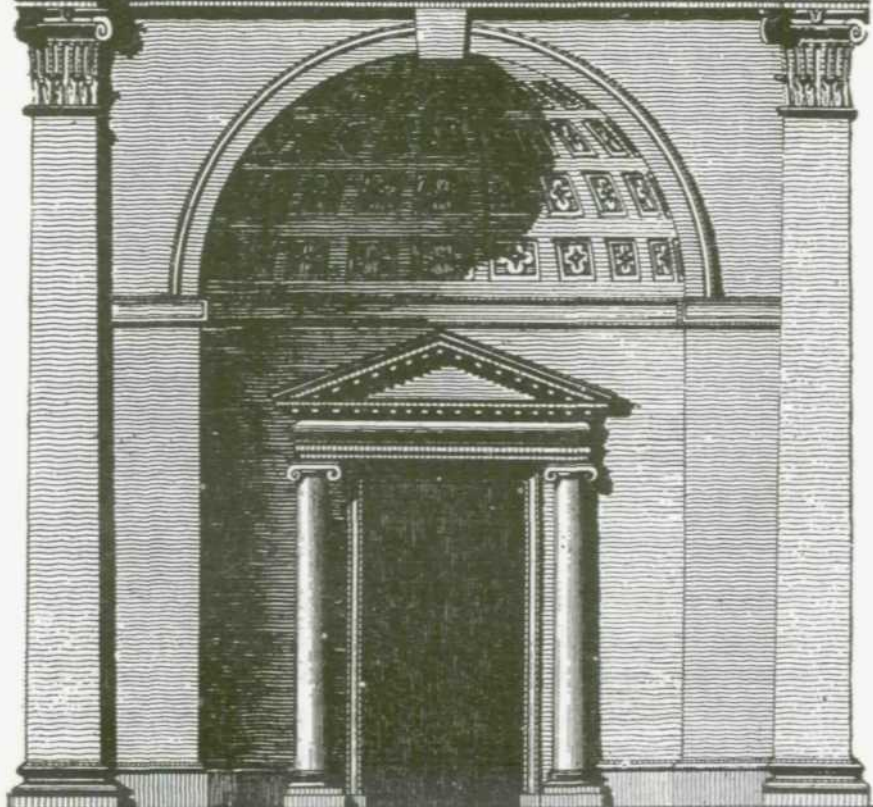


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GEORGIAN SOCIETY

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*Contents*

IRISH ROCOCO PLASTERWORK by Desmond Guinness	page 23
VISIT TO LONGUEVILLE by Elizabeth Conner	26
IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY	30

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SINGLE NUMBERS 2S. EACH

# IRISH ROCOCO PLASTERWORK

DESMOND GUINNESS

The exterior of most of the Georgian houses in Dublin conform to the plainest possible design. Strict rules were enforced to ensure complete uniformity in street and square, and, taken out of context, the average Dublin house would seem plain to the point of dullness. It is true that many of them have extremely individual doorways, but they depend for their effect on their classical proportions and the cliff-like massing of the street as a whole. The interiors, however, are as exuberant and varied as the stuccodores through seventy years of changing taste (1730-1800) could make them.

Before the Rococo style for which Dublin is famous supervened, a flourishing guild of plasterers were engaged in "Compartment" ceilings, as at No. 9 Henrietta Street. This beautiful house was designed in 1731 by Richard Castle, the German architect, for Thomas Carter, Master of the **Rolls**. The **plaster** has been attributed to Simpson, a friend of Castle's who collaborated with him elsewhere, but the style is so impersonal that this is no more than a guess. The Sisters of Charity who inhabit the house to-day, keep it beautifully and are always ready to admit the interested visitor.

The great period of Rococo plasterwork was ushered in by the two **Italian** brothers, Paul and Philip Francini, who arrived in Ireland at the invitation of the Earl of Kildare in the year 1739, and executed for him the famous ceiling at **Carton, Maynooth**, for sheer **magnificence** hardly equalled in the islands. The fashion for modelled figures, trophies, fruit and flowers quickly spread, and the Irish craftsmen soon learnt the technique. The use of moulds was fairly limited, and most of the modelling had to be done by hand *in situ*. The final twist of a bird's neck, the choice of flowers in wreath or garland, a cloak blowing in the wind — these personal touches helped to imprint the style of the artist on his work.

There is a somewhat static quality in the **Francinis'** heavily stylised figures, enclosed in their **bolection** frames, which makes them easily recognisable. A smaller version of the Carton ceiling is to be found in the saloon on the *piano nobile* of Newman House (No. 85 Stephen's **Green**—designed in **1740** by Richard Castle). Beneath the Saloon, the small dining room or Apollo room is surrounded with plaques typical of the Francini, Apollo himself being over the mantelpiece.

Another close parallel can be drawn between the staircase at Castletown, Celbridge, and that of No. 9, Stephen's Green. **No. 9** was built in **1756**, and although there is no proof that the Francini did the plasterwork, the resemblance with Castletown is striking. Castletown is the largest and finest private house in Ireland, built in the full Palladian tradition in **1713** for William **Conolly**, Speaker of the House of Commons. Although the house was finished in **1722**, the main staircase was not put in until **1759-60** by Lady Louisa Conolly, sister of the Countess of Kildare. The cornice and cove appear to be of the earlier period, and resemble 9, Henrietta Street, but the rococo work in between and below the cornice was done by one of the Francini. The evidence of this lies in a letter from Lady Louisa to her sister, dated May **1759**, in which she says:

"Mr. Conolly and I are excessively diverted at Franchinis' **impertinence**, and if *he* charges anything of that sort to Mr. **Conolly** • there is a fine scold in store for *his* honour."

(Authors' italics).

She goes on to mention mantelpieces and designs for finishing the Gallery — in other words it is a letter that relates to decoration she **was** having done at Castletown. She refers to Francini as *he* and *his*, which perhaps means that only one of them was working there. It was apparently the partner who filled in the frames at No. 9, Stephen's Green who was absent from Castletown where they are empty except for paintings, avoiding the rather crowded effect of the Dublin house

The pure Rococo style which developed **1740-60** only

followed the Francini up to a point; generally speaking the human figure ceased to dominate the scene, and birds, flowers, and musical instruments came into their own. There was more **life**. And above all there was the swirling gaiety of the **plaster** itself, twisting and flowing into a thousand rococo themes. Tyrone House (1740) and Russborough (1741) are two of the finest examples of this sugary style.

Richard Castle was again the architect in each case, and may have designed some of the ceilings himself — many different hands were probably employed. There is however a strong Francini flavour in each saloon, or principal **room**. It seems likely that the architect would continue to patronise one of the Francini, and in making use of the one who specialised in decorative rococo work he was able to introduce other artists into the same house without a glaring change of style.

The Rococo period was brought to a close with the fashion for Adam ceilings, and as the Adam plaques were so easily mass-produced, the art of plastering was soon forgotten. Before it came to an end, however. Robert West, the Irish architect and stuccodore, and many others, had reached a high degree of perfection in a delicate art.



## VISITS TO LONGUEVILLE c. 1805-15

*Memories of Childhood and Youth*

ELIZABETH CONNER *née* LONGFIELD

From an early age I recollect going with my Father and Mother to Longueville. I did not look forward with much pleasure to my visit, being greatly in dread of my **Grand**-father who had a bluff manner and a deep growling voice and seemed not at all fond of children. I rather liked my Grandmother, a small delicate looking old lady. She was daughter to Mr. William Foster, and first cousin to the last Speaker of the House of Commons in Ireland before the Union. My Grandmother's dress was generally (in the house) a nice quilted petticoat of silk or sateen, her gown open in front in the skirt, not meeting in the front. A tight square body, sleeves also tight coming a little below the elbow. Long lace or knitted **mittens**, a **large** thin muslin handkerchief crossed on her neck, and a clear muslin apron. A cap of thin muslin with a band and bow of ribbon, her grey hair rolled off her forehead. Shoes of black velvet, high heeled, and

narrow toed. She was fond of plain work. Worked very neatly and held the work so close to her eyes I used to wonder she did not stitch her nose.

**Longueville** in my time was a very large **house**. The largest house I had ever seen or lived in (now greatly enlarged, 1873).<sup>1</sup> Off the breakfast parlour was a large dining room very scantily furnished. (Curtains that did not reach the ground: and *no* drapery). A carpet just the size of the dining table. A spindled legged side board and chairs and a large four leaved *screen* covered with silk, or what I think what was called **Taffita**, a thin silk material stamped with figures of Butterflies, Chinese scenery, *etc.*

**My** Grandfather was a man of property and had money in the Bank. He was a member for **Mallow** *alternately* with **Mr. Jephson**, and his establishment was large and numerous. I recollect two post *boys* (both *old* men) a Butler and footman, two Stewards, one, the *upper* steward lived in the house, and as there was in those times no "second table" for the servants of the **household**. it was the custom at LongueviUe) (perhaps elsewhere for ought I can tell) for the first Steward to dine with the family and take his place after the family had sat down to dinner and *invariably* take his departure *before* the second course and the Steward was never asked "What he would have" and never spoke a word, and *vanished* as *quietly* as possible from the dining room.

The entire house was most *scantily* furnished, in these times would be reckoned as *miserably* furnished. The drawing room was hung with coloured pictures of about a foot square in black *woodenframes*, scenes of processions in Rome the principal subjects in *my* eyes; they were most interesting and **beautiful**. For the space of ten or eleven years I always saw the same servants at LongueviUe and some continued to live there for years after. The only servant who went away was the Kitchen **Maid**. She learned under the experienced cook (**Mrs. Sheehan**) a knowledge of cooking **and** readily got a

1. Some alterations and additions were made about 1866.

good situation (and of course advance of wages) as cook in some neighbouring gentleman's family. My **Grandfather** left legacies or annuities to all his old servants bringing in money according to the length of rime they had lived with him.

The plates we dined off generally were Pewter plates, with pewter *hot* plates under. They were kept nearly as bright as silver and were all *crested*, and a service of Pewter was thought a good **deal** of, in those times. Several dishes were also Pewter but on *state* days a service of China ware was used. **My** Grandfather had several pet dogs most of them of a large size, and messes were made at the table at the close of dinner for each one, and given to them in the *room* which often led to quarrelling amongst the dogs, very unpleasant to the company. One dog would not touch rabbit, another liked roast beef etc., so each mess was made separate to suit the particular dog it was meant **for**.

**My** Grandfather and Grandmother were accustomed to pay visits in a Chaise and *four* horses and I was *generally* taken with them, and **though** no doubt I thought it was *very* grand, yet the drive was by no means pleasant to me. In the first place I was always inclined to be sick in my stomach when in a close carriage, and in the second place I was generally placed between my Grandfather and Grandmother and the carriage was hung in such a sloping way that as I was not tall I could see nothing but the sky and the tops of trees, and though we had four horses we went very slow. That is termed a *jog trot*. I could see the caps of the postillions rising and falling and I recollect I used often amuse myself by making a tune in my mind to suit the jig jog of the trot of the horses. Neither Grandfather nor Grandmother liked the chatter of a child. How often I have heard that "little children should be *seen* and not heard" from my Grandmother.

Longueville was a dry but in winter a cold house. Great scarcity of fire, all coals had to be brought from Cork, and

2. Died in **1815** aged 74 years



**nobody** thought of ever stirring the well slacked fire in the sitting room during the day. "Clothes for the old, exercise for the young and fires for cooking (only)" was another saying of my Grandmother's. So when the weather was so bad as not to admit of taking a *small* walk to warm us, I and my brother **Mountifort** (who was generally my companion) used to get the *dry* rubbing brush and polish the front hall. Sometimes we used to go out to the wood and gather a bundle of dry sticks (what is called a "Brusha" in this country) and coax the housekeeper (Mrs. Lyons) to let us have a *blaze* in her room.

#### EXPLANATORY NOTE

The **writer** of these recollections — Elizabeth Conner, born in 1800 and married to Daniel Conner of Manch House, Co-Cork, in 1822 — was the eldest daughter of the Rev. **Mountifort** Longfield of Church Hill (**rector** of Desertserges, Co-Cork) by his first **wife** Grace Lysaght, whom he married in 1796. As her father had a family of fourteen, it was very natural that Elizabeth should often have stayed **with** her grandfather, John Longfield, at **Longueville**, near Mallow, during the ten years or so prior to his death in 1815. Her younger brother, **Mountifort** (born in 1802) whom she mentions, later became an eminent jurist and **was** Professor of Feudal and English **Law** in Trinity College, Dublin.

Although not written down until she was an old woman, there is a certain vividness about these **memories** of life — as seen **through** the eyes of a child — during the early years of the nineteenth century. The original "**jottings**" eventually came into the hands of a cousin, the late Mrs. **Sybil** Monkhouse (née Longfield). Before her death in 1956, however, she had a few copies made for relatives (including the writer of this note).

**Longueville** — a handsome, if not particularly distinguished house of the latter half of the eighteenth century — is still standing, but no longer belongs to any of John **Longfield's** descendants.

...A.K.L.

## IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

### ROTUNDA CHAPEL

The beautiful rococo chapel in the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin (Richard Castle, 1751), with its famous **plasterwork** by Cre-million, was, until recently, painted in the gloomiest browns and purples. Fortunately this little masterpiece has just been **beautifully** restored, and the bright, cheerful colours are a great improvement. There is still, however, an ugly Victorian stained glass window which clashes with the interior, all the more so now that it has been redecorated. Apart from detracting from the charm of the chapel, the **façade** of the Rotunda Hospital also suffers because the central windows (which **light** the chapel) have lost their glazing bars. Thus if the windows are put back as they were, not only would the chapel regain its 18th century gaiety and **light**, but the front of the **building** would be far more beautiful.

### DUBLIN CAB TOURS

The College Dublin Society of U.C.D. are conducting horse-drawn cab tours of some of the finest **Georgian** interiors every Wednesday until the end of **August**. Although chiefly **designed** for the tourist anyone is welcome to join the tours (12/6 per head) which leave from Newman House at 2.45p.m.

### CASTLETOWN HOUSE

Near Celbridge, 12 miles from Dublin, and the finest example of Palladian architecture in Ireland, **will** be open on Saturday July 30th in aid of the Adelaide Hospital, 2.30 — 5 p.m.

### WESTPORT HOUSE

Westport House, Co. **Mayo**, will be open to the public this **year** for the first time. The seat of the Marquess of **Sligo**, it was built in 1734 by Richard Castle and added to by Wyatt

in 1780. Surrounded by a beautiful park it has a view of Croagh Patrick across the bay. The house contains an important collection of paintings and furniture, as well as many exhibits of exceptional interest such as the Mayo Legion Flag, which was made in France in 1798 and presented by the French General Humbert to the Mayo Legion.

The house will be open from July 15th — September 18th,

Admission to grounds: Adults 6d.

Children 6d.

Admission to house: Adults 2/6

Children 1/-

Westport will not however be open to the public for the five days August 22<sup>nd</sup> — 26<sup>th</sup>. on account of the Irish Georgian Society's Ball on August 24<sup>th</sup>, in aid of Westport House. There **will** be a preview of Sybil Connolly's Autumn and Winter collections at the ball, and dancing to Earl Gill and his orchestra from 9 — 2.

Tickets (2gns., including supper) may be obtained from the Earl of **Altamont**, Westport House, Co. Mayo.