

Architectures of gentility in nineteenth-century Ireland

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Ideas of gentility and politeness were central to the elite culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, recent academic debate has queried the usefulness of such terms in demarcating any meaningful boundaries of class.¹ Material cultural – in particular architecture – served to both articulate and enforce social and economic boundaries while at the same time diffusing a taste for such culture to a rising class of middle-income consumers. While the genteel aspirations of the Victorian middle class are visible in the spread of polite suburban housing developments, this essay examines the material equipage of ‘gentility’ – from architecture to landscape – among the lesser gentry and rising class of rural farmers. The cultural relationship between the ‘Big House’, small but polite houses of the minor gentry, and the homes of wealthier tenant farmers remains under explored territory. With some notable exceptions, architectural studies – often concerned with issues of attribution and stylistic development – have tended to focus on larger and better-documented houses where a coherent line of architectural and ornamental development can be retrieved.²

Maurice Craig, in his *Classic Irish houses of the middle size*, commented that ‘the gulf between the ‘Big House’ and the cottage has perhaps been over-emphasized by historians, and too much has been made of the absence of a middle class’.³ The term ‘parish gentry’ has been used to describe those families whose supremacy was merely local, and in the nineteenth century this group included the more affluent merchants, professionals and farmers.⁴ Indeed, the more ubiquitous homes of the minor gentry constituted the ‘Big House’ in most localities and were designed in such a way as to articulate their membership of an elite, however localized that might be. Terms such as ‘seat’ and ‘demesne’, traditionally associated with the upper ranks of the gentry, have been subject to relatively little scrutiny. As I argue below, their broad usage during the nineteenth century denotes an increasingly democratized context for polite culture in Ireland. For this reason, I have used the term ‘architectures’ to describe the scope of domestic buildings that expressed ‘gentility’ in nineteenth-century Ireland.

1 For a general review of the debate, see Lawrence E. Klein, ‘Politeness and the interpretation of the British eighteenth century’, *Historical Journal*, 45:4 (2002), 869–98.

2 For a recent overview of the historiography, see Terence Dooley, *The big houses and landed estates of Ireland: a research guide* (Dublin, 2007), pp 117–18. **3** Maurice Craig, *Classic Irish houses of the middle size* (Dublin, 2006), pp 3–4. **4** Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), p. 180.

Not only is the period defined by aesthetic and, indeed, moral antagonism over style – particularly the Classical v. Gothic debate – but also over scale – cottage, farmhouse, villa and mansion – all of which, in their way, might indicate genteel status.

'A MIDDLE CLASS OF GENTRY'

The notion of gentility was all the more fraught and contested in a country where the ruling class was derived largely from a colonial elite politically and religiously alienated from the general populace.⁵ 'Englishness' long remained a core element in definitions of good taste. Unsurprisingly, the country house in Ireland never assumed the role of national heritage that it did in Victorian England.⁶ More recent attempts to repackage it as such have not gone uncontested.⁷ This unease over elitism, gentility and national identity was palpable when a new Catholic middle class first began to assert itself, as Gustave de Beaumont noted in 1839:

We must not be astonished if aristocratic inclinations display themselves in the middling properties which are gradually being formed in Ireland; there is not a middling proprietor who, at the sight of the privileges attached to the possession of land, is not tempted to enjoy them himself: he is delighted at possessing in his condition some analogy to a noble lord, his country neighbour, whom he hates as his political and religious enemy, but from whom, to convert his hate into love, he probably waits only for a kind smile, or a complimentary recognition . . . Will they persist in their hostile feelings to the privileged, now that their property gives them, besides all political rights, the chance of being named justices of the peace, being summoned on grand juries, sitting on the bench with the aristocracy in petty and quarter sessions?⁸

When did such material aspirations to gentility first emerge among the farming class? Until the 1780s, most farmers had lived in single-storey, vernacular 'cabins' partly due to what Kevin Whelan has described as 'a typically cautious, low-profile mentalité among Catholics'.⁹ He gives the example of the Aylwards in Walsh mountain, who ran a 'dairy empire' and enjoyed a 'gentry-like income' but occupied houses little distinguishable from the peasant.¹⁰ Despite their material invisibility,

⁵ For some discussion on this point, see Patrick Duffy, 'Colonial spaces and sites of resistance: landed estates in nineteenth-century Ireland' in Lindsay J. Proudfoot and Michael M. Roche (eds), *(Dis)placing empire: renegotiating British colonial geographies* (Aldershot, 2005), pp 15–40. ⁶ See Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

⁷ Hugh Maguire, 'Ireland and the house of invented memory' in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Ireland's heritages: critical perspectives on memory and identity* (Aldershot, 2004), pp 153–68.

⁸ Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: social, political and religious* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), p. 248.

⁹ Kevin Whelan, 'An underground gentry', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, 10 (1995), 37. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

there were many small freeholders among this group. Thomas Power records the estimation in 1807 that of the '6,500 freeholders in the county [Tipperary], 5,500 or 84 per cent were Catholics, showing that beneath the level of gentleman the base of the Catholic landed class was wide'.¹¹

In Ireland prior to the nineteenth century, a shared reliance on the vernacular was more likely to bind the lower gentry and wealthier farmers more than any common dabbling in the niceties of architecture. From the seventeenth century, the new Protestant elite had been content to occupy the castles of their dispossessed Catholic predecessors or make do with unpretentious thatched houses,¹² many only beginning to 'quit their cottages' towards the end of the eighteenth century.¹³ This seems particularly true of the lesser gentry. For example, William Roulston notes that although formal architecture makes an appearance among the northern Irish clergy in the early eighteenth century, simple rural residences remained 'commonplace' until much later.¹⁴ According to Toby Barnard, as late as 1790, Co. Down had a commission of the peace of eighty-seven but only forty-eight of those had 'notable seats'.¹⁵ A similar familiarity with the vernacular existed among the gentry of Cork during this period, according to local memory recorded in the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Certainly, among eighteenth-century Catholic middlemen, a strong sense of gentility based on dress, education, pedigree, hospitality and local prestige was often retained within a vernacular architectural tradition. Occasionally, this might assume a hybrid form through the employment of symmetry.¹⁷ The process that saw a widespread move to a consciously formal architecture among the elite is now often difficult to recover. It has been argued that the 'thatched mansions' that characterized the dwellings of well-off farmers and minor gentry in the eighteenth century were often demolished or remodelled beyond recognition, suggesting that the line between vernacular and polite architecture was more assertively drawn as rising agricultural prices (in the second half of the eighteenth century) drove both the construction of towns and the establishment of a more prosperous farming class.¹⁸

11 Thomas Power, *Land, politics and society in eighteenth-century Tipperary* (Oxford, 1993), p. 107. **12** Barry Reilly suggests that a number of the surviving two-storey vernacular dwellings – often five or six bays wide and 'the largest houses in their townlands' – are datable to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. See Barry Reilly, 'Hearth and home: the vernacular house in Ireland from c.1800', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 111C (2011), 197. **13** Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure* (London, 2004), p. 22. **14** W.J. Roulston, 'Accommodating clergymen: Church of Ireland ministers and their houses in the north of Ireland, c.1600–1870' in T.C. Barnard and W.G. Neely (eds), *The clergy of the Church of Ireland, 1000–2000: messengers, watchmen and stewards* (Dublin, 2006), pp 106–27 at p. 119; Roulston also gives the example of the single-storey thatched 'cabin' known as 'Belville', seat of Edward Bayly, treasurer of Co. Down, see p. 117. **15** Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, p. 35. **16** David Dickson, *Old world colony: Cork and south Munster, 1630–1830* (Cork, 2005), p. 529, n. 185. **17** Whelan, 'An underground gentry', 24. **18** Caoimhin Ó Danachair, 'Traditional forms of the dwelling house in Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 102:1 (1972), 91; Kevin Danaher, *Ireland's vernacular architecture* (Dublin, 1975), p. 49; Susan Hood, 'The significance of the villages and small towns in rural Ireland during the

These improvements were reflected in furnishings as well as architecture. Arthur Young, writing in 1776, noted ‘numerous exceptions’ to the generally impoverished cabins of the poor with ‘much useful furniture, and some even superfluous; chairs, tables, boxes, chest of drawers, earthen ware, and in short most of the articles found in a middling English cottage’.¹⁹ These acquisitions, he pointed out, had all been made within the last ten years, which he regarded as a sure sign of a rising national prosperity. The same process was occurring across Britain. In 1825, William Cobbett, writing about England, expressed disgust at the transmutation of the farmer and his family into ‘a species of mock gentleness’ through their acquisition of parlours and genteel furniture.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, it is at a local level, where the paths of landlord, middleman and tenant farmer frequently crossed, that we find the idea of gentility at its most malleable. Yet here, geography played its part. Thomas Power has noted that the northern baronies of Tipperary had far fewer large leaseholders than south Tipperary, where there was a substantial class of gentrified Catholic head tenants – many of whom built country houses indistinguishable from those of the landlord class. For example, Mr Macarthy of Spring House was leasing nine thousand acres in the late 1770s, while another such farmer, James Scully, a well-off grazier, was leasing some fifteen thousand acres in 1796.²¹ In contrast, farms in the northern Tipperary barony of Lower Ormond were far smaller, in the region of five or six hundred acres – and many had no substantial buildings.²² No farmer in the northern Tipperary barony of Ikerrin held more than a hundred acres.²³ Although landownership was certainly used as one of the criteria to define membership of the gentry as a class, vast leaseholds could render any such distinction redundant.²⁴

Testament to these blurred social boundaries, in 1795 the English architect, John Miller, produced in the same volume designs for a ‘gentleman’s house with a farm-yard’ and a ‘genteel farmhouse and offices’, of similar scale and pretension.²⁵ Although clearly some social distinction was intended, it is difficult now to differentiate the two architecturally. However, the occupants of such houses – whatever status they might claim – were clearly distancing themselves from the vernacular traditions

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ in Peter Borsay (ed.), *Provincial towns in early modern England and Ireland: change, convergence and divergence* (Oxford, 2002), pp 241–63 at p. 245; Whelan, ‘An underground gentry’, 38. **19** Arthur Young, *A tour in Ireland* (2 vols, Dublin, 1780), ii, p. 30. **20** Cited in Michael McMordie, ‘Picturesque pattern books and Victorian designers’, *Architectural History*, 18 (1975), 43–59, 109–12, n. 19 at 53–4. **21** Whelan, ‘An underground gentry’, p. 39; Young, *A tour in Ireland*, ii, p. 157. **22** Young, *A tour in Ireland*, vol. 2, p. 227. **23** Power, *Land, politics and society*, pp 113–14. **24** Toby Barnard, ‘The gentrification of eighteenth-century Ireland’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, 12 (1997), 154. While Kevin Whelan has argued for the survival of an ‘underground gentry’ of Catholic former proprietors who maintained archaic gentility within their own tradition, Toby Barnard has pointed to the ‘imported’ nature of both the language used to articulate gentility and the materiality through which it was expressed. **25** John Miller, *The country gentleman’s architect, in a great variety of new designs, for cottages, farm houses, country-houses, villas, lodges for park etc.* (London, 1791), pp 10–13.



of the peasantry. Already in 1801 Charles Coote, writing of Queen's County, observed a 'middle class of gentry', who were engaged in improvement and whose residences were 'handsome, and generally well calculated for good family farm houses'. These he contrasted with the 'hovels' of the peasantry.²⁶

The spread of polite architecture among farmers appears to have been much slower in Ireland than in England, however, and was not apparent to every observer. In 1807, Henry Colt Hoare remarked 'we see no conveniences of sheds, stalling, fenced rick yards &c. as in England; nor is the house of a farmer, renting three of four hundred pounds a year, at all better than many of the labouring poor', a problem he attributed to the insecurity of sub-leasing from avaricious middlemen.²⁷ Edward Wakefield in 1812 attributed the material impoverishment of wealthy farmers to a desire to avoid hearth and window tax.²⁸ One visitor remarked in 1836 that 'the whole surface of England is covered with substantial farm-houses; in Ireland they are scarcely to be seen', a dearth he attributed to the low wages of Irish labourers, reckoned at half that of their English counterparts.²⁹

Inevitably, the quality of housing erected by well-off farmers varied considerably from region to region. Wakefield, despite his more general comments, noted the very fine farmhouses around Gorey, Co. Wexford, all rebuilt with slated roofs since their destruction during the 1798 rebellion.³⁰ As late as 1837, Samuel Lewis recorded that the residences of rich farmers in the region of Kilkenny were 'generally inferior to their means',³¹ while Arthur Atkinson noted that farmers' houses in the county of Carlow were distinguished by iron gates and stone piers, 'an appendage which until my entrance into this county, I did not see attached to concerns of the same character'.³² It is possible that such variation depended on the size and quality of farms available in each region, as noted above in relation to Co. Tipperary.³³ However, statistical evidence from Munster suggests that the period from 1790 to 1840 was an extraordinarily transformative one in terms of residential improvement for the farming class.³⁴ Regional disparities made farmers hard to pin down in terms of class as – in the words of one early twentieth-century commentator – 'an Irish farmer may be anything from a private gentleman on a small scale to a labouring man on a large one'.³⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, farmhouses would vary from 'imposing

26 Charles Coote, *General view of the agriculture and manufactures of the Queen's County* (Dublin, 1801), p. 22. **27** Richard Colt Hoare, *Journal of a tour in Ireland* (London, 1807), pp 306–7. **28** Edward Wakefield, *An account of Ireland, statistical and political* (London, 1812), p. 468. The lack of farmyards and poor state of farm offices contributed to a desire to economize. **29** Baptist Wriothlesley Noel, *Notes of a short tour through the midlands of Ireland in the summer of 1836* (London, 1837), p. 359. **30** Wakefield, *An account of Ireland*, p. 409. **31** Samuel Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1837), ii, p. 108. **32** Arthur Atkinson, *Irish tourist* (Dublin, 1815), p. 406. **33** For a broader view of the regional variations in the quality of housing by county in the nineteenth century, see W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), pp 271–2. **34** Dickson, *Old world colony*, p. 317. **35** Robert Lynd, *Home life in Ireland* (London, 1909), p. 11.



stone-finished dwellings, fitted out with pianos and Victorian furniture, down to small two-roomed and even one-roomed cottages, white-washed, and with thatched roofs ...'³⁶

INTERROGATING THE 'BIG HOUSE'

A 'democratization of aesthetics' from the late eighteenth century saw the discourse on landscape and architecture open up to those without means to build on an extensive scale.³⁷ Rousseau's celebration of rural simplicity had elevated the status of the humble cottage and revived the popularity of indigenous place names.³⁸ Gentility was defined not by building alone but through participation in aesthetic discourse, allowing those on the fringes of the gentry to pass judgment on the taste of their social and economic superiors. Stephen Bending has spoken of the 'battles for control over socio-aesthetic taste' that emerges in the second-half of the eighteenth century in a range of literature produced beyond the confines of the patrician elite.³⁹ In this guise, Arthur Atkinson, an impoverished King's County Protestant whose *Irish tourist* was published in 1815, was often derogatory about the lack of aesthetic judgment in the design of larger houses and demesnes he visited. Like other educated but impecunious travellers, Atkinson took pleasure in talking down to the upper ranks of the gentry, often giving detailed instructions on how their demesnes might be improved. High walls built to inspire awe could be quickly pulled asunder by a disapproving stroke of the pen – and one wonders how many campaigns of rebuilding in the early 1800s were prompted by some slight in a tourist guidebook. The enlargement of Oak Park, Co. Carlow, in the early 1830s⁴⁰ came in the wake of Atkinson's comment that the house was 'neat but not extensive' and his dismissal of its eight-hundred-acre demesne – enclosed by a ten-foot-high wall – as 'completely destitute' of a decent prospect.⁴¹ Another travel writer, later in the century, criticized the Kildare seat of the earl of Mayo for having 'a low situation' and a view 'greatly confined' before recommending 'a splendid site not many perches from the front door'.⁴² The seat of the Barons Courtown was likewise 'confined ... [and] almost smothered in the trees, which prevents the free circulation of air'.⁴³

36 *Ibid.*, pp 15–17. **37** Stephen Bending, 'One among the many: popular aesthetics, polite culture and the country house landscape' in Dana Arnold (ed.), *The Georgian country house: architecture, landscape and society* (Stroud, 2003), pp 61–78 at p. 63. **38** See Arthur Atkinson's discussion of this revival in the context of a broader Celtic revival in *The Irish tourist*, p. 229. **39** Bending, 'One among the many', p. 63. **40** See Ann-Martha Rowan, *Dictionary of Irish architects*, <http://www.dia.ie>, accessed 10 June 2011. **41** Atkinson, *The Irish tourist*, p. 369. **42** James Godkin and John A. Walker, *The new handbook of Ireland* (Dublin, 1871), p. 223. **43** *Ibid.*, p. 196.



'SMALL BEAUTIES'

Participation in aesthetic discourse by lower-ranking gentry and professionals was part of a broader diffusion of genteel culture in the early nineteenth century, seen also in the 'democratisation of fashions' wherein 'the lady's maid could dress in the style of her mistress'.⁴⁴ This cultural interchange was not one-way only, for at the same time that the lower economic ranks sought the traditional trappings of gentility, the elite also took a close interest in the material culture of the peasantry – albeit in an idealized form. The landscape of early nineteenth-century Ireland was something of an architectural dressing up box; indeed, the line between well-intentioned improvement and picturesque fantasy was often a fine one. The contemporary popularity for the *cottage ornée* and *ferme ornée* – sometimes in highly ostentatious forms, such as the Butler's Swiss Cottage at Cahir – created a sylvan refuge for an idle elite rather than a better class of farmhouse.

When foisted on tenant farmers and estate workers, the picturesque style was not always well-received or understood. At the start of the nineteenth century, Charles Coote expressed astonishment that the peasantry seemed to prefer their own vernacular dwellings to those of their improving landlord.⁴⁵ Yet small farmers and estate labourers could hardly have wished to celebrate the faux-bucolic lifestyle dreamed of by their masters. In 1825, James Brewer, the travel writer, castigated Mr Jefferyes of Blarney for over-embellishing the dwellings of his tenants when building the town of Blarney, arguing that 'such superfluous circumstances of embellishment were derided by the rich, and viewed with indifference by the tenants and the poor' leading to a state of dilapidation.⁴⁶

Among the lesser gentry, cottage architecture eased the material expectations involved in housing impoverished maiden aunts and displaced dowagers, while disguising the reality that many of them had, in the previous century, been served by houses of a less intentionally vernacular character. Despite the air of aristocratic indulgence, designs for cottage architecture were often propagated by lower middle-class professionals who, 'within a modest compass, made the genteel life possible by their arrangement'.⁴⁷ Lewis' *Topographical dictionary* of 1837 includes the thatched, mud-built – yet symmetrical – house (fig. 1.1) of the local Catholic curate among a group of 'seats' in the parish of Jamestown, Queen's County – a group that includes a large neoclassical mansion by William Vitruvius Morrison.⁴⁸ Clearly a remodelling of an earlier vernacular dwelling, its name, 'Abbeyview Cottage', cleverly appropriated the genteel language of the picturesque to make a virtue of its humble scale and materials.⁴⁹ The name also asserted a visual relationship with the fanciful Gothick

⁴⁴ Mairead Dunlevy, cited in Claudia Kinmonth, *Rural interiors in art* (London, 2006), p. 50.

⁴⁵ Coote, *General view of the agriculture and manufactures of the Queen's County*, p. 144.

⁴⁶ James Brewer, *The beauties of Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1826), ii, p. 379. ⁴⁷ Michael McMordie, 'Picturesque pattern books and Victorian designers', 50. ⁴⁸ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, p. 248. ⁴⁹ The owner, Michael Dempsey, has ascertained an early modern date for the building using carbon dating (pers. comm.).





1.1 Abbeyview Cottage, Co. Laois (photograph by the author, with thanks to Michael Dempsey).

revival mansion of the earl of Drogheda, Moore Abbey, built in the 1760s – reducing the aristocratic pile to an eye-catcher in the Revd Maher’s masterly field of view. In this way, visual conversations opened up between cottage and castle in a newly shared cultural landscape.

More so than the strong farming class from which they were drawn, Catholic priests had the education and leisure time to engage with art and architecture. Another Queen’s County cleric of this period, the Revd James Walsh, was remembered as ‘a man of genius, taste and learning, painter, sculptor, designer’.⁵⁰ Frequently classed among the gentry, priests in wealthy parishes often occupied quite substantial houses⁵¹ with genteel interiors. A painting of 1878 shows the high-ceilinged parlour and marble fireplace with overmantel mirror that exemplified the plush gentility of the Irish priest’s house. As Claudia Kinmonth has observed, these features provide a

⁵⁰ Monument on south side of nave of Durrow RC church. ⁵¹ The more common view of the Catholic priest is perhaps that relayed by a correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Jan. 1880, who described a Fr Conway in Ballina, Co. Mayo, as ‘a lodger in one of the larger farmhouses adjoining the road’: see T.M. Healy, *Why is there an Irish land question and Irish Land League?* (Dublin, 1881), p. 73. Those priests who could raise money to build new chapels might also raise funds for a new parochial house. Blake’s ‘Father Peter Morrissey’, resident in a large parish, makes the transition to ‘a comfortable glebe-house’, which afforded ‘more ample accommodation than the modest two rooms in a farmhouse heretofore occupied by the parish priest’ – see his *Pictures from Ireland*, p. 55.



1.2 Moneycleare House, Co. Laois (image reproduced courtesy of the NIAH).

‘studied contrast to the simple poverty of [a] barefoot girl and her mother, who bends in deference to the priest’.⁵² Such an interior might be found in the home of the Revd James Delaney, resident at Moneycleare House on the outskirts of Ballinacill, Co. Laois, in 1850. Approached down a winding avenue, a genteel flight of stone steps accessed an attractive fanlit, Gibbsian door. A two-storey servants’ wing extended to one side (fig. 1.2).⁵³ Similarly, in the small village of Puckaun, Co. Tipperary, the genteel and picturesquely titled demesne of ‘Riverview’ was the mid-nineteenth-century residence of a parish priest who leased it from a member of the local gentry.⁵⁴ Parochial houses built later in the century, often in towns and close to the church, shed something of this earlier glamour. While they enjoyed the trappings of a genteel lifestyle, priests were answerable to those who paid for it. There were at least two instances in Carlow in the early nineteenth century of outraged parishioners reclaiming parochial houses from the relatives of deceased priests. In Clonegal, they literally dragged the secular ‘heirs’ of the priest out of the house.⁵⁵

Although every type of building from the castle to the cottage might articulate some notion of polite living, the minor gentry – particularly the Protestant clergy who built extensively in the early nineteenth century – followed a reserved architectural template for gentility: the symmetrical astylar block, two storeys high, three

⁵² Kinmonth, *Rural interiors in art*, p. 159. ⁵³ <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation>, accessed 15 June 2011. ⁵⁴ Daniel Grace, *Portrait of a parish: Monsea and Killoodiernan* (Nenagh, 1996), p. 172. ⁵⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 29 Oct. 1842.





1.3 A typical glebe house near Terryglass, Co. Tipperary
(image reproduced courtesy of the NIAH).

bays wide, with fanlit doorway (fig. 1.3). The influence of neoclassicism and theories of landscape design recommended a three-dimensional articulation of the house as ‘villa’ within a landscape. Regular fenestration on at least three sides allowed views out into the free-style parkland – popularized by Capability Brown – which in turn framed views back towards the house. This was a departure from their more rigidly oriented early eighteenth-century precursors, which sat in gardens of geometrically designed groves and parterres – more expensive and harder to imitate by those in straitened circumstances. Inside, the simple plan of dining room and drawing room flanking a narrow hall was nothing new, but presented the rising middle class with a formula for architectural respectability.

Aspiring farmers extend the life of this villa style well beyond the nineteenth century, and Atkinson noted with approval the ‘growth of taste’ among this class. ‘It would be utterly incompatible within the limits of this volume’, he remarked, ‘to introduce to public notice, all the rising villas of this kind which mark the improvement of the country’.⁵⁶ He repeatedly favoured what he called ‘small beauties’, which

⁵⁶ Atkinson, *The Irish tourist*, p. 307. Cloth merchants in the north of England had similarly clung to the old-fashioned style of the ‘Tudor manor’ well into the seventeenth century due to its enduring associations with the landed classes – see Nicholas Cooper and Marianne Majerus, *English manor houses* (London, 1990), p. 88; Patrick and Maureen Shaffrey comment that this classical type, generally denoting a farm of over a hundred acres, was still being built by farmers as late as the 1950s – see their *Irish countryside buildings* (Dublin, 1985), pp 41–3.



he equated to his own 'standard of rural excellence'.⁵⁷ The 'demesne' was no longer exclusive to the 'Big House' and Atkinson employed the term at every scale, including a series of 'cottages in the English style' on the Cosby estate of Stradbally, to each of which, he remarked, 'a few acres of demesne are attached'.⁵⁸ While landlords were often the sponsors of such domestic improvement among their tenantry, these improvements are necessarily described with a vocabulary borrowed from the Big House (around which the discourse of improvement had first arisen). Certainly, an air of cultivation and maturity in the plantations around smaller houses hinted at the gentility of their residents, sometimes making their social status difficult to ascertain. In the 1870s, Godkin and Walker commented that, in addition to the beautiful mansions of the Offaly gentry, there were also 'substantial dwelling houses sheltered by old trees, showing either that the owner is a smaller proprietor or that he or his forefathers had a long lease'.⁵⁹ A few decades later, an observer described such a dwelling as having 'little plantations of trees around it, and an orchard and flowerbeds, and often a lawn for games', the houses 'stone finished and four-square and roofed with slate'.⁶⁰ To what extent landlords were involved in improvements among more prosperous tenants is uncertain, though there is evidence to suggest that their influence was more limited in this sphere.⁶¹

Although farmers were what Atkinson termed the 'useful class of the community', he encouraged them to cultivate genteel surroundings for themselves. Commenting favourably on the 'villa' of a farmer named Morris near Bray, Co. Wicklow, he suggested that utilitarian farm equipment be kept out of view of the visitor approaching the house and trees used to screen farm activity. The surroundings of a farmhouse could, in classic villa style, be divided into the genteel and the utilitarian.⁶² Elsewhere he described the 'demesne' of a farmhouse (fig. 1.4) on the estate of the absentee Lord Stanhope, and lauded the house itself in the following enthusiastic terms:

... a neat white-washed edifice of about thirty-six feet by twenty-four – it might have contained two small parlours, a hall, pantry and kitchen, on the ground floor, and as many apartments above them; but certainly not much under or over – its extent was exactly adequate to the accommodation of a family of taste and small fortune, and the garden, offices and demesne exactly corresponded with this – all compact and in good order, bore the aspect of

⁵⁷ Atkinson, *The Irish tourist*, pp 174–5. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 319. ⁵⁹ Godkin and Walker, *A new handbook of Ireland*, p. 237. ⁶⁰ Lynd, *Home life*, p. 38. ⁶¹ Patrick and Maura Shaffrey argue that 'the stronger tenant farmer and minor gentry were responsible for more improvements in agricultural techniques than many a great landlord': see *Irish countryside buildings*, pp 41–3. Was the same true for architectural improvements outside the sphere of the estate town? At a lower social level, Patrick Bowe has shown that some nineteenth-century manuals for cottage improvement were aimed directly at cottagers themselves – see P. Bowe, 'The traditional Irish farmhouse and cottage garden', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, 3 (2000), 77–101. ⁶² Atkinson, *Irish tourist*, p. 606.





I.4 Valleyfield House, Co. Laois (photograph by the author, with thanks to the Delaney family).

comfort; but save one or two objects in the little domestic landscape, nothing had the appearance of grandeur.⁶³

He asserted that it was ‘one of the prettiest little villas which I have yet seen in this part of Ireland’, recommending gentlemen travelling through the area to visit it. It was, he said, ‘the epitome of English neatness and beauty’. Atkinson here uses terms like ‘demesne’, ‘lodge’, ‘villa’, ‘ornament’, ‘offices’, ‘garden’ and ‘lawn’, and the occupants he describes as people of ‘taste’. Although he was unsure whether the small lake close to the house was intentionally ornamental or not, given the farm’s proximity to Heywood, one of the country’s most important landscape gardens – which it overlooked – it is certainly feasible that it was.

Keen not only to describe the improvements and tastes of the humbler classes, but also to include them among his readers, Atkinson created four separate ranks of subscriber, each paying a separate price. One such subscriber he recounts seeking out in a decent-looking cottage, poor, Protestant and in the linen trade – and a ‘respectable’ member of society.⁶⁴ We can detect in Atkinson’s enthusiasm for ‘small beauties’ the contemporary picturesque taste for the rural idyll and an evangelical fervour for honest living. There is also a criticism of a purely materialist notion of ‘improvement’. He wrote:

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 175. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.



I connect every idea of comfort ... with a neat lodge and demesne, in a neighbourhood highly cultivated and improved, but cultivated and improved in a sense much more important and extensive than is conceived necessary by some of those who have been placed by public suffrage in the first class of taste and correct judgment.⁶⁵

'ESQUIRES' AND 'GENTLEMEN'

Deciding who exactly qualified as a 'gentleman' in an Ireland where political and religious supremacy was increasingly contested was a difficult task. Certainly, by the nineteenth century, many conservatives across Britain viewed the term 'gentleman' as having been thoroughly debased.⁶⁶ As a result, the somewhat archaic label of 'esquire' took on a new importance in distinguishing the established gentry from those regarded as their social inferiors. Various forms of nineteenth-century literature carefully pursued this distinction. In describing the provincial Tipperary town of Nenagh, *Slater's Directory* of 1846 included an extensive list of esquires among the 'nobility, gentry and clergy' but also a smaller number labelled merely as 'gent' – mostly distinguished by their Irish names – Mr Consedine, Mr Flinn, Mr Kennedy, Mr Murphy, Mr Talbot. In contrast to the 'esquires', these men had addresses in the town rather than the surrounding country.⁶⁷ This is not to suggest that this class was merely urban, but rather that those members of the lower gentry residing outside the town were omitted from the list. Their influence was clearly judged to be more geographically limited than that of the 'esquires'.

The distinction was by no means an Irish one alone. In 1842, *The Spectator* had, in an article entitled 'Dilemmas of gentility', described the attempts of jurors in Chelsea to move from those listed as 'gentlemen' to those listed as 'esquire'.⁶⁸ Jury lists also raised eyebrows in Ireland. John O'Brien of Hogan's Pass, Co. Tipperary, occupant of a small but genteel two-storey, five-bay house on the outskirts of Nenagh, had his status downgraded from 'esquire' in 1841 to 'gent' in 1845.⁶⁹ Edward Flinn, 'gent', occupied a modest but polite residence – named grandly as 'Fox Hall' – outside Newport, Co. Tipperary, and appeared as both 'esquire' and 'gent' in separate publications.⁷⁰ Only those who held the rank of 'esquire' (loosely classed as landowners, bankers and merchants) were eligible for inclusion in special juries and an inquiry into the status of jurors in 1867 showed that many returned themselves as 'gentlemen' rather than 'esquire' to avoid the more onerous duties of the latter class, while describing themselves as 'esquire' in town directories. Only the better sort of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202. ⁶⁶ For a broad overview of these changes, see Penelope J. Corfield, 'The rivals: landed and other gentlemen' in N.B. Harte and R. Quinault (eds), *Land and society in Britain, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 1996), pp 1–33. ⁶⁷ *Slater's national commercial directory of Ireland* (London, 1846), p. 295. ⁶⁸ *Spectator*, 15 (1842), 1236. ⁶⁹ *Jurors (Tipperary)* [380], HC 1844, xlv, 18; *Jurors (Tipperary)* [393], HC 1846, xlii, 34. ⁷⁰ See *Slater's directory* (1846), p. 301; *Jurors (Tipperary)* [393], HC 1846, xlii, 33–4.



tradesmen, such as wine merchants and builders, were deemed eligible to sit on grand juries – but not shopkeepers. It was decided that the only means of establishing the true class of any individual was by reference to the character and location of his house.⁷¹ On paper, houses could be just as misleading as anything else, as their names were often more grandiose than their appearance would justify. While house names with ‘mount’, ‘park’ and ‘lodge’ proliferate among those listed as ‘esquire’ in the returns of jurors for Tipperary (North Riding), such genteel names were also adopted by those only granted the status of ‘gent’: ‘William Ryan of Mount Alt’, ‘John M. Fletcher of Shannon Hall’, ‘Obediah Holland of Mount Falcon’, ‘William Vere Cruise of Mount William’, ‘Edward Flinn of Fox Hall’ and ‘William Nagle of Fortfield’ were all classed among the lower gentry.⁷² Although many of these ‘seats’ were significantly smaller than those occupied by the local ‘squires’, they also cultivated a certain gentility in their architecture and surroundings. Mount Alt, for example, was modestly scaled yet occupied a politely laid-out parkland with an orchard to the rear. Very similar in size is the equally grandly titled ‘Shannon Hall’ (fig. 1.5), where the orchard out-scaled the parkland. However, some houses of this class, such as Garryvenus – the seat of William Fogarty, which neighboured Mount Alt – made do with just an orchard.⁷³ The maintenance of such social division in the classification of the gentry was inevitably a source of friction. In 1850, a Galway town councillor and poor law guardian ‘lost several of his teeth from the blows of a guest, at his hospitable table . . . , in a dispute about the gentility of their respective families’.⁷⁴

Such disparities in material status were more difficult to disguise in towns where there was often a readily apparent distinction in the architectural quality of certain streets. Slater’s directories of Irish towns from the 1840s give an indication of the urban localities most favoured by the patrician class, such as Nenagh’s Summerhill, where the architecture parallels that of Georgian Dublin, with houses reaching four and five storeys high, embellished with fanlit doorways and stone steps to their entrances (fig. 1.6). Popular with those ranked ‘esquire’, the clergy (Catholic and Protestant), wealthy professionals and tradesmen, none of the town’s lower ranking ‘gentlemen’ were found among the tenants.⁷⁵ Similarly, zones of upmarket architecture served to delineate status in many other small Irish towns in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The neighbouring village of Borrisokane featured terraced villas in the polite ‘modern’ style on its south side, totally distinct from the townhouses in the centre. Mountrath, Queen’s County, a small town of similar size,

⁷¹ *Reports from committees: special and common juries* [425], HC 1867, ix, 32. ⁷² *Jurors (Tipperary)* [393], HC 1846, xlii, 33–4. ⁷³ See first-edition OS map. ⁷⁴ *Nenagh Guardian*, 20 Apr. 1850. ⁷⁵ Residing at Summer Hill, Nenagh, during the mid-1840s were ten members of the gentry and clergy (of both denominations), six attorneys, one barrister, one doctor, two architects, two building contractors, three carpenters, three stone masons, five schools or academies, two land agents, two corn dealers, one newspaper, two public houses, one saddler, one shopkeeper and one baker, one shoemaker, one straw bonnet-maker, one tailor. See 1846 *Slater’s directory* (1846), pp 295–8.



1.5 Shannon Hall, Co. Tipperary, with remodelled windows
(image reproduced courtesy of Peter Clarke).

also had a series of polite villas on its north side; its south side, in contrast, featured small two-storey, two-bay labourers cottages. Unsurprisingly, these polite areas tended to be closer to the Protestant church – except in Nenagh, where the church was at the opposite end of the town until moved to the town's genteel quarter c.1850. Urban wealth increasingly spread outwards in suburban demesnes surrounding towns and villages in the same region, a pattern common in other parts of the country. Lindsay Proudfoot, in his study of the 'Big House' in Co. Tyrone during the nineteenth century, described the clusters of notably small demesnes around provincial towns, as part of a 'process of socially driven land purchase by petty urban capitalists'.⁷⁶ The superficial trappings of landownership – the Big House, demesne, gate lodge etc. – clearly had a role in articulating claims to genteel identity among this class, despite their dependence on trade and commerce.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Lindsay Proudfoot, 'Place and mentalité: the 'Big House' and its locality in Co. Tyrone' in Charles Dillon and Henry A. Jefferies (eds), *Tyrone: history and society* (Dublin, 2000), p. 511. ⁷⁷ David Dickson has commented on this 'glittering allure' of landed gentility around Cork, arguing that 'however important merchants may have been in the great economic transformation, the dominant element in the region's power structure remained the county gentry'. See Dickson, *Old world colony*, pp 170, 421.





1.6 Summerhill, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary (photograph by the author).

LANDLORDS AND TENANTS

Lewis' *Topographical dictionary* of 1837 expanded the parameters of gentility considerably to include prosperous Catholic farming families. We find Clopook House near Luggacurren, Co. Laois, described as the 'seat' of the Catholic Mahon family (fig. 1.7), who rented a 247-acre farm from a local Protestant clergyman. The family were also freeholders of almost four hundred acres at a value £176 per annum, partly leased to fourteen separate tenants.⁷⁸ Built in 1821, the house is very clearly distinct from the vernacular dwellings of their tenants, having a symmetrical two-storey façade and an emphatically genteel block-and-start doorway of limestone with fanlight.⁷⁹ Similar in size and character was the 'seat' of their neighbour John Dunne of Raheennahown, a 'gentleman of extensive means', who leased 1,300 acres from the marquess of Lansdown.⁸⁰ The Raheennahown demesne was distinguished from its

⁷⁸ <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation>, accessed 12 June 2011. ⁷⁹ The house has been dated by a scrap of newspaper discovered by the present owner behind the skirting, recounting the coronation of George IV. ⁸⁰ Virginia Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006), p. 87.

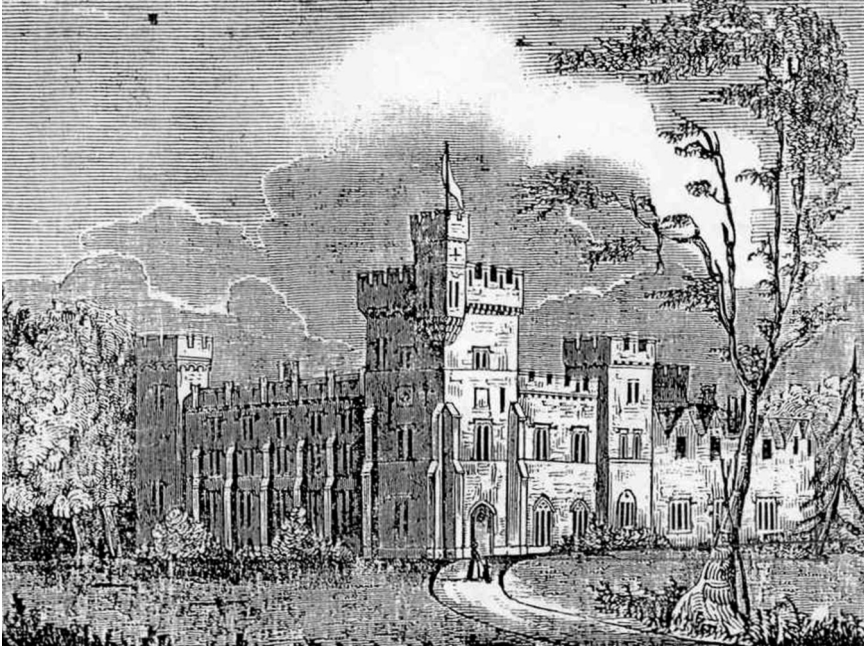


1.7 Clopook House, Co. Laois (photograph by the author).

neighbour by its gate lodge built in the Tudor Revival style. Tenants with similarly sized holdings but more aristocratic pretensions could build on a much more lavish scale and in more exuberant style. The Lenigan family, who leased 1,600 acres from the earl of Portarlington in Co. Tipperary, in the early 1800s built a large castellated mansion (fig. 1.8) to advertise their descent from the noble Gaelic family of O’Fogarty.⁸¹ Like most castellated houses in Ireland, it subscribed to the ‘English style of architecture’ in a line with accepted notions of genteel taste.⁸² A popular novel of 1823 made fun of such pretensions, referring to ‘the Fogartys of Castle Fogarty, as they now choose to designate themselves’, while in the 1840s, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* attacked them as impoverished ‘castellated gentry’. Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, made ‘Lord Castle-Fogarty’ an acquaintance of ‘that tattling old harridan, Peggy O’Dowd’. Lady Morgan, on the other hand, compared their gentility favourably against that of upstart English baronets who had made their fortunes in industry.⁸³

81 <http://www.landedestates.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=3359>, accessed 10 Jun 2011; *Dublin Penny Journal*, 4:183 (1836), 249. **82** *The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland* (Dublin, 1846), p. 361. **83** Miss Cramp, *Isabel St Albe: or, Vice and virtue* (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1823), i, p. 166; Andrew Tierney, ‘Noble Gaelic identity in medieval and modern Ireland’, *Virtus: Jaarboek voor Adelsgeschiedenis/Yearbook of the History of the Nobility*, 16 (2009), 168; See G. Saintsbury (ed.), *Miscellaneous contributions to Punch by William Makepeace Thackeray, 1843–54* (Oxford, n.d. [1917]), pp 138–53; William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York, 1848), p. 60;





1.8 Castle Fogarty, Co. Tipperary (*Dublin Penny Journal*, 6 Feb. 1836).

While architectural grandeur might invoke snide remarks from certain quarters, a family's gentility might equally be undermined by their status as tenants rather than landowners. The McCutcheons of Kilmore, Co. Tipperary, occupants of a polite dwelling house on 157 acres, suffered the indignity of having their chattels seized during the Land War. Their absentee English landlord, Colonel Maberley, expressed an extraordinary degree of contempt for assertive tenants of this class, wishing to reduce another local Protestant family of gentleman farmers, the Dags, to the poor house:

The building I shall burn down, and let the land run waste to recover the fertility, of which, no doubt, owing to your style of farming, you have pretty well deprived it. I have few wants, no debts, no family and a good English income. The loss would be a mere nothing to me, and I shall have the satisfaction of punishing you, and, I trust, rendering you for life an inmate of the Nenagh Union.⁸⁴

Toby Barnard has observed similar attempts to demote the pretensions of genteel tenants during the previous century – see *Making the grand figure*, p. 38; Lady Morgan, *The princess, or the beguine* (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1835), ii, p. 66. **84** *Nenagh Guardian*, 31 Aug. 1881.

Much more substantial families, such as the Dunnes of Raheennahown, were evicted during the Plan of Campaign in March of 1887 to set an example to smaller tenants.⁸⁵ The trappings of architectural gentility were therefore no barrier to experiences more commonly associated with the thatched cottage.

Tensions between the lower and upper gentry came to the fore in a widely publicized lawsuit taken by Michael Kelly of Mirehill, Co. Galway, in 1843. An occupier of a modest dwelling on a leasehold of 272 acres, Kelly had been disqualified as winner of a race in Athlone when Moore of Moore Hall asserted that he was not a gentleman. Kelly successfully sued for the return of the £55 trophy in a court case that saw both sides grapple with the definition of gentility. Although it was asserted in the evidence that Mr Kelly's wife did not receive visits from the upper ranks of the Galway gentry, the case was ultimately decided in his favour by virtue of his family's inclusion in *Burke's guide*.⁸⁶ Sydney Owenson's Celtic Revival romances had glamorized the pedigrees of the impoverished native gentry, who, from the 1830s, were received with notable enthusiasm into this well-known register of genteel families. Concerned with the notion of 'the house' in its genealogical and material form, *Burke's guide* vied with earlier books such as Lodge and Debrett's to define the parameters of gentility not just in Ireland but throughout Britain and the empire. Here, the antiquity of three branches of the Galway O'Kellys was prominently displayed. Its writers – several generations of the Burke family of Elm Hall, Co. Tipperary – were provincial Irish Catholics who earned a living as lawyers and genealogists and were anciently connected to clans such as the Kellys by marriage.⁸⁷ They boasted an ancestor in the Austrian service and proclaimed themselves descended from the O'Reillys, 'Princes of Brefny', in the female line, a pedigree decidedly out of kilter with the mainstream Protestant establishment in Ireland.⁸⁸ 'Elm Hall', like Mirehill, was of decidedly humble scale.⁸⁹ A short avenue from the road led to a modestly scaled house with a walled garden to the rear and a small park to the front. In material terms, the Burkes existed at the very margins of the class they sought to define – a fact obscured by the publication of their books in London.

This Irish Catholic background may explain why they sought to promote pedigree over material wealth as the true measure of gentility and why they could be quite dismissive of new English and Cromwellian blood of more recent vintage. The real aristocracy of Ireland, they explained in one edition, was to be found in very low

⁸⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 24 Aug. 1881 and 31 Aug. 1881; Crossman, *Politics and pauperism*, p. 87; see also Leigh-Ann Coffey, *The planters of Luggacurran* (Dublin, 2006), p. 20. ⁸⁶ For the Kelly leasehold, see Griffiths Valuation (www.askaboutireland.ie). For an account of the squabble, see *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, 15 (1844), 264; see also Tierney, 'Noble Gaelic identity', 168. ⁸⁷ John Burke, *A general and heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire* (2 vols, 1832), ii, p. 248; Joseph Jackson Howard and Frederick Arthur Crisp, *Visitation of Ireland* (London, 1973), pp 23–4. ⁸⁸ John Burke (ed.), *The Patrician* (London, 1848), v, p. 501. ⁸⁹ The scale of the house and garden is visible on the first-edition OS map. The house was demolished about twenty years ago according to the present owner (pers. comm.).

places – the Old English and Gaelic Irish. Dispossession and exile might therefore be worn as badges of the old Irish family.⁹⁰ The Burkes' close neighbours, the Aylmers, who lived at the very small and remote Derry House, Rathcabbin, Co. Tipperary, were also representative of this class. Although their current 'seat' was very insubstantial, they appeared in *Burke's guide* as 'the Aylmers of Lyons', the large Kildare estate they had sold in the previous century to the woollen manufacturer in Dublin who later became Lord Cloncurry.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

The spread of polite architecture and landscape in rural Ireland during the nineteenth century reflected the growing social and political confidence of the middle classes. Already by the late eighteenth century, polite consumer goods were making an impact in rural Ireland, a process accelerated by the eradication of smaller holdings in the post-Famine years.⁹² Terms such as 'seat', 'demesne' and 'villa' were applied quite far down the economic scale and sweeping avenues, gate houses and fanlit doorways were no longer the preserve of the landlord class. Tenants on even relatively small acreages appropriated a visible gentility in parallel with their newfound political and social power. Catholic priests, in the years following emancipation, similarly acquired – at least in richer parishes – the material trappings of the landlord class. Fine parlours or drawing rooms asserted the new liberty of the Catholic Church in the same way as ambitious programmes of church building by fashionable architects. The contemporary taste for polite architecture on the small scale – cottages and villas – accommodated the aspirations of small landowners on the fringes of the gentry. Those with aristocratic pretensions but who were unable to build grandly could find refuge in *Burke's guide* and it is revealing that this authoritative social register, which was ostensibly a prop of the Protestant ascendancy, emerged from the ranks of the Irish Catholic professional class. Certainly, such claims to gentility were more assertively made as the spread of formal architecture and the democratization of elite culture saw the lines between prosperous farmer, middleman and landlord increasingly blurred.

⁹⁰ Tierney, 'Noble Gaelic identity in medieval and modern Ireland', 167. ⁹¹ Sir Bernard Burke, *Genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1879), p. 55. ⁹² For these broader improvements, see Alan Gailey, 'Vernacular dwellings of Clogher Diocese', *Clogher Record*, 9:2 (1977), 207; Danachair, 'Traditional forms of the dwelling house in Ireland', 91.