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IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

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Interviewed by John Mason, by courtesy of Trinity News.

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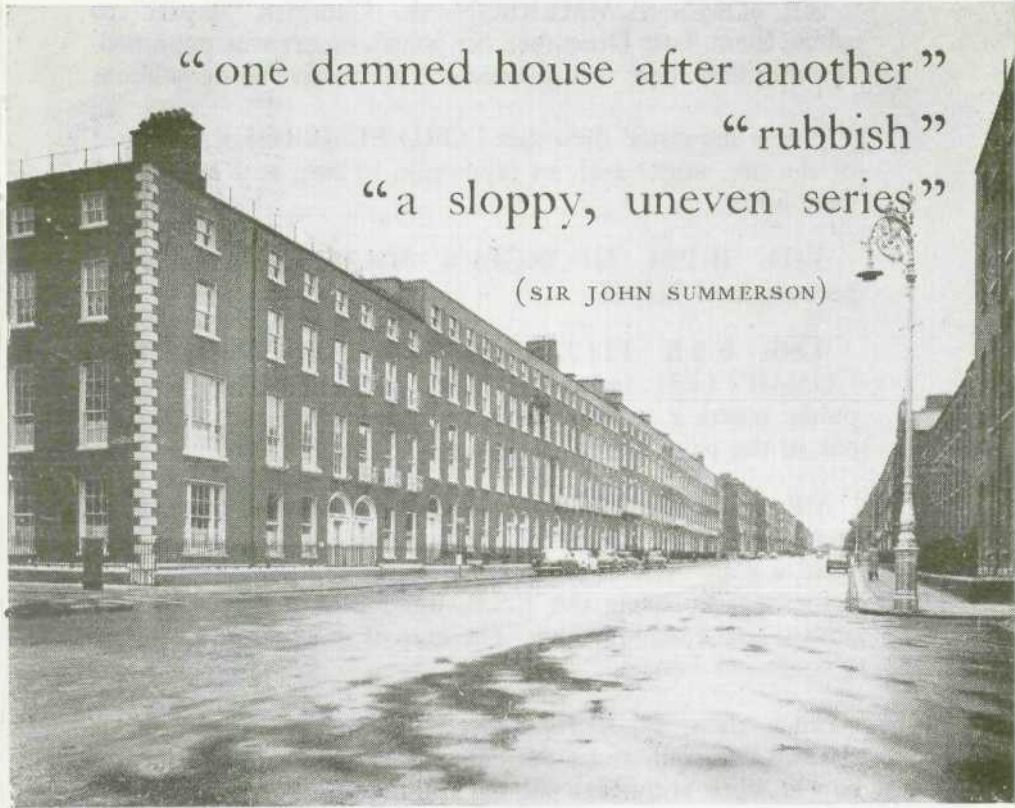
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“one damned house after another”

“rubbish”

“a sloppy, uneven series”

(SIR JOHN SUMMERSON)



LR. FITZWILLIAM STREET

Last year, THE ELECTRICITY SUPPLY BOARD announced that they intended to pull down their offices contained in Georgian houses in Lower Fitzwilliam Street, and to replace them with a modern office block, because of an urgent need to expand. After protests that this would ruin the character of the area had been made, they invited

SIR JOHN SUMMERSON, the Georgian "expert" to advise them. Last December, Sir John's report was published. It stated that there was no practical alternative to demolition.

It was suggested then that LORD PEMBROKE, landlord of the site, might seek an injunction to stop any attempt at demolition.

THE IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY organised a petition, and helped

THE E.S.B. FITZWILLIAM STREET PROTEST COMMITTEE, formed to fight demolition, to arrange a public meeting at the Mansion House in January, at which one of the principal speakers was

SIR ALBERT RICHARDSON, the outstanding British architect. Having inspected the premises, Sir Albert put forward a plan—that the houses be renovated and returned to domestic use, while the E.S.B. build a new tower on the unused space behind them. The cost of renovation he put at £6,000 per house.

Since then, DUBLIN CORPORATION has approved the E.S.B.'s plan, and a furious correspondence raged in the papers, with architects playing leading parts on both sides.

Four points of view. John Mason interviews

SIR ALBERT RICHARDSON

Sir Albert Richardson, K.C.V.O., P.P.R.A., has advanced the plan that the E.S.B. vacate most of the lower Fitzwilliam Street houses, building their new accommodation in the form of a tower on the remaining garden space. He estimates the cost of structural renovation and conversion back to domestic use at £ 6.000 per house. There are sixteen houses involved.

Sir Albert says: "The main issue in this controversy is the interest of the general public in a heritage of beauty. Dublin, like Venice, has a charm denied to most capital cities; the mountains, the sea, the moist atmosphere blend the conventions of architecture and scenery in a way **which is** indescribable. This is recognised by ordinary folk to be a heritage common to **all—do** not despise it. Fitzwilliam and Merrion Squares form the most important contribution to the European manner of the eighteenth century. No one architect or particular individual was responsible for the charm and spontaneity of these productions of the craftsmen of the time. And no eighteenth century houses were substantially **built—does** that lessen their merit?"

SIR JOHN SUMMERSON

1—*What is your reply to the charge that you were called in to pronounce the last rites over the buildings in Lower Fitzwilliam Street?*

I was simply called in to give an opinion and was given every opportunity to study the problem. Until I had done so I did not expect that I should advise against preservation.

2—*Why did you not think that for the sake of the rest of the façades the buildings should be saved?*

It has no special architectural coherence; it is not a planned *façade* nor an architectural entity. It is simply one damned house after another; this does not constitute architectural unity. It does not even constitute uniformity, for the houses are a sloppy, uneven series. I do see that for the sake of uniformity of *character* over a wide area there was some real point in considering preservation, but on balance it seemed to me wrong. It is nearly always wrong to preserve rubbish, and by Georgian standards these houses are rubbish.

3—*Do you then think that the merit of Dublin architecture of this sort has been over-estimated, and that preservation must centre rather on the large public buildings or country houses of the Georgian period?*

I think the quality of these houses has been grossly over estimated, but I would not confine preservation to major buildings. Planned groups of buildings even when perfectly plain can be very valuable. I would not, for instance, wish to see Merrion Square or Upper Mount Street disturbed. The trouble is that many people who want to preserve Georgian things lose all sense of Georgian *values*. I have seen the Place Vendome and the Regents Park terraces mentioned as analogous to Fitzwilliam Street. If we come to think as loosely as that, preservation becomes sheer lunacy!

4—*Did you form any opinion at all, whilst you were in Dublin, of what should be preserved in the Merrion Square and Fitzwilliam Square area?*

No, I did not. That would require a very detailed study. I must emphasise, though, that such a study (of the whole Georgian area with a view to selecting the most significant portions) seems urgently required. It would not, I think, be reasonable to sterilise the whole area, but control is essential. I am sure that many people would like to see a Government commission set up for this purpose. I would foresee the absolute preservation of Merrion Square and Fitzwilliam Square, and of parts of the adjacent streets. There are long stretches of negligible importance where opportunities for development might be allowed, but I would emphasise that it must be controlled development in order to preserve skyline, continuity of rhythm and general character. We do not wish Georgian Dublin to explode into a variety of personal "interpretations of the modern idiom." Discipline is the main virtue of the old; let us have discipline in the new.

5—*Did you meet any of those bodies interested in the preservation of Lower Fitzwilliam Street, whilst you were in Dublin?*

No. I made a point of meeting as few people as possible.

6—*How did you go about your examination of the*

buildings? Did you have expert advice on their conditions at hand}

I was conducted round all the houses and given full information about their condition. But the condition of the houses, although pretty bad, did not worry me. You can preserve anything if it is worth preserving. There are much more important things in Dublin than the preservation of Lower Fitzwilliam Street. What is the future of Henrietta Street? Here are houses of exceptional quality and rare historic interest. The same principles apply on the North side of the city as on the south, though I appreciate that this is a more difficult problem owing to the type of occupancy, re-housing needs and so on.

7—Do you not think the decision to demolish Lower Fitzwilliam Street minus two houses an extremely dangerous precedent?

It poses a problem which has got to be faced sooner or later, as it has been faced (or sometimes, alas, not faced) in every historic capital. Dublin is a living city and you cannot stop a living city from growing. Planning, rebuilding, and preservation have got to be considered together as aspects of the same problem, the problem of intelligent and civilised growth.

MR. T. MURRAY
Chairman of the E.S.B.

1—Is the reason for demolishing the buildings in Fitzwilliam Street purely financial}

No. The reasons are partly financial and partly a question of accommodation. The buildings, even if preserved, would provide only half the accommodation we must have.

2—Do you reject Sir Albert Richardson's plan completely}

Yes, we do. There are three main objections to Sir Albert's plan:

Firstly, such a tower would exceed height limits laid down by the Corporation for buildings in this area.

Secondly, it would leave no space to satisfy Corporation requirements for car parks (demanded of all new office blocks).

Thirdly, it would still not provide enough accommodation, would hinder full development of the site, and would take up space at present usefully occupied.

3—*What of Sir Albert's figure of £6,000 per house as the cost of restoration?*

The figure is a gross under-estimate. Our own experience in dealing with these houses tells us that more than twice this amount would not make a reasonable job.

4—*Is there any chance of the E.S.B. acquiring adjoining property in Baggot Street and in James' Street and building there?*

The Board does not envisage expansion into Baggot Street. As an electricity authority it has no compulsory purchase powers to acquire such property.

5—*Is the Board prepared to move elsewhere?*

The Board is simply not prepared to, and indeed cannot, vacate this site and split its headquarters. The cost of any such move would be an unwarrantable burden on electricity consumers.

6—*Has Lord Pembroke made his intentions known to you?*

The relations between landlord and lessee are not considered by the Board to be matters of legitimate public comment. Both parties must operate in accordance with the agreement between them.

7—*Are the buildings so decrepit because of the treatment they received from the E.S.B.?*

Definitely not. They were in poor condition when acquired. The Board has, in fact, spent considerable funds

trying to keep them in usable condition pending rebuilding.

8—*Why then, did the Board acquire the property?*

The Board had to have accommodation in the centre of Dublin and acquired these houses gradually from 1928 onwards. In fact, rebuilding was envisaged almost from the beginning. Rules for an architectural competition to provide a replacement were drawn up in 1938, but the competition was abandoned because of the war.

9—*Will the Board DEFINITELY preserve the houses leased to it in Upper Mount Street and the two in Lower Fitzwilliam Street which are not to be demolished on this occasion?*

The Board's policy in regard to property occupied by it is to improve it and to preserve it as long as possible. There are no plans for rebuilding the houses referred to.

MR. E. DEALE

Chairman of the Protest Group

1—*Do you still adhere to Sir Albert Richardson's plan for the site?*

We do not bind ourselves slavishly to the details of Sir Albert's solution. He came over to see if it was possible to preserve the buildings, and has established that it is. The houses should now be returned to their original use, as dwellings. The ground floors would be well suited to professional use by doctors, dentists or lawyers, especially the first; there is a big demand by doctors for consulting rooms in this district. The second and third floors would make admirable maisonettes, and the top floors could be boxrooms, or even flats. The demand for all these types of premises in this area is assured.

2—*It has been said that Sir Albert's estimate of six thousand pounds per house for renovation and conversion is far too low, and that the real cost would be prohibitive. Do you still accept Sir Albert's figure?*

We have checked the price with Dublin architects, and their estimates have been fairly close to Sir Albert's—close enough to show that it is not an unreasonable figure.

3—*What is your reaction to the E.S.B.'s claim that the need for accommodation leaves them no choice but to re-build in Fitzwilliam Street?*

This claim is nonsense. There is plenty of unused space behind the houses. Car parking space could be provided under any new building, and the height limit is not an insuperable barrier. If more space is needed, the adjacent houses in Baggot Street—or at least their gardens—could probably be bought up, and plenty of room would then be available without disturbing Fitzwilliam Street.

But why should E.S.B. use the most costly part of Dublin for mere office accommodation? Bord Failte have a case for this as they want to bring tourists into this 18th century square mile. E.S.B. could build far more cheaply elsewhere in Dublin. They would get a big sum for the 18 houses and would find buyers for their new building (behind) as there is great demand for office accommodation in Dublin.

4—*Has the Protest Committee any views on the need for a plan covering the whole of Georgian Dublin?*

The Committee, as such, has as yet no policy on this wider issue. But the general trend of opinion is probably in favour of a planned attempt to preserve as much as is practicable of 18th century Dublin. The only large old area in a good state of repair at present is that of which Lord Pembroke is ground landlord, in the south of the city. Lord Pembroke imposes stringent requirements in his leases, and is, in effect, doing the job the Government should be doing in this respect.

IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

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Irish Georgian Society

PILLAR ROOM

In paragraph 2, page 41 of the last Bulletin we stated that Mr. Michael Scott, the Dublin architect, was in favour of removing the pillars from the pillar room beneath the Gate Theatre in Parnell Square. In fact, when their removal was proposed he was the first to condemn the idea. We apologise to Mr. Scott for this error, and thank him for the part he has played in securing the future of this beautiful room, the finest Assembly Room in Dublin.

In the hope that it will be considered by members who are in search of large rooms for any type of function, we have ascertained that the pillar room may be hired from Mr. Tom Costello, The Crystal Ltd., South Anne Street, Dublin, for the following scale of charges:

Oval refreshment room	£2 per hour (min. fee	£6)
Pillar room	£4 per hour (min. fee	£12)
Both rooms combined	£5 per hour (min. fee	£15)

The cost of hiring extra chairs would depend on the number required. Buffet service and suppers can be provided.

MOUNT IEVERS REPAIR FUND

Work has started at Mount Ievers on essential structural repairs, and the Irish Georgian Society has forwarded £152-7-2 to Mr. Ievers which has been most gratefully received. This was the total amount collected in the Repair Fund during 1960 and 1961, and which is still open.

VISIT TO PORTARLINGTON

There will be a visit to Portarlington and district for members on Saturday, 5th May, 1962. Assemble at 11 a.m. in the main square, Portarlington, bringing picnic lunch.