

Ireland and Art

(By GEORGE NOBLE COUNT PLUNKETT, T.D.) in the *Irish Year Book*.)

The most essential quality for Art is imagination. Whether we credit the observation of Nature or the quickening of the poet to have started the draftsman we now have to admit that while manual skill and the reproduction of images of things seen are excellent, they are altogether subsidiary. Ancient Ireland showed in Pagan and Christian times a skill, a sense of balance, a proportion and a love of reasoned and luxuriant detail, which could only be acquired through a long course of artistic training, extending over centuries. The feeling for proportion, for structural qualities independent of applied ornament, and the "unity in variety" in old Irish work, reached their completeness in Irish Romanesque architecture, in illuminated MSS, in the higher crosses, and in delicate metal work, before the Anglo-Norman Invasion. But in painting and sculpture only the foundation, as it were, for the higher forms of art, had been laid. Ornament was still supreme, and only in a few instances was the human figure treated other than symbolically or fancifully. On some of our shrines, however, naturalism and the expression of emotion were beginning to show themselves. But this nascent school of students of beauty was forcibly broken up by the intrusion of an alien civilisation. Henceforward the struggle between the two races interfered with the natural development of Irish imaginative art. In the course of English and Anglo-Irish history it is common to find Irish pioneers introducing new methods, and breaking ground sometimes in futile attempts to establish schools whose ideals England could not assimilate. Likewise the attempts to develop individuality in Ireland were naturally sporadic, seeing that England and the English agents had become the paymasters here.

James Barry, trying to found a school of historical painting in England, wrecked his own life. A little group of Irish landscape painters helped to found in England the one school that has persisted. Engraving, less expensive to work, and having a more popular demand than painting, attracted our artists to such an extent that to them is due the so-called English school of engravers. They became the most masterly mezzotinters in Europe, and through this art and through etching, they made the reputation of Sir

Joshua Reynolds and other eighteenth century recorders of English life. Even satirists like Hogarth live for us mainly through the work of Luke Sullivan and other Irishmen. The miniaturists, too, through the persistence of human vanity, gained a livelihood for half a century, and much of their best work in this delicate art was produced by our countrymen. So likewise during the short-lived popularity of chalk-drawing some of the most notable portraiture was done by Hamilton and his little Dublin group. Sculpture gave a more precarious opportunity to Irishmen in the early times. It was only in the nineteenth century, when a mania for public monuments spread, that Ireland's chance came. Hogan, the sensitive poet of sculptors, McDowell, the most natural, and Foley, a man who touched convention with genius, remain the most prominent figures in public sculpture in modern times. When *genre* became the desire of collectors, Mulready and MacIse found their market, though MacIse's power lay in the cartoon, and Mulready's in anatomical drawings. Elmore attempted to establish Christian painting in the north, but he died young. Lawless, who showed himself a forcible and sensitive draftsman, in his short career had to appeal to other than Irish feeling.

In a summary, I cannot deal with more recent examples. I have seen our schools of art, and the individual efforts of workers outside the schools, lapse into failure from the cause of the irregularity of Irish imaginative work—the fact that neither initiative nor continuity can be in the arts in Ireland as long as the Irish people are kept in a state of intellectual subjection. The systems of education and public administration have hitherto taken their direction in Ireland from England, and the demands of England. The commonest crafts have suffered from the uncreative condition of Ireland as a whole. I cannot here develop my argument, but I may say that I look forward to the emancipation of Ireland from English obscurantism as our only hope for art and for the other imaginative powers.

In music we have had the survival of something speaking for the Irish nature and recording and transmitting the emotions of the race, and speaking for all time. When Ireland expands in freedom, she naturally

will find her self-expression through the media which the race has always loved, in painting and sculpture and poetry and fiction, giving full play to her qualities, and in the re-awakening of her long-dormant aptitude for distinction in all these arts. When a corporation and a county council can commission the painter, the sculptor, and the architect to harmonise their inventions into one perfect whole, then, and then only, will art in Ireland have found its opportunity.

Ireland to-day is in sad need of art. The race that has done so much to develop artistic qualities in other peoples, is starved for want of the visible images it craves for at home. The English materialism that vulgarised everything it touched has left its traces around us, and our own better judgment remains almost unexpressed. We require native schools of all the arts working together with the crafts in guilds by preference, to make life worth living and ennoble the worker with the work.

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