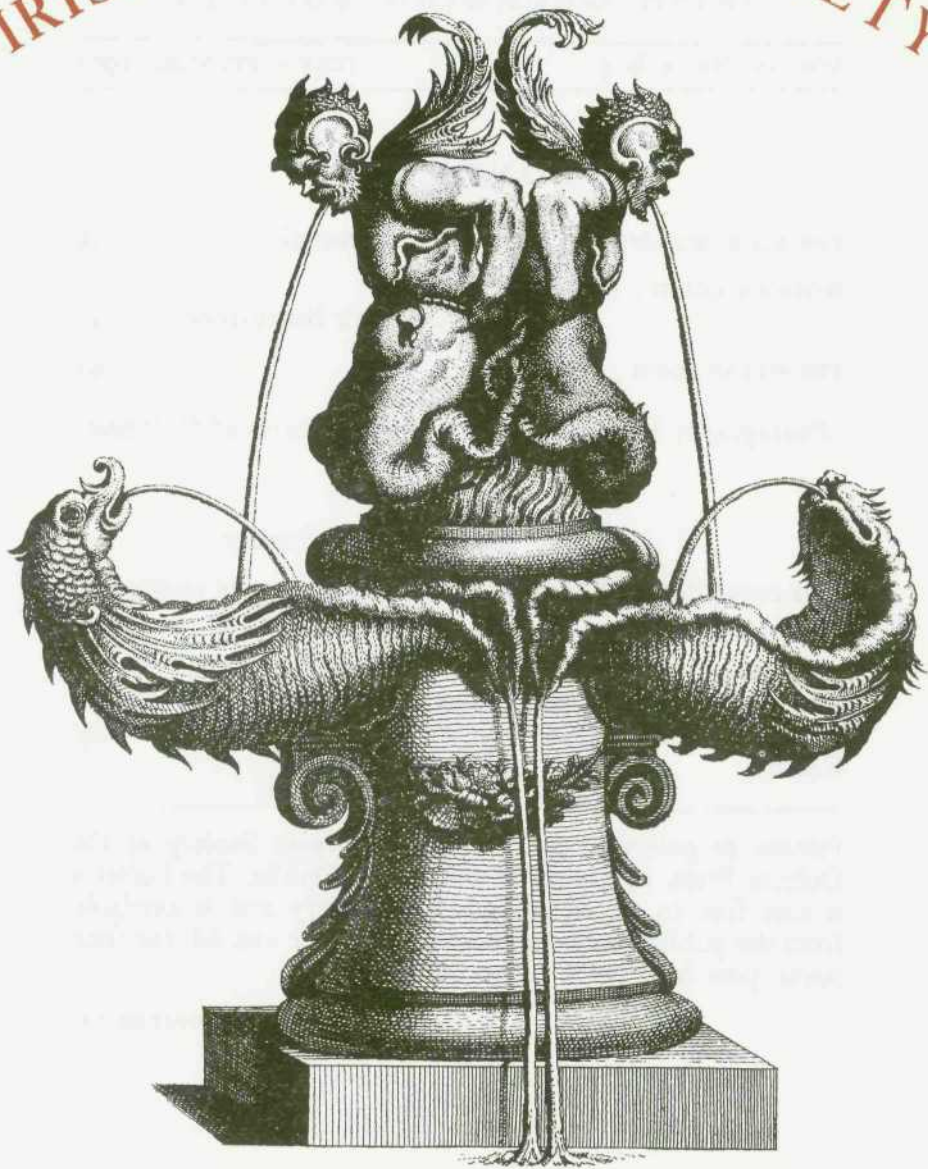


IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY



VOL. IV JULY — DECEMBER MCMLXI

QUARTERLY BULLETIN OF THE
IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

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JULY - DECEMBER 1961

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The cover design is adapted from an xviii century engraving.

Application for membership (£ 1 annually, which entitles members to lectures, expeditions and other functions) should be made to the Irish Georgian Society, Leixlip Castle, County Kildare.

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DOUBLE NUMBER 6S.

THE E.S.B. BUILDINGS: WILL THEY SURVIVE

Another attack is being made upon our Dublin architectural heritage, the worst attack so far. It is now likely that the existing facade of the the E.S.B. offices in Lower Fitzwilliam St. will be destroyed. This will leave a horrible gap in what is surely the longest stretch of Georgian domestic architecture in existence, extending three-fifths of a mile from Holies St. Hospital to Lower Leeson St. The E.S.B. has initiated an architectural competition for this site and assessors have been appointed. The only logical reason for holding such a competition would be that the E.S.B. intends to destroy these buildings. *Whatever* the structural condition of the houses in question (and the E.S.B. having used these buildings for 20 years cannot entirely disclaim responsibility for this) it is ridiculous to suggest that it is beyond the technical skill of architects to preserve the facades.

The whole area, including Merrion Sq., Upper Mount St., Fitzwilliam St. and Fitzwilliam Sq. is the finest townscape of its kind in Europe. The E.S.B. stretch in Fitzwilliam St. is an essential element in the unity of the whole. This unity must not be lost. We appeal to the E.S.B. and to the Government Department concerned, at all costs to preserve this facade. We are confident that if they do so they will earn the gratitude of all who take pride in our capital city.

lack White wrote in "The Guardian" for 8th September 1961: "The wide question is simply this: is there a public opinion in Ireland sufficiently concerned to put a stop to this vandalism; and if not, why not?"

It was, after all, a Minister of State who said to a visitor discussing the demolition of some Georgian buildings in Kildare Street, "I was glad to see them go. They stand for everything I hate."

I know what he meant. They stand for an alien tradition.

They stand for a Dublin which was an Anglo-Irish city. They stand for money and privilege and for the society that produced Sheridan and Oscar Wilde, the society that attended Castle levées and sent loyal addresses to the Sovereign. They stand for an urban, cosmopolitan culture, and not for the culture of the plain people.

The trouble is that, aesthetically speaking, the plain people of Ireland have really no tradition at all. From the coming of the Normans onward, there is no native design. The entire genius of the peasantry seems to have gone into language, into story-telling, poetry, and song. There is little or no evidence of domestic crafts being used as a vehicle for artistic expression. Waterford glass and Dublin silver are as much extensions of an English style as Fitzwilliam Square. There is no native domestic building, or none more elaborate than the basic thatched cottage. Furniture did not go beyond the rudest country carpentry.

There may be spiritual reasons for this indifference to the external world. There is a more obvious material reason: poverty. It cost nothing to spin a yarn in the chimney corner, and a good story could carry the spirit away, far from the cottage with the mud floor.

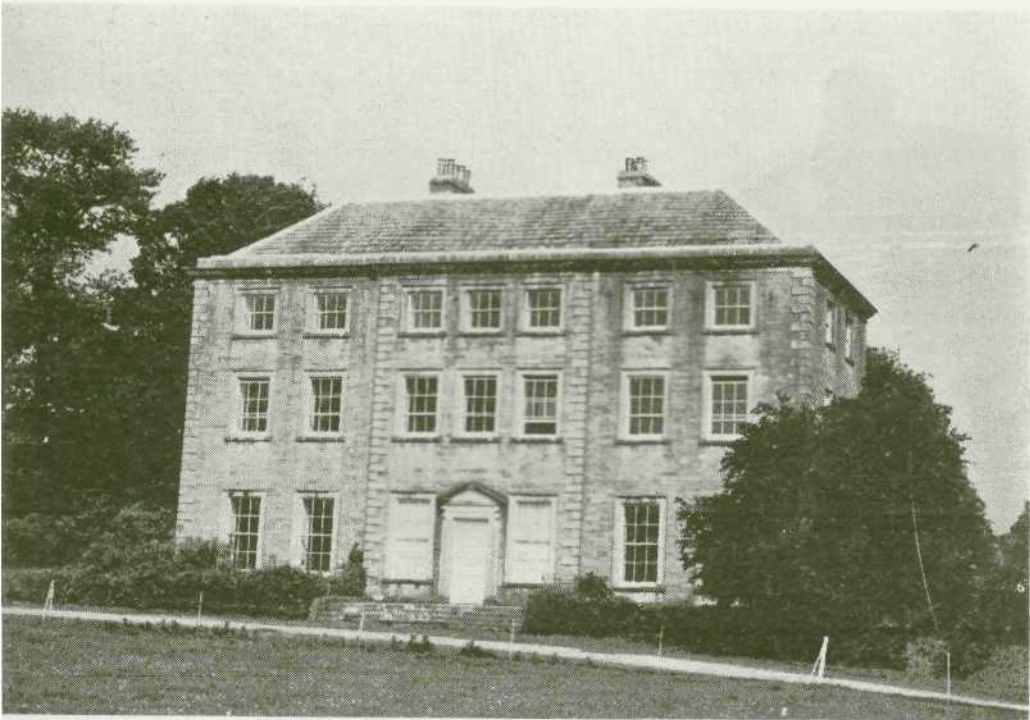
But poverty is deprivation; and there is no point in rejecting the legacy that has come down from the rich side of the family, the side that married the English. We all hope that Irish architects will produce fine modern buildings to embellish this capital city, but they could find plenty of places to build them without pulling down the finest thing we have."

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BOWEN'S COURT — AN APPRECIATION

MARK BENCE-JONES

The houses of our writers seem fated. Edgeworthstown is greatly altered; Moore Hall has been burnt; so has Aubrey de Vere's home, Curragh Chase. Lady Gregory's Coole is pulled down. Bowen's Court, which Miss Elizabeth Bowen sold a couple of years ago, is more fortunate than any of these in that it is to be preserved in private occupation. But the top storey is being removed; this, however much it might make the house more manageable, will completely change its character. And however well it may be cared for by future owners, it will never be the same as when it was the home and very largely the inspiration of one who is perhaps the greatest writer this part of Ireland has produced.

Bowen's Court was an outstanding example of the typical Irish house: a great cube, almost as high as it was long, with three storeys and a basement and many windows. Even to-day there are people to whom this kind of house is unsympathetic. Brought up, one suspects, on an overdose of gables, as indeed was Miss Bowen's governess, they call this kind of house "uncompromising", "an Irish box" or "a brute of a house". Such people are either insensitive, or they have never seen a tall Irish house, least of all Bowen's Court. These houses are so different from the three storied Georgian house one finds in England. The latter *is* uncompromising; it is four-square, sensible, correct, solid. Houses like Bowen's Court seem, for all their squareness, rather frail. There is something dreamlike and impermanent about them. It may be due to the silvery colour of the stone, the soft, ever-changing Irish light. Or perhaps their builders never in their heart of hearts had the feeling that they were building for an assured posterity. Ireland was unsettled; even before the century of building was over there was to be a full-scale rebellion. Many of the families for whom these houses were built were in a shaky financial state. To-day, one can see the burnt-out shells of these houses all over the country; their very tallness makes them burn extra fast; and those which survive are, one by one, being given up. They are too big for most people; yet lacking as they do the splendours of the more important Georgian houses, they do not readily attract rich buyers. This is a tragedy, for they have a beauty that is unique. An elusive beauty; the nearest thing to it being, I think, the beauty of one or two English Renaissance houses, notably Hardwick; or perhaps of later seventeenth century houses like Stanford in Leicestershire.

Early builders were uncertain of Classical motifs and proportions. It was hit or miss; if they missed, they produced something clumsy, thin, or attractively gauche; if they hit, they could achieve an impressionist beauty which eluded their more competent successors altogether. Bowen's Court was finished as late as 1775. In England at that time Wyatt was

already practising, but the remoter parts of Ireland were many years behind. It is significant that houses like Bowen's Court are not to be found near Dublin. These houses were the immediate successors to keeps, or to low, small-windowed dwellings that were equally mediaeval; just as in England, nearly two centuries before, Hardwick was the immediate successor to a half fortified house. As well as having the floating, more-glass-than-wall effect of Hardwick, Bowen's Court had another thing in common with Elizabethan houses. Like Mount levers, is possessed a long gallery: the Long Room, on the now vanished top floor.

The story of the Bowen family and of the building of the house has been told by Miss Bowen herself in her book *Bowen's Court*, which as well as giving a brilliant picture of the house and the people who lived in it, it is also one of the best histories of County Cork available. Henry Bowen, a Cromwellian colonel from Wales, is said to have been offered as much Irish land as his pet hawk could fly over. The hawk flew so far that people said Colonel Bowen had made a pact with the Devil; and the Bowens became possessed of many acres in North Cork, just below the Ballyhoura Mountains which separate the county from Limerick. But they subsequently acquired another estate further West; and here they lived until well into the 18th century, so that when the third Henry Bowen married, in 1760, the original estate only possessed a small house. This Henry had grand ideas, grander, in fact, than he could afford. He was good looking and enjoyed life; in his young days he was one of the Rakes of Mallow and he might have remained a bachelor. But when he was nearly forty he had fever; and as he lay gravely ill, he noticed the reflection of a fire. His cousin and heir, whom he greatly disliked, had ordered bonfires to be built to celebrate his inheritance, and had been so foolish as to light the first one prematurely. Henry heard about it and the story goes that he leapt from his bed and on to his horse and galloped off to ask a girl to marry him. She did; and to be on the safe side they had twenty-one children.

Henry Bowen started from scratch with his new house, having, to his wife's sorrow, completely pulled down the old one. There is a theory current that the architect was the younger Rothery, but Miss Bowen in her researches has never found any mention of an architect and so one can really say that the architect's name is unknown. All plans and other papers about the building of the house have vanished; Henry Bowen's son may have taken them with him when he went to live at Bath, where perhaps some of them exist. Henry Bowen, in the words of his descendant, "believed in elevation, and he designed for his family . . . a house that should be certain to elevate'. The house "with its rows of dark windows set in the light façade against dark trees has the startling, meaning and abstract clearness of a house in a print, a house in which something important occurred once, and seems, from all evidence, to be occurring still". The building took ten years; it was held up by a builders' strike and by lack of money; "it may have looked, at one heart-sickening moment, as though the roof would never go on at all". But Henry's relations all put up something and the house was finished, but with one corner, the North-East, missing.

The house turns its back on the mountains and faces South across a stretch of lawn. Since the trees grew up, the mountains, which are such a dominant feature of this countryside, could only be seen from the staircase window and the upper rooms; best of all from the Long Room and the bedrooms off it from which one could look North to the Ballyhouras, South to the Nagles and East to the Galtees and Knockmeal-downs. The entrance front had twenty windows, surrounded by simple mouldings, and a pedimented doorway. The West front, the only other complete facade, had eighteen. Inside, the rooms are few, large, high and of perfect proportions. The "big windows not only reflect the changes of weather but seem to contain the weather itself". There is a hall, which has pedimented doorways and a pedimented chimney piece of grey marble. To the left is the drawing room, to the right, the library. Behind the drawing room is the dining room. All

these rooms have elegant plaster friezes and mahogany doors now faded by the light to a warm pink. Behind the hall is the staircase, with oak balusters of fine eighteenth century joinery. It is lit by a Venetian window framed by two Corinthian pilasters carrying an entablature. The upstairs rooms are quite plain, the plasterers having been sent away when Henry Bowen found himself short of money; though there are some pleasant chimney pieces of the same coloured marble as the one in the hall. At the head of the staircase is the Lobby, immediately above the hall. It is a separate room with its own fireplace and is, in effect, an upstairs drawing room where in the old days the women used to sit and gossip. If the house had been completed, an extra flight of grand stairs would have led up to the Long Room. Instead, the Long Room had to be reached by the upper flight of the back stairs, which brought one up, rather surprisingly, through its floor. It ran the whole depth of the centre of the house, with windows at each end, like the gallery on the top floor of Mellerstain. Its coved ceiling would have been decorated if the plasterers had stayed; as it was, the only features of the room were two grey marble chimneypieces and two rough and ready ovals of plaster decoration which someone who had watched the plasterers at work downstairs must have tried his hand at making. The Long Room was intended as a ballroom, but the floor would not stand dancing; so it was used, instead, in the words of Miss Bowen, "as a promenade deck, as a wet-day playroom for people of all ages, for solitary reflections and for theatricals". In spite of being right at the top and empty, it remained "the core of the house". Miss Bowen and indeed her guests never felt they had come back to Bowen's Court until they had been up to the Long Room.

Henry Bowen's son, another Henry, married a daughter of the first Lord Dunalley, and in the latter years of the eighteenth century Bowen's Court was the scene of a certain amount of high life. Then he and his wife parted and he retired to Bath, and the house was let to his younger brother and heir, Robert. He and subsequent Bowens led the ordinary life

of the Irish gentry. Miss Bowen's grandfather, another Robert, added a long low office wing running back from the missing corner. He also redecorated the drawing room, replaced the chimneypieces in the drawing room, dining room and library with Victorian ones and filled the house with Victorian furniture. Luckily, his alterations went no further; he did not attempt to substitute plate glass for the Georgian glazing bars. Following his death, the house was lived in less and less. Miss Bowen's father, as a lawyer, had to spend most of his time in Dublin. Then Miss Bowen's work and that of her husband, the late Mr. Alan Cameron, kept her in England. Bowen's Court was only used for holidays. Most of the Victorian furniture was sold; at the time when *Bowen's Court* was written (1941) the only downstairs rooms in use were the library and the hall, which also served as a dining room.

Yet though Miss Bowen spent so much of her time away, the house continued to influence her. "A Bowen, in the first place, made Bowen's Court. Since then, with rather alarming sureness, Bowen's Court has made all the succeeding Bowens". An Irish house figures in most of her novels; it is not so much a mere background as one of the characters. In *The Last September* the house is directly modelled on Bowen's Court. One feels that Miss Bowen had a sense of the transience of these great square houses, for the house in *The Last September* ends in flames. In *Bowen's Court* she describes herself sitting by Lake Como in 1921 expecting any day to hear that Bowen's Court had thus perished. Perhaps she found it necessary to make the house suffer, in fiction, the fate which she had feared it would suffer in real life. There is an echo of this theme in *The House in Paris*. When Karen goes to visit her uncle, she sees "ghastly black staring photographs" of the ruin of his house which had been burnt in the Trouble. "Downstairs was a photograph of the house as it used to be, in winter, a grey facade of light-reflecting windows, flanked each side by groves of skeleton trees". This ghost house still seems to haunt the uncle; and though he is a lesser character, it seems through him, to penetrate further into the book. The houses

in *The Heat of the Day* and *A World of Love* are smaller and, unlike Bowen's Court, are built on the side of a river. But the river is the Funcheon, which, while not going through the Bowen's Court demesne, flows, between its steep banks, through Kildorrery, a mile or two away. In *Bowen's Court* she writes: "Lives in these houses, for generations, have been lived at high pitch, only muted down by the weather, in psychological closeness to one another and under the strong rule of the family myth . . . Each of these family homes, with its stables and farm and gardens deep in trees at the end of long avenues, is an island and, like an island, a world". This intensity of life is depicted so well in *A World of Love* that to read it leaves one almost breathless; particularly as it is no longer "muted down by the weather". There is no "steady sough of rain in demesne trees" to induce "a timeless and rather soothing melancholy"; but it is bright and hot, "a summer almost unknown".

Though the house in *A World of Love* (like that in *The Heat of the Day*) does not suffer destruction, there is transience in the form of decay: "The small mansion had an air of having gone down The door no longer knew hospitality; moss obliterated the sweep for the turning carriage; the avenue lived on as a rutted track". But unlike so many Irish houses, Bowen's Court did not suffer decline any more than it suffered fire. A few years after the war, Miss Bowen gave up her house in London and came to live permanently at Bowen's Court. The house was redecorated and refurnished. The hall was given a red damask paper which set off the white doorcases and the eighteenth century family portraits to perfection. It contained the original Irish dining room furniture that had been bought when the house was built. There was also much eighteenth century Cork silver; for the room was still used for eating. Miss Bowen considered that the old dining room, which has trees close to it was too dark. The drawing room kept its white Victorian watered silk paper and the gilt pelmets and mirrors. Instead of attempting to suppress the room's early Victorian character, Miss Bowen de-

veloped it along the right lines. She furnished it sparsely, with gay, brightly coloured pieces like a painted Regency sofa and an inlaid marble table. There was some beautiful china and on the grand piano stood a bust of the great Duke of Wellington to whom Miss Bowen is related through her mother's family. The Lobby contained more Regency furniture and was given bookcases, to hold Miss Bowen's ever-expanding collection of books, which had outgrown the library. Here, too, was the piano which Eliza Wade Galwey, the wife of the fifth Henry Bowen, brought with her when she married him in 1829. Henry had fancied going to the opera, but his duty kept him at Bowen's Court. So "he could listen, instead, to Eliza playing and singing". The piano, an early Broadwood, now belongs to me. The Long Room remained empty except for some modern paintings on the walls and what looked like a day bed but turned out to be an interesting if macabre piece of Irish furniture, a wake-couch. But the bedrooms off it, with their wonderful views, were each given a character of their own and were in full use once again. For when Miss Bowen was at Bowen's Court the house was always filled with her friends. To stay there was a delight; the surroundings and the charming presence of Miss Bowen herself meant that there was always a steady flow of visitors that might have taxed the resources of one less hospitable. Her friends came from all walks of life, Irish, English, American; but needless to say, there was a large proportion of writers. At Bowen's Court one would meet people like Lord and Lady David Cecil, Lady Cynthia Asquith, Mr. Robert Speaight, Miss Rosamond Lehmann, Miss Antonia White and Mrs. Elizabeth Taylor. Life followed a pattern. Unless there were people coming to luncheon, Miss Bowen would work for most of the day, in a study which was formerly a dressing room next to her bedroom on the first floor. At five she would come down and join her guests for tea in the library; after which, if it was summer, there might have been an expedition. This could have been up the mountain, or to the wonderful gardens at Anne's Grove, a few miles away, or else to the garden of Bowen's Court itself. In the

latter case the word "expedition" seems particularly suitable. Irish walled gardens are famous for their distance from the house; even so, the distance of the garden from the house at Bowen's Court must be a record. It is right on the far side of the woods to the North, literally at the foot of the mountain. One approaches it along a path lined with laurels which winds on indefinitely. After this long dark walk, the garden, with its old-fashioned flower borders and backcloth of mountains, had an enchanting effect. Later, there would be people in for drinks; not a party, though the drawing room would very quickly be full. After dinner, amusing talk would go on late into the night until it was time to go to bed, when Miss Bowen would, rather regretfully, one felt, ask someone to help her put the great iron bar in place which kept the front door shut. This bar was a relic of the '98; to her, it seemed as though it kept Ireland out. She would much rather have left the door open all night, just as it always stood open during the day.

Just as a short period of happiness can make a whole lifetime worthwhile, so these few years seemed to be the house's *fulfilment*. At a time when so many other houses like it were slowly dying, Bowen's Court was living through its greatest days. It was being, at last, what it was built to be: a background for civilized life. Moreover, it was being appreciated. Alas, those days had to come to an end; the upkeep of the house and estate proved too much for Miss Bowen, whose work still took her abroad for much of the year. But not only in those last few years has Bowen's Court been more fortunate than most of its fellows. Whatever may be the future of the actual building, the house has achieved immortality in some of the most beautiful prose of our time.

THE PILLAR ROOM

now known as the Town & Country Club

The Pillar Room beneath the Gate Theatre, as illustrated, has just been re-decorated on the advice of the Irish Georgian Society, having been shut and dis-used for the past three years. It is the most beautiful assembly room available in Dublin, and can be hired on any night of the week, except Saturdays, by writing to Thomas Costello, Town and Country Club, Parnell Square, Dublin.

There is a much smaller oval room with a fine coved ceiling and niches next to the large ballroom, for smaller gatherings. Fortunately the pillar room narrowly escaped being altered by Mr. Michael Scott, a Dublin architect, who wanted to remove the pillars and modernise it.

The Pillar Room and Gate Theatre were both designed in 1785 by Richard Johnston, the elder brother of the more famous Francis, for the "Rotunda" Maternity Hospital which still owns them and lets them for profit. In general layout it resembles the Assembly Rooms at Belfast (which no longer exist) by Sir Robert Taylor, 1780, and Johnston, who came from Armagh, may well have seen them.

We are indebted to Mrs. Harold Leask for the following-extract from *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*
Tues. 13—Thurs. 15 March, 1787.

*Masquerade Ball and Supper
Rotunda and New Rooms*

"As we are always desirous to give the Public an entertaining account of what we think will amuse, *Monday* (i.e. 12 March 1787) *Nights' Masquerade* must not pass unnoticed
Gentlemen of Hughes's Club . . . took the earliest opportunity of exhibiting a suite of rooms, wh. connected with the Rotunda, bids fair to stand unrivalled by anything as yet designed for Public entertainment in Europe.

. . . . Before we proceed in this account, it may not be unreasonable to remark, that the *first purpose to wh. the new*



rooms at the Rotunda were devoted, next to the protection of unborn infancy, was the encouragement of Irish manufacture.

The ball-room was everything that could be expected. Over one of the chimney-pieces was a brilliant girandole composed of the insignia of the different ornaments of the Knts. of St. Patrick.

This had a splendid and beautiful effect, and the temporary pillars were ornamented w. artificial flowers, and festoons of evergreens wh. hung the whole room and gave it an appearance of simple elegance.

The Card-room was fitted up as a refectory, ornamented w. festoons and artificial flowers and in the niches were placed orange and rose trees in full bearing.

When this room is finished, its appearance will be very beautiful.

The vestibule between the Rotunda and Ball room is covered w. a light and elegant canopy of glass, and on this occasion was judiciously improved in its appearance, by orange trees, and natural and artificial flowers.

The Rotunda was newly beautified, and over the entrance to the card-room was a transparency of a Knt. of St. Patrick, at full length, in the habiliments of his order.

A complete band in the orchestra, which was relieved by a regimental one.

The supper rooms were more brilliant than could be fully expected from their unfinished state.

A few strips of painted paper, were hung up, and were at once an ornament, and intimated the stile in which it was intended to complete the rooms. On this paper were represented a girandole standing on a pedestal, over which was a harp, encircled by a laurel wreath, and over all a curtain disposed in imitation of a canopy, under which were the initials S.P.Q.H. Senatus populus que Hiberniae, the Senate and People of Ireland, in imitation of the S.P.Q.R. of the Romans.

The tables were over spread with a profusion of sumptuousness; under a most resplendent lustre which held no less than 60 lights, were the figure of two pheasants, on each side of a fancy piece of confectionary.

Upon the whole, the supper had a luxuriant appearance, not easy to describe, and the wines were particularly well flavoured.

The stairs were embellished w. emblematical scenes and in the window was a beautiful transparency of the order of the garter.

The number in the principal supper-room were upwards of 600, of whom 400 had seats: the lesser supper room accommodated near 200."

(A list of some of the Masques follows—e.g. "Mr. Conolly as a Watchman" etc., etc.)

(Want of sufficient hackney carriages etc.)

"About 7 o'clock in the morning, the motley groups began to disperse, highly gratified with the night's entertainment."

IRELAND IN MAPS

An exhibition of old maps is on view until the end of March in Trinity College Library, and as the Georgian period is well represented, members would certainly enjoy a visit. The exhibition has been arranged by the Geographical Society of Ireland and the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. An illustrated catalogue has been published by the Dolmen Press, containing an historical introduction by Dr. John H. Andrews, and is on sale at five shillings.

IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

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