



Building Victorian Dublin: Meade & Son and the expansion of the city

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At the dawn of the Victorian age, Dublin was a comparatively small city, clustered around a medieval heart, its municipal boundary marked by a series of roads and canals built the century before. Dublin's Georgian city was essentially complete, with its grand squares and streetscapes of red-brick terraces. The influences of the Fitzwilliam and Gardiner estates had ensured that development was focused to the east of the city, both north and south of the river. But on the west side, large tracts of undeveloped land lay wide open, dotted with market gardens and suburban villages (fig. 2.1).

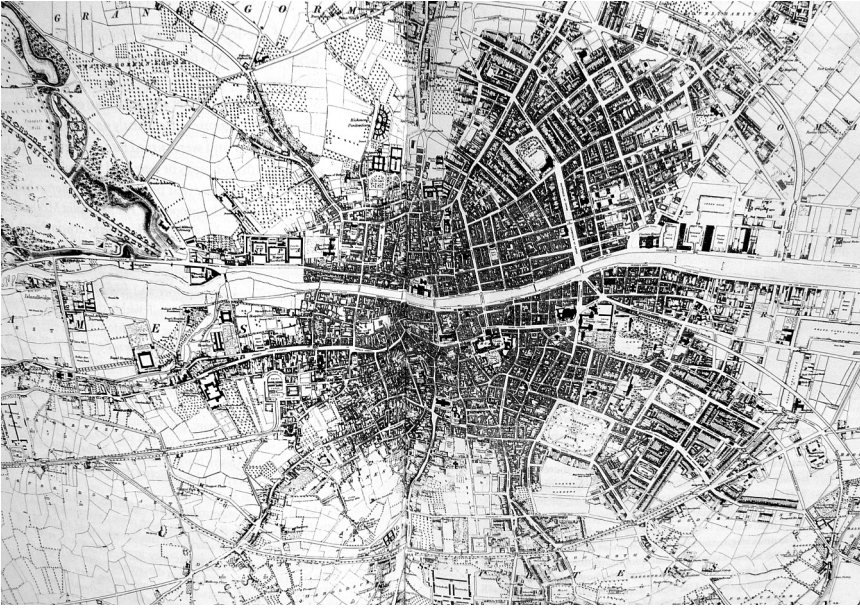
This was a city on the verge of major expansion. During the nineteenth century, Dublin's population increased by over 43 per cent as the city expanded to form new residential suburbs.¹ Speculative developers entered the frame, carving out new streets in empty fields, both inside and outside the canals. A growing middle class sought refuge in these new areas, away from the disease and overcrowding that characterized Dublin by the mid-nineteenth century. Out of this context emerged a new house form, as a high-density urban building model gave way to one more suitable to a suburban context. Today, Dublin's Victorian architecture extends across a vast area from the city to the surrounding county. The level of architectural sophistication and the quality of materials and craftsmanship are testament to the skills and status of their creators. This essay explores the role of one of these protagonists – the firm of Michael Meade & Son, a prolific family of Dublin builders. The Meades emerged in the post-Famine period to forge new business opportunities in a rapidly changing city. Part of a rising Catholic elite, they expanded their building empire until it became one of the city's largest employers. How did their entrepreneurial spirit and drive help to shape the ever-shifting nineteenth-century urban landscape?

BEGINNINGS

Born in Dublin to a Catholic family in 1814, Michael Meade first appeared on the scene in the 1840s as a carpenter and builder in Townsend Street, to the north of Trinity College. By 1843, he was insolvent, but he must have recouped his losses fairly quickly, as within two years he was back in business at the same address.² From

¹ Mary Daly, *Dublin, the deposed capital* (Cork, 1984), p. 3. ² *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Oct.





2.1 Dublin, 1837 (© Ordnance Survey Ireland/Government of Ireland, copyright permit no. MP 0004712).

the outset, Meade was active politically, campaigning for Catholic rights and the repeal of the Union. His earliest recorded project was the Turkish Baths at Lincoln Place in 1858, followed by two houses in Rathgar designed by the architect Rawson Carroll. Meade began to benefit from a golden age of church building, as the lifting of anti-Catholic legislation enabled the clergy to commission major works to cater to a burgeoning laity.³ He built up an ecclesiastical client base, commencing with the Passionist monastery at Mount Argus for the renowned church architect James Joseph McCarthy. He also began work on the first of many public projects: in 1858, he broke ground for a new building to the rear of the Four Courts designed by James Higgins Owen, architect to the Board of Works.

Clearly, a growing enterprise such as this needed to source large quantities of building materials. By the end of the 1850s, Meade was in the process of building a sawing, planing and moulding mill at Great Brunswick Street (present day Pearse Street). A carpenter by trade, it was a natural fit for Meade, but it would also provide him with an important material resource for his burgeoning building empire. The premises were located on a large site adjoining the terminus of the Dublin and Wicklow railway and they were built to house ‘powerful machinery’ to process timber for building. The machine age had arrived and new steam power could

1843. ³ Brendan Grimes, *Majestic shrines and graceful sanctuaries, the church architecture of Patrick Byrne, 1783–1864* (Dublin, 2009), p. 2.



manufacture doors, sashes and mouldings faster and cheaper than ever before. Meade claimed to be the first to introduce the new technology, boasting that his was 'the only manufactory of the kind in Dublin'.⁴ At Great Brunswick Street he produced flooring, skirtings and mouldings 'of all sizes and patterns' as well as doors, sash frames and shutters. It must have been a conspicuous sight in the city – its 150-foot-high chimney was reported to be 'the tallest structure of its class in Dublin'.⁵

THE HOUSING BOOM

By 1859, the outskirts of Dublin were in the course of rapid transformation:

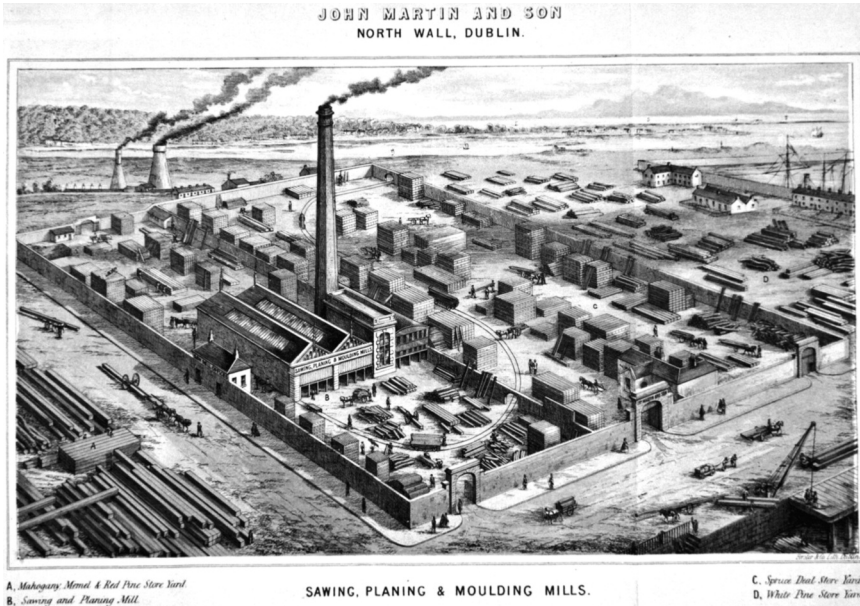
Passing to the south side, we find the same steady march in the path of improvement ... where villas, single and semi-detached, terraces &c., are springing up with an almost fairy-like rapidity, and the green sward speedily gives way to macadamized roads and populous thoroughfares, justifying the supposition that there is a universal move in that direction.⁶

Meade's timing could not have been better: a housing boom had just taken off and timber was the main raw material required to fuel it. By 1862, there were eight saw mills operating in the city, many with a wholesale yard on the quays from which shiploads of raw timber were sold. Meade placed advertisements in the *Dublin Builder* alongside those by the 'prince merchants' Martin & Sons, illustrated here operating from North Wall Quay (fig. 2.2).⁷ The drawing demonstrates the potential enormity of such an operation, with a labyrinth of yards storing a wide variety of raw and sawn timber. In the bottom right hand corner, a timber wharf was being extended on a continuous basis to cope with the increasing loads of lumber arriving mainly from Canada and the Baltic. By 1862, Great Britain and Ireland were importing annually over half a million loads of Canadian pine timber. Most of it was processed on the Ottawa River, giving employment to over 40,000 men.⁸

Throughout the 1860s, Meade's business continued to prosper. In 1862, the *Dublin Builder* announced that he was in the process of rebuilding two houses in Eustace Street for the solicitor Mr Pickering.⁹ The designer was William Caldbeck, who had trained under the eminent architect William Deane Butler and who was also working with Meade on new Italianate premises at 24/25 Grafton Street. Ecclesiastical work continued to thrive, and during this period Meade worked with the architects Pugin & Ashlin on a cathedral and four Catholic churches. Ashlin was the son of a Cork corn merchant and had received a privileged education in Belgium and England. In 1860, he went into partnership with the London architect Edward Welby Pugin and opened a Dublin office to run the Irish side of the practice. With

⁴ *Dublin Builder*, 1 Nov. 1859. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 June 1862. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 Nov. 1859. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 Feb. 1860. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 Jan. 1862. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 Jan. 1862.





2.2 John Martin & Son saw mills, North Wall Quay, Dublin (courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin, *The Dublin Builder*, 1 Feb. 1860).

a predominately Roman Catholic client base, Ashlin soon became the leading ecclesiastical architect in Ireland, and completed more than sixty church and cathedral projects throughout the country. One of these was the church of Saints Augustine and John in Thomas Street in Dublin, which Meade began work on in 1866. It remains one of Dublin's most important churches, and has been described as 'the most original Victorian Gothic church in Dublin'.¹⁰ Two years later, the foundation stone was laid for Pugin & Ashlin's largest commission: St Colman's Cathedral in Queenstown, Co. Cork. Meade was involved in the first phase of the project, but, when the design was significantly altered, he refused to negotiate the contract and left the site. Work on the cathedral was carried out in a piecemeal fashion thereafter and did not reach completion for another fifty years. O'Dwyer declares it as 'one of the grandest and certainly the most costly Irish ecclesiastical building of the Victorian era'.¹¹ Other collaborations included parish church commissions in the expanding Dublin suburbs, such as the church of St Patrick in Monkstown (1861–6) and the church of the Sacred Heart in Donnybrook (1863–6).

During this time, Meade became involved in one of the largest public works projects in Ireland: Ennis Lunatic Asylum (1863–6), designed by the Limerick architect

¹⁰ Christine Casey, *Dublin* (New Haven, CT, 2005), p. 627. ¹¹ Frederick O'Dwyer, 'A Victorian partnership: the architecture of Pugin & Ashlin' in John Graby (ed.), *150 years of architecture in Ireland: RLAI, 1839–1989* (Dublin, 1989), p. 55.

William Fogerty (fig. 2.3). This enormous complex was built in an Italianate style and was Fogerty's largest commission. The complex cost £35,000 to construct and was so large that it was said 'one would imagine this establishment could accommodate all the indoor and outdoor idiots, madmen, women and children in the whole kingdom of Ireland'.¹² As work began on the asylum, Meade was commissioned to build the Dublin cattle market in Prussia Street by Dublin Corporation. The facility would later become the biggest cattle market in Europe, serving the needs of the ever-growing populations of Ireland and Britain.¹³ Operations continued unabated at Meade's Saw Mills in Great Brunswick Street, providing many of the raw materials for his building contracts.

The 1860s also saw Michael Meade acquiring sites for house building. In 1862, the company was in the process of building eight houses and a villa in Bray for William Dargan, the railway entrepreneur.¹⁴ Dargan was 'the great figure of the Irish Railway Age' and was responsible for the development of practically every such project in the country, including the first one in 1834 from Kingstown to Dublin. Railway companies promoted the attractions of open sea bathing, an activity which had spawned a growth of seaside resort towns across the United Kingdom.¹⁵ An enthusiastic supporter of Bray, Dargan determined to make it the 'Brighton of Ireland',¹⁶ and it seems that by 1862 development there had been 'literally gigantic; houses here, there, everywhere', with 'hotels of monster form' catering for the crowds arriving during the summer season.¹⁷ Meade's Bray houses were designed by the architects Lanyon, Lynn & Lanyon who had recently set up partnership in Belfast and Dublin.¹⁸

Meade then turned his attention to Ailesbury Road, a new thoroughfare that had just been opened up. It had been created by the Pembroke Estate to connect Donnybrook with Sydney Parade Station, resulting in 'over a mile of potential building frontage'.¹⁹ Meade was the first to build there, acquiring a prime corner site of over two acres on the junction with the Merrion Road (fig. 2.4).²⁰ A testimony to his growing success, he built a grandiose Italianate villa for himself there in 1865. Its most striking feature is the seven-storey tower said to be modelled on Osborne House, Queen Victoria's country retreat on the Isle of Wight. A spiral staircase rises through the campanile, affording views far and wide from the city to the sea and the

12 Quoted in Brendan O'Donoghue, *The Irish county surveyors, 1834-1944* (Dublin, 2007), p. 89. **13** Liam Clare, 'The Dublin Cattle Market', *Dublin Historical Record*, 55:2 (2002), p. 180. **14** Irish Architectural Archive, *Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1720-1940*, Michael Meade (<http://www.dia.ie/>) accessed 31 May 2012. **15** John K. Walton, *Wonderland by the waves* (Preston, Lancs, 1992), p. 2. **16** Maurice Craig, *Dublin, 1660-1880* (London, 1952), p. 302. **17** *Dublin Builder*, 1 Jan. 1862. **18** Irish Architectural Archive, *Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1720-1940*, Michael Meade & Lanyon, Lynn & Lanyon (<http://www.dia.ie/>), accessed 31 May 2012. **19** E. McAulay, 'The origins and early development of the Pembroke estate beyond the Grand Canal, 1816-1880' (PhD, TCD, 2003), p. 217. **20** Original lease from Lord Pembroke to Michael Meade for piece of ground on the south side of Ailesbury Road in the city of Dublin for 150 years from 29 Sept. 1865.

2.3 Lunatic Asylum, Ennis, Co. Clare (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland).

Wicklow Mountains. As De Breffny & Ffolliott have noted,²¹ suburban houses of this scale were a rare sight in Ireland, where there was always a good selection of Georgian houses on the market. But Meade was determined to put his stamp on the new suburbs.

Meade continued with his vision, acquiring plots next to his mansion in Ailesbury Road. The land was acquired by leasehold agreement from Lord Pembroke who gave him two years to build 'two good and substantial dwelling houses'.²² The estate administered strict building leases, which set overall development guidelines by fixing plot size, building line and form. Only the best quality materials were to be used: the lower levels were to have punched or chiselled granite with the 'best red bricks' to the upper storeys. Out of the specifics of this lease, a new type of domestic architecture emerged, where wider plots and greater setbacks allowed houses to separate into pairs, resulting in a semi-detached building model. Although similar in form to those emerging in other streets of the Pembroke Estate, Meade's houses exhibit a high quality of execution and the sandstone window surrounds are unusually extravagant features for the time. By 1870, the builder had completed ten semi-detached houses there, providing the catalyst for future development (fig. 2.5).²³ Catering to an elite class, they were let to high-ranking

²¹ Brian De Breffny & Rosemary Ffolliott, *The houses of Ireland: domestic architecture from the medieval castle to the Edwardian villa* (London, 1975), p. 216. ²² Registry of Deeds, 1866, vol. 24, memorandum 131. ²³ *Thom's Dublin street directory*, 1870.



2.4 St Michael's house, Ailesbury Road, Dublin (photograph by the author).

professionals, or those in the upper levels of the public service.²⁴ These high-quality structures have ensured that Ailesbury Road remains one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in Dublin today.

²⁴ *Thom's Dublin street directory*, 1875–1885. Most of the occupants were solicitors, but other residents included an army colonel, a land agent and a county court judge.





2.5 Meade's houses, Ailesbury Road, Dublin (photograph by the author).

MEADE & SON

In 1870, Michael Meade's son Joseph married the daughter of William Carvill, a timber merchant from Co. Down. The two families had much in common: Carvill was also part of the rising Catholic merchant class and had developed housing on his estate in Rathgar. Each family brought property to the marriage: the Meades entrusted two of their Ailesbury Road buildings and the Carvills conveyed a pair of houses in Rathgar. The following year, Joseph became partner in the building firm and the company was renamed 'Meade & Son'.²⁵ Working from the saw mills in Great Brunswick Street, Joseph began to acquire property in the city. In 1872, the Pembroke Estate wrote to him for the third time about rent due on a holding in Denzille Street, and the following year he was party to a mortgage on a number of properties in Dublin and Wexford: two plots on the Portobello Estate, nos 10 and 12 Crosthwaite Park and thirty-five acres of ground in Kellystown.²⁶ The 1870s was certainly Meade & Son's busiest period in terms of building activity, beginning with the laying of the foundation stone for the new Gaiety Theatre in South King Street.²⁷ The inspiration for the project came from the Gunn brothers, who had run

²⁵ Irish Architectural Archive, *Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1720–1940*, Joseph Michael Meade (<http://www.dia.ie/>), accessed 31 May 2012. ²⁶ Registry of Deeds, 1873, vol. 13, memorandum 259. ²⁷ *Irish Builder*, 1 July 1871.

a music business nearby on Grafton Street. They appointed C.J. Phipps, the eminent theatre architect, who designed a two-thousand-seater auditorium on the site. The building was completed in a record five months, with 'workmen labouring through the nights by torchlight'.²⁸ *The Irish Builder* considered the design too utilitarian, but expressed confidence in the calibre of the builders: 'the contractors are Messrs Meade and Son, of Great Brunswick-street', it announced; 'there is little doubt but the builder will carry out his contract according to design and specification'.²⁹

The Catholic Church continued to be a lucrative source of work for Meade & Son, and by 1870 the firm had completed five ecclesiastical projects for Pugin & Ashlin.³⁰ Collaboration continued throughout the 1870s, as they worked together on at least three new church projects. Meade also began to break ground for some new buildings in the growing suburb of Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire), including the new town hall and St Michael's Hospital. As townships all over the United Kingdom expanded to fulfil the desires of a rising middle class, civic building had emerged as a symbol of urban pride and identity. In Kingstown, the chairman of the township put up £20 in prize money for the best design in campaigning for a new town hall.³¹ The competition was won by the Dublin architect John Loftus Robinson, who had recently set up practice in Great Brunswick Street. Built in the style of a Venetian Gothic palace, the building is a reflection of the wealth and confidence of the township. Meade and Robinson worked together next on St Michael's Hospital, but the project was more functional in design, built to 'meet the wants of the poor in Kingstown'. The Sisters of Mercy, who commissioned the project, engaged Meade a number of years later to build the new Jervis Street Hospital in Dublin. Towards the end of the decade, Meade and Robinson worked together on two more schemes: a new wing to the male orphanage in Glasnevin and a new laundry and Magdalen asylum at Glathule.

Although Meade was busy with civic projects in Kingstown, he continued to be involved in the construction of domestic buildings. The Dublin Artisans' Dwellings Company was established in 1876 by members of the Dublin Sanitary Association. The company was made up mainly of Dublin's unionist business elite and became the 'only sizeable semi-philanthropic housing body in Ireland' which aimed to build housing for the working classes.³² Meade was the first contractor to get involved, and constructed a housing project in Buckingham Street, designed by the Belfast-born architect Sir Thomas Drew as a 'model tenement block'.³³ Meanwhile, on a personal note, tragedy struck for Joseph's growing family, as he and his wife Catherine lost three of their five children between 1876 and 1879. The first was Elizabeth, a 'dearly beloved daughter', who died of bronchitis at fourteen months, followed by two boys:

²⁸ Douglas Bennett, *The encyclopaedia of Dublin* (Dublin, 2005), p. 82. ²⁹ *Irish Builder*, 1 Nov. 1871. ³⁰ Irish Architectural Archive, *Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720–1940*, George Coppinger Ashlin (<http://www.dia.ie/>), accessed 31 May 2012. ³¹ Peter Pearson, *Kingstown* (Dublin, 1981), p. 107. ³² M. Fraser, *John Bull's other homes, state housing and British policy in Ireland, 1883–1922* (Liverpool, 1996), p. 71. ³³ M. Daly, M. Hearn & P. Pearson, *Dublin's Victorian houses* (Dublin, 1998), p. 45.



2.6 Nos 46–52 Northumberland Road, Dublin (photograph by the author).

Michael (infant) and Joseph (aged three and a half). Two of Joseph's brothers and two of Catherine's siblings also died during these years. Premature deaths such as these were not unusual during the period; Sir Charles Cameron, Dublin's chief health and medical officer, lost five of his eight children early in life.³⁴ Frequent outbreaks of disease transcended class divides and were often related to inadequate sanitary provisions.

By 1880, Michael Meade had laid out approximately £30,000 in building on the prestigious Pembroke Estate.³⁵ Soon his son began speculating there in a new street south-east of the city, acquiring a plot of ground on Northumberland Road.³⁶ This streetscape of red-brick houses had been one of the first to be opened up in the new suburbs and was largely complete by the time the builder entered the scene. Finished in 1885, his scheme is in the High Victorian Gothic style and displays a high degree of architectural sophistication (fig. 2.6).³⁷ The mark of the builder is proudly displayed in the signature Meade monogram, 'MM', which is cast in terracotta on the front gable (fig. 2.7). With this first set of houses, Joseph Meade was instrumental in creating the most successful architectural composition of the whole road. He also continued to acquire property in the growing suburbs: in 1882, he sold his interest in

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10. ³⁵ H.C. Parliamentary Papers, 1880, XXX.327 C.2725, 'Municipal Boundaries Commission (Ireland). Part I. Evidence, with appendices. Dublin, Rathmines, Pembroke, Kilmainham, Drumcondra, Clontarf and also Kingstown, Blackrock and Dalkey', p. 188, para. 5056. ³⁶ Registry of Deeds, 1882, vol. 6, memorandum 76. ³⁷ *Thom's Dublin street directory*, 1885, Northumberland Road.





2.7 Michael Meade monogram (photograph by the author).

a holding at Brennan's Terrace, Bray's earliest and most complete seafront terrace.³⁸ He was also resident at a property there named 'Bella Vista', which probably served as a seasonal home.

Building work at Meade & Son seemed to slow down during the 1880s but, for the first time, property deeds began to appear under the company name. A deed dated 1884 refers to a number of allotments in Donnybrook, consisting of over two acres with houses, mills and offices.³⁹ In addition, large parts of the Meade saw mills were sold off to the adjoining railway company, possibly forming part of a compulsory purchase agreement.⁴⁰ Meade & Son were also involved in quite a few commercial building projects in and around the city centre. During the rebuilding of no. 110 Grafton Street for the house agent James H. North, the neighbouring property collapsed, resulting in a lawsuit against both Meade and North. The firm were also involved nearby at nos 96–100 Grafton Street (now Weirs) when they built a block of new shops for Dublin Corporation. Three years later, in April 1884, Joseph Meade's wife Catherine died, and this was followed five months later by the death of their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. The causes of death are not known, but Joseph Meade was left with three children between seven and twelve years of age.

³⁸ *National inventory of architectural heritage*, Bray. See Reg: 16301103 (www.building-sofireland.ie/), accessed 31 May 2012. ³⁹ Registry of Deeds, 1884, vol. 50, memorandum 75 & 1885, vol. 47, memorandum 66. ⁴⁰ Registry of Deeds, 1885, vol. 51, memorandum 277 & 278.



THE PASSING OF THE FOUNDING FATHER

Two years later, in May 1886, Joseph's father, Michael Meade, died at his mansion in Ailesbury Road after a long illness. The *Irish Times* paid tribute to the 'eminent builder and contractor', who had been engaged in business in Dublin for more than thirty years:

during that time, he erected many of the churches and other public buildings which ornament the city . . . He was highly esteemed and respected, not only for his business qualities, which were eminent to a degree, but also for the way in which he always exerted himself to forward every object of a charitable and deserving nature. His straightforwardness, coupled with his charity, made for him a very wide circle of friends, by whom his death will be deeply regretted.⁴¹

Michael Meade died with assets worth over £32,442, a considerable fortune for the time (equivalent to 477 times the yearly salary of a building labourer), and quite an achievement considering Meade's humble beginnings as a carpenter. His son, Joseph, inherited the building firm aged 47 and his business and political career continued to soar, as that year he was elected to Dublin Corporation as alderman for the Trinity ward. Building was in a depressed state during this time, and the firm completed few projects, though the saw mills in Great Brunswick Street continued to operate. Joseph continued to speculate in the Pembroke Estate and in 1887 he acquired a second plot on Northumberland Road beside the red-brick terrace he had completed two years previously. He also got married for the second time, to Ada, daughter of the late Thomas Willis of Ormond Quay. Willis had been a well-known apothecary, a purveyor of medicines and a campaigner for better social and sanitary conditions for the working classes.⁴² His daughter was 18 years of age when she married Meade, who was thirty years her senior. The second plot at Northumberland Road formed part of the marriage settlement, where the builder was about to complete three dwelling houses.⁴³

After his father's death, Joseph and his family moved to the family home, St Michael's in Ailesbury Road. By this stage, he was becoming an important business and political figure in the city and in 1887 he was elected to the board of the Hibernian Bank.⁴⁴ Two years later, as high sheriff for Dublin city, he could be found selling a large site on Grand Canal Quay for a considerable £14,000.⁴⁵ The position of high sheriff was one favoured by high-ranking nationalists and Meade's election marked his rise through the hierarchy of local government. In January 1889, some

⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 26 May 1886. ⁴² *The hidden Dublin: facts connected with the social and sanitary condition of the working classes in the city of Dublin*, ed. D. Dickson and members of the Trinity History Workshop (repr. Dublin, 2002). ⁴³ Registry of Deeds, 1887, vol. 7, memorandum 199. ⁴⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 15 Feb. 1887. ⁴⁵ Registry of Deeds, 1889, vol. 50, memorandum 6.

members of the Pembroke Town Commissioners proposed him to the board and, although the motion was not passed, the chairman was anxious to elect the builder, since he had 'such a large stake in the township'.⁴⁶

In the summer of 1890, Dublin Corporation proposed Alderman Joseph Meade to the office of lord mayor. Meade was praised by the chairman for his 'great intelligence and industry' in a report carried by the *Freeman's Journal*:

Alderman Meade and his family had been connected with the city for a number of years. He was a large employer, a merchant prince, respected by the citizens of all classes, and in his opinion the council could make no better selection for the office of lord mayor.⁴⁷

Joseph Meade appears to have been a successful and popular mayor. During his first year in office, he presided over many important developments in the city, such as the introduction of electric lighting, improvements in drainage and plans for a new fish and vegetable market. The following year, the corporation praised him for his skills as a public speaker and this, combined with his 'sound practical judgment', rendered him most deserving of a second term of office. In January 1892, the Right Honourable Meade began the second year of the mayoralty, 'with the entire approval and good wishes of every section of his fellow-citizens'.⁴⁸ Soon afterwards, he was awarded with an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at Trinity College Dublin. When the university celebrated its tercentenary later that year, Meade commemorated the occasion by holding a grand reception and ball in the Mansion House.⁴⁹ The year 1892 must have been a busy one for the mayor, as he went on to contest Stephen's Green in the Parnellite interest, but was narrowly defeated by Mr William Kenny, a Catholic unionist lawyer who went on to serve as solicitor-general for Ireland a few years later.⁵⁰

In 1893, Meade stepped down from the mayoralty and resumed his role as alderman for the Trinity ward. That year, he was honoured with the ultimate distinction when he was appointed to her majesty's most honourable privy council in Ireland.⁵¹ His work as lord mayor was also recognized, when the city's aldermen and councillors gathered at his mansion in Ailesbury Road later that year. The dignitaries made reference to Meade's 'dignity and strict impartiality' in addition to his 'practical knowledge and business capabilities'. Sir Charles Cameron, the chief health and medical officer of Dublin, presented Mrs Meade with a tiara of diamonds and a marble bust of her husband.

⁴⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Jan. 1889. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1890. ⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, 2 Jan. 1892. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6 July 1892. ⁵⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 6 July 1892.

THE DEMISE OF A GEORGIAN STREETScape

In 1894, Joseph Meade invested in the city's most important Georgian streetscape by purchasing eight properties on Henrietta Street (fig. 2.8).⁵² Built for the elite in the early eighteenth century, the mansions are of an overwhelming scale and some are double the width of a standard Georgian terraced house. Numbers 3, 4 and 5 are palatial in size and were originally occupied by the earls of Kingston and Thomond and the Rt Hon. John Ponsonby.⁵³ Meade's purchases equated to the whole of the north side of the street and he proceeded to strip out many of the original features such as grand staircases and valuable chimneypieces, turning the buildings to tenements. In doing so, the builder transformed himself into 'one of the most notorious slum landlords of the late nineteenth century'.⁵⁴

While converting Georgian mansions for the poor, Meade was also busy building villas for the rich. By the close of 1894, Charles Ashworth had completed drawings for him on Shrewsbury Road, just north of his villa on Ailesbury Road. Ashworth had been appointed architect to the Dublin Artisans' Dwelling Company in 1890 and although there is no record of previous collaborations, he and Meade were certainly acquainted.⁵⁵ By 1900, Shrewsbury House was complete, a fine detached six-bedroom residence on the junction with the Merrion Road (fig. 2.9). This was followed by four semi-detached houses adjacent, also designed by Ashworth (fig. 2.10). It seems that the builder was slow in developing these sites as John Vernon, agent to the Pembroke Estate, wrote to him frequently about lack of progress during this time. Although he was in contravention of his lease, Vernon was willing to turn a blind eye, due to Meade's expenditure of 'large sums in building on his lordship's estate'.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, debate continued to rage in the council chambers on the state of the poor in Dublin city, who inhabited insanitary and overcrowded houses such as those in Henrietta Street. The debate reached the House of Commons, where it was pointed out that Meade 'was the owner of a considerable number of the tenement houses complained of, and which the corporation were desirous of sweeping away'.⁵⁷ As Mark Crinson has shown, several leading Dublin councillors were known to be slum landlords, and it appears that the former lord mayor was one of them.⁵⁸ By the turn of the century, the eight mansions that he presided over in Henrietta Street produced a substantial annual rent of £1,500. Yet Meade was known for his philanthropy, and was a founder of the association for the housing of the very poor.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Ibid., 28 Jan. 1893. ⁵² Registry of Deeds, 1894, vol. 36, memorandum 89. ⁵³ Maurice Craig, *Dublin, 1660–1860* (London, 1992), p. 103. ⁵⁴ Peter Pearson, *The heart of Dublin* (Dublin, 2000), p. 361. ⁵⁵ NLI, Visitors' book of Alderman Joseph Meade, lord mayor of Dublin, 27 Jan. 1891–2 Aug. 1892. MS 19,707, acc. 3383. Charles A. Ashworth of 2 Ballsbridge & 42 Dame Street made three visits to Lord Mayor Meade at the Mansion House in 1891. ⁵⁶ NAI, PEP, Letter books, vol. 24, Vernon to the Rt Hon. J.M. Meade, 7 Mar. 1899, p. 492 (acc. 97/46/3/21). ⁵⁷ *Irish Times*, 26 June 1900. ⁵⁸ Mark Crinson, 'Georgianism and the tenements', *Art History*, 29:4 (Sept. 2006), 644. ⁵⁹ Daly, *Dublin, the*



2.8 Nos 3–10 Henrietta Street, Dublin (photograph by the author).



2.9 Shrewsbury House, Dublin (photograph by the author).





2.10 Shrewsbury Road houses, Dublin (photograph by the author).

How do we equate the philanthropic endeavours of Joseph Meade with his notoriety as a slum landlord? The answer to this apparent hypocrisy perhaps lies in a cynical cartoon appearing some years after Meade's death. During a visit to a Dublin slum, a public inspector is told of the identity of the landlord,

and being told he is the eminent philanthropist who represents the Kill-em-all Ward, he wearily remarks that his eyesight is growing worse each year, then retires to make room for the doctor, coroner and undertaker. And public health goes to sleep again, and the slum-owner takes the chair at a large and influential meeting for 'the better housing of the poor', and makes his audience weep with his heart-rending description of life in the tenements.⁶⁰

deposed capital, p. 285. ⁶⁰ *Leprechaun Cartoon Monthly*, Oct. 1907.



CONCLUSION

By the time of Joseph Meade's death in 1900, his building empire employed some nine-hundred men.⁶¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the winding up of the firm led to a dramatic increase in unemployment among building workers in the city.⁶² Success and wealth came to the Meades – not from inheritance of title, but from a strong work ethic and an entrepreneurial spirit. Emerging in the post-Famine period, Michael Meade began in the carpentry trade, placing himself at the centre of opportunity in a rapidly advancing city. His son Joseph built on his father's success and continued to expand the building business, while forging a formidable political career of his own. As builder to the rich and slum landlord to the poor, however, Joseph Meade was also an opportunistic capitalist who benefitted from both sides of the economic divide. He died as a new century dawned, leaving behind an estate worth over £89,000, including fifty-three properties in the city and surrounding county. The power, wealth and influence that they amassed are manifested in the architecture of Victorian Dublin.



⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 16 July 1900. ⁶² Daly, *Dublin, the deposed capital*, p. 63.

