Books

Roger Stalley, ed. 
*Irish Gothic Architecture: Construction, Decay and Reinvention* 
Dublin: Wordwell, 2012, 226 pp., 75 color and 75 b/w illus. €29.99 (paper), ISBN 9781905569700

The marginalization of the study of late medieval architecture in Ireland results from a series of coincidences, including the treatment of Ireland as peripheral to mainstream European developments; the perception of the Gothic style as a foreign imposition when compared to indigenous forms of earlier eras; the relative unfamiliarity of scholars outside Ireland with the complexities of Irish history; and the limited scale of Irish Gothic construction in a discipline that has traditionally prized technological achievement. In the past, architectural historians structured the field to elevate the great French cathedrals as the standard for Gothic form and meaning, but the spread and popularity of Gothic design elements throughout late medieval Europe in innumerably varied circumstances mean that most Gothic deviates from the “rule.” Recent scholarship—for example, Colum Hourihane’s survey of late medieval artistic production, *Gothic Art in Ireland, 1169–1550* (2003)—has attempted to reassess the situation, but the subject of Gothic architecture in Ireland still provides much to explore.1 *Irish Gothic Architecture: Construction, Decay and Reinvention* contributes to that process of exploration. The volume was produced by a team affiliated with the Department of the History of Art at Trinity College Dublin, and its title implies a survey, but the book is a series of connected studies that follow the erection and subsequent fate of Gothic buildings on Irish soil. The authors have the stated intention of producing a multifaceted study of Gothic, incorporating ideas of reception and postmedieval change. The consideration of the *longue durée* as it relates to buildings has become a useful methodology for scholars of medieval architecture in recent years, but given the political and religious oppression in Ireland since the Middle Ages, Irish buildings can assume charged but shifting symbolic functions that make this approach particularly fruitful here.

Roger Stalley’s introduction provides a historiographical grounding for the chapters that follow. Stalley considers why Irish Gothic has been minimally studied, with nineteenth-century nationalism emerging as a key obstruction: while Irish Gothic is a survival from the Catholic past, it was also considered a style imposed on the colonized by their colonizers. Stalley stresses the value of analyzing how buildings have been reimagined over time, as he notes that the refashioning of the meaning of these sites continues in the present day, with Irish Gothic sites becoming the centers of commercial redevelopment plans. Stalley acknowledges the heterogeneity of Gothic as a category, making reference to the ongoing debate within the discipline about the usefulness as the term “Gothic.” One question that remains unanswered is whether the contributors to this volume share a particular concept of Irish Gothic. In his own chapters, Stalley mentions certain features such as crenellated parapets as being typically Irish, but neither he nor the other authors explicitly discuss what connects Irish Gothic buildings beyond location and a late medieval construction date.

The first chapter, “Cathedral Building in Thirteenth-Century Ireland,” is also by Stalley. This selection serves as a foundation for the rest of the book by establishing the scope, economy, and practices of late medieval construction at major Irish sites. Limiting his view to cathedrals allows Stalley to delve into issues of episcopal organization, economy, and symbolism as they relate to Gothic buildings. Late medieval Ireland was divided into thirty-eight dioceses, meaning that a country with substantially less wealth than England divided that wealth over a far greater number of cathedrals, and Stalley goes into detail about the income of Irish sees: the richest see by far, Dublin’s, had an income one-tenth the size of Lincoln’s. Gothic arrived in Ireland with Anglo-Norman colonization, and Stalley links appointments of English bishops with new building campaigns, using the example of Waterford to demonstrate how recent English architectural developments (in this case Glastonbury Abbey) could be influential in Ireland—but with the caveat that monastic affiliation might play a role alongside nationality when patrons considered sources and that patrons were not necessarily dictators of formal solutions reached...
by builders. He suggests that an English influence was not always immediate and makes note of English masons without specific English models at Christ Church and St. Patrick's Cathedrals in Dublin. Ethnic as well as financial divides might have affected the choice to build anew: native Irish bishops tended to hold the poorest sees.

Stalley considers the issue of Gothic’s reception in Ireland throughout the chapter: was it seen by the Irish as something imposed? With no evidence of direct contact with French builders or sources, it is hard to make the argument that Gothic would have been associated with anyone but the Anglo-Normans. Stalley theorizes that the relationship between the ethnicity of those in power and the use of the Gothic style becomes significantly less clear by the late thirteenth century, once Gothic was established: his example of Ardfert, an accomplished Gothic building with no evidence of English patronage, supports this point.

Stalley also contributes the second chapter, devoted to establishing a chronology of the construction of Cashel Cathedral. Cashel’s unique history and geography mean that it cannot be considered typical nor would it serve as a model for other locations; as such, its place in the history of medieval architecture has been difficult to define. Stalley describes its series of east-to-west campaigns: a homogeneous choir (ca. 1240), followed by the transepts and part of the nave (ca. 1260–90), the later addition of a western fortified tower, and the alteration of the nave with a floor insertion, for which he suggests a sixteenth-century date. He associates the second campaign with Bishop David Mac Cerbaill, whose biography—he had ties to the Cistercians and traveled to England and the Continent—does not seem to have affected the forms chosen at Cashel, although Stalley does suggest that the awkward insertion of the north transept rose window may have been a result of the patron’s impetuosity. Mac Cerbaill, he argues, would have seen the style of his campaigns as modern rather than English, and the lack of clear connections to specific English sources underscores this idea. Mac Cerbaill’s era marks a significant transition in materials: builders changed from sandstone of the eastern arm to limestone, and Stalley suggests that limestone may have been less expensive to dress and may also have suited the defined details of Gothic ornament. The second campaign also incorporated pre-Gothic construction, and Stalley notes how the new transept passages accessed the existing round tower. Cormac’s Chapel (1127–34), a Romanesque building, strangely is not brought into the new construction in the same way: while the building was still accessible from the south side, its main (north) portal was cut off by the angle of the choir and south transept arm. The contrast in the treatment of these two architectural “relics” merits further discussion.

Rachel Moss’s “Reconstructing Cashel” covers the postmedieval history of the site, which was declared Protestant during the Reformation, returned to Catholic use between 1641 and 1647—when Cashel was besieged by parliamentary forces—and then had its choir restored for Protestant worship. Unusually for a religious site, locals used the ruins as a source of stone, and Moss points out that the site was often referred to with secular labels; its status as a site of faith but also of rebellion and tragedy complicated its perception as a monument, and only later did antiquarian investigations help reframe Cashel as a national symbol. Moss historicizes the contemporary debate over preservation versus restoration, noting that the conflict develops from an ongoing battle over the meaning and use of Cashel. The deliberate removal of the roof by Bishop Charles Agar in 1750 exemplifies the clash between symbolic and functional use: the author notes that Agar may have been interested in the picturesque aspect of Cashel’s ruins. Agar’s gesture might be further considered in light of the anti-Catholic rhetoric on ruins emerging in England in the mid-eighteenth century: it seems likely that there was a political as well as an aesthetic intent in a Protestant archbishop hardening the ruin of a Catholic past.

“Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Irish Monastic Architecture c. 1540–1640,” also by Rachel Moss, frames the Reformation in Ireland as a period of architectural experimentation within restricted circumstances. The process of nationalizing, secularizing, and/or despoiling sites in Ireland was much less systematic than in England, perhaps in part owing to a flooded metals market and a reduced demand for building materials. The author discusses multiple cases in which medieval sites were transformed, including decorative elements stripped for reuse; religious structures that became schools, hospitals, or fortresses; the use of religious sites as homes; naves allowed to fall into ruin while chancels stayed in use as churches; and the continued use of some sites by Catholics, including burial sites. In some examples, the historical connotations of the physical site were transformed by new construction; in others, the reuse of architectural elements suggested continuity or, in the case of buildings adapted for Protestant use, appealed to authority. Parts of buildings stripped for reuse were often the most identifiable Gothic—sculpted elements and window tracery, for example—and it is intriguing to consider how the style remained desirable as a symbol well into the seventeenth century.

Olivia Horsfall Turner’s “Ruin and Reparation: Medieval Parish Churches in Seventeenth-Century and Early Eighteenth-Century Ossory” reevaluates the blame traditionally placed on Cromwell for devastating Ireland’s medieval architectural heritage. With the help of sources such as episcopal visitation records, the Down Survey of 1654–57, and numerous bills addressing the state of churches, Turner describes a more complex situation, with Ossory as a case study: while the general trend in the seventeenth century was toward destruction (69 of 124 churches in the parish were listed as in a good state in 1622, but only 8 of 76 in 1731), Cromwell did not bear all responsibility. Ownership and location of the site as well as the parish’s population and financial state all affected a given site’s condition. Turner notes that symbolic elements such as age or style of a building played little role in its maintenance, typifying the concern with practicality over conservation expected prior to nineteenth-century preservation movements.

The final chapter, Niamh Nic-Ghabhann’s “Irish Architects and the
Restoration of Medieval Buildings, 1835–1904,” addresses some of the ideological issues of restoration in the nineteenth century, a time when antiquarian education had become an expected part of architectural practice, using two contrasted cases: the work of Richard Rolt Brash at Buttevant Priory and the work at St. Multose, Kin- sale, sponsored by the Irish Ecclesiastical Commission (IEC). Brash was informed by his antiquarian background and had a belief in the cultural significance of medi- eval remains; in his restoration at Butte- van, he preserved architectural fragments without trying to restore or complete them. The IEC’s concern was with func- tional restored buildings, as at St. Multose, which underwent three campaigns in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the first two under the oversight of the IEC, followed by a reactionary campaign attempting to revive the church’s authentic- ity. NicGabhann notes how the mixed reaction in the press to the third campaign at St. Multose exemplifies the difficulty of the antiquarian community in maintaining an apolitical position in relation to the preservation of potential national symbols, a challenge she relates to the ongoing division between medieval buildings confined to the realm of history as monuments and medieval buildings continuing in func- tional use.

Considering the scope of the essays, a collective bibliography would have been a helpful addition to the book: the reader just beginning to grasp the subject wants to know where else to look. Regardless, this volume is an intriguing beginning to a more holistic approach to Irish Gothic; it should be of particular note to the reader interested in how historical circumstances can engender specific meanings for style and how those meanings can become increasingly complex, even contradictory, with the passage of time.

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Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout, eds. 
Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium
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For the French theorist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade, hierophany is the physical manifestation of the sacred in an object. The transfigured object is thus imbued with sacral significance yet retains its connection to materiality by remaining an object in the physical world.1 Although Eliade primarily had in mind natural objects like stones and trees (Moses’s burning bush, for example), it is not difficult to see how built forms fit into his rubric. Indeed, given its inherent multiplicity and absence of singular meaning, architecture is well suited to elision with the sacred, particularly when “the sacred” is understood in terms of ritual activity and expe- rience. Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium, edited by Bonna Wescoat and Robert Ousterhout, illuminates the nature of this relationship through twelve wide- ranging and thought-provoking chapters, along with a preface and an afterward. The overarching thrust of the volume is articulated early on by the editors when they note that the built environment is no mere setting or framework within which ritual activity occurs but rather “the archi- tectural setting [functions as] an active agent in the ritual process” (xxiii). This emphasis on the centrality of architecture to the human experience of the sacred grounds the essays of the volume in the spatiotemporal demands of ritual activity and also permits a relative degree of flexi- bility in terms of analytical and interpret- ative approach. Within this malleable framework, however, the built environment almost always takes center stage in a way that refreshingly inverts the typical treatment of architecture as handmaiden to ritual.

The balance of this relationship is taken up in the first chapter, “Material Culture and Ritual: State of the Quest- tion,” wherein Jas Elsner emphasizes the general problems in scholarship on the built environment and ritual, particularly the—perhaps surprising—lack of interdisciplinarity between the fields of anthropology, art history, and archaeology. This is a serious issue and Elsner is right to highlight the problems of such polarized approaches, but we might criticize his subsequent lumping of perspectives into “optimist” and “pessimist” categories as enabling rather than challenging the issue. A further problem is that Elsner does not treat architecture as a distinct element of material culture, one that is far different from the more ephemeral and movable votive and ritual objects populating the sanctuaries and cities of antiquity. In addition, the dominance of the spatial turn does not enter his discussion nor does he consider the roles of place and space—issues that are integral to understanding the capacity of architecture to generate and maintain meaning. While Elsner’s challenges to the “optimist” approach (the notion that it is easy and relatively uncomplicated to reconstruct ritual, and therefore religious belief, from material culture) are well founded, his chapter largely con- tradicts the assertion of the preface that architecture is both a viable and a generative aspect of human experience of the sacred.

Happily, the subsequent chapters, while perhaps occasionally falling prey to Elsner’s maligning “optimist” approach, neverthe- less underscore the important role of archi- tecture in understanding ritual experience. In chapter 2, “Monumental Steps and the Shaping of Ceremony,” Mary Hollinshead persuasively argues for the significance of monumental stairways as both processional venues and theatrical viewing areas, drawing on examples throughout the Aegean and spanning the Archaic to Hellenistic periods. Hollinshead makes broad claims about “agency” with respect to architecture, but this term is not rigorously explicated and leaves the reader with more questions than answers. The generative capacity of built form, on the other hand, is at the heart of chapter 3, “Coming and Going in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, Samothrace.” Here, Wescoat masterfully draws on evidence from architecture, sculpture, ceramics, inscriptions, and texts to present a