about artists and art writers. Many of the galleries that were an essential part of the life of Irish art have closed down – the Dolmen Gallery in Limerick, the Hendrik's Gallery and the Rubicon Gallery in Dublin are three examples of spaces that were very significant, but that have not left dedicated archives. While NIVAL (the National Irish Visual Art Library) at the National College of Art and Design holds files relating to these spaces, these galleries would have written press releases, commissioned catalogue entries, and generated interviews in the press. One finds a good clutch of such documents in individual artist files at NIVAL, if the artist in question has had the mind to keep them, but there is a risk of loss as times goes on. The inclusion of examples of these types of text, written by Brian Fallon and Dorothy Walker, for instance, point future researchers towards recovering more of this type of work as part of their archival research. Similarly, and providing a rather unflattering contrast to the art publishing landscape today, the book provides important evidence of the range of journal and magazines that included writing on Irish art, aimed at the 'art world' as well as a broader readership. Excerpts from *Envoy*, *Circa*, *Printed Project*, *The Bell*, and *Hibernia*, demonstrate a readership for journals in print even in straitened economic times. As well as providing access to individual perspectives, the book also does the work of signalling this publishing history to future researchers. Art writing is produced across multiple sites, and these sites involve different motivations, critical perspectives, relationships to the art market, and to the artists themselves. They include sites of scholarship (books, journals), sites of display and promotion (galleries, museums), sites of intentional

statement (artists writing about their works), and sites of response (art criticism). In a small country, these are necessarily overlapping, and are knitted together over time to create the discourse of art history. This book does a good job of reflecting that closely-woven discourse, together with the welcome and necessary reflections from 'elsewhere'.

*Sources in Irish Art 2* provides a robust introduction of the types of documents that can be used in scholarship, making them a valuable scoping resource for research students and early career researchers. It will be of particular value to those scoping their field of research, but it is of great value to those working on Irish art at any stage, provoking, as it does, a return to the complexity of the original moment rather than the subsequent summary or scholarly interpretation. For more established scholars, it is an important reminder to do the necessary intellectual spadework in terms of finding those channels and pathways that have been laid down by past scholars. This is particularly important given the lack of bibliographical reviews of the field, and the fact that important texts are produced across a wide range of contexts, as outlined in my overview of the past decade. An important set of perspectives may have been advanced in an exhibition catalogue, but these can fall between the cracks if not indexed or submitted to copyright libraries, making books like *Sources in Irish Art 2* all the more important. The book has a good index, and this allows ideas to be traced across different writers and sections – the enduring idea of the 'Celtic' as a source, or a 'golden age' that persists and is reinterpreted across the entire period covered by the book. It has a number of very well-produced full colour plates, that aid the reader's interpretation of the selected texts. It might be argued that the book reproduces the concerns and critical ideas of scholars rather than artists in the framing of its four sections. However, the fairly unobtrusive approach taken by the editors, however, and emphasis on the original texts, mitigates against this.

Given that the book was prompted by the increased availability of digital texts, it is good to see that Cork University Press has published it as a Kindle edition as well as hardcover. Perhaps one measure of the value of the book as a project is that it suggests a bigger version of itself. One might imagine a central database of texts with critical pathways curated by researchers, linked to digital image repositories, and to complementary critical texts, bibliographical and biographical information, GIS-mapped in order to visualise spatial pathways and changing landscapes through time.<sup>20</sup> Given the growing importance of open access research, citizen science, and digital archiving supported in Ireland by the Digital Repository of Ireland, perhaps this is now closer to reality than imagination.

**Niamh NicGhabhann** (University of Limerick). Her research focuses on the construction of the devotional infrastructure of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is particularly interested in the construction of church buildings, and on the interactions between procession,

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<sup>20</sup> The ongoing project, Full Stack Feminism, could provide a model for this kind of 360 degree digital archive: <https://ifte.network/full-stack-feminism/> (accessed 9 July 2023).

architecture and the performance of religious identity in public space. Her recent publications are:

(2023) Niamh NicGhabhann, 'An index of civility': Ireland, imperialism and histories of medieval architecture', in Fintan Cullen (ed.) *Ireland and the British Empire: Essays on art and visuality* (Peter Lang), pp. 33-63.

(2023) Niamh NicGhabhann, ' "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house': Magnificence and Catholic architecture in Ireland, 1850-1900', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, advance publication 31 March 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcad002>;

(2022) Niamh NicGhabhann, 'Curatorial practice and public history: Reflections on the World Within Walls exhibition', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 52 (1), 77-90 (<https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2022.0543>)

Material and Cultural Heritages of Religion in Ireland research network and events: <https://mchireland.wordpress.com/>

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