The greater opportunities for patronage and artistic fame that London could offer lured many Irish artists to seek their fortune. Among landscape painters, George Barret was a founding member of the Royal Academy; Robert Carver pursued a successful career painting scenery for the London theatres and was elected President of the Society of Artists while, even closer to home, Roberts’s master George Mullins relocated to London in 1770, a year after his pupil had set up on his own in Dublin – there may even have been some connection between the two events. The attractions of London for a young Irish artist were manifold. The city offered potential access to ever more elevated circles of patronage and the chance to study the great collections of old masters. Even more fundamental was the febrile artistic atmosphere that the creation of the Royal Academy had engendered; it was an exciting time to be a young ambitious artist in London. By contrast, on his arrival in Dublin in 1781, the architect James Gandon was dismissive of the local job prospects: ‘The polite arts, or their professors, can obtain little notice and less encouragement amidst such conflicting selfishness, a situation which had led ‘many of the highly gifted natives…to seek for personal encouragement and celebrity in England.’ Balancing this, however, Roberts may have judged the market for landscape painting in London to be adequately supplied. In 1769, Thomas Jones, himself at an early stage in his career, surveyed the scene: ‘There was Lambert, & Wilson, & Zuccarelli, & Gainsborough, & Barret, & Richards, & Marlow in full possession of landscape business’. Jones concluded that ‘to push through such a phalanx required great talents, great exertions, and above all great interest’. As well as the number of established practitioners in the field there was also the question of demand. Even the great Gainsborough could not survive solely on the proceeds of his landscapes and Roberts showed little aptitude, or enthusiasm, for portraiture which would have provided him with a steady income while he continued his experiments in landscape. Nor, unlike his sister who painted stage sets back in Waterford, would Roberts’s highly finished style have lent itself to the work in the London theatres on which Carver clearly thrived.

The flow of Irish artists to England was not only one-way. Despite his pessimistic assessment of the prospects, Gandon himself stayed to make his career in Ireland and Gandon’s friend William Ashford from Birmingham spent almost the entirety of his long working life in his adopted city of Dublin, where he thrived artistically and financially. At home, Roberts was to enjoy patronage from some of the most august members of Irish society and his relative isolation from the artistic mainstream did little to impede his creative development. It is even arguable that there was a comparatively greater
demand for landscapes in Ireland than in England. The steady commissions that Roberts and Ashford received contrast with Sir William Beechey’s account of how Gainborough’s landscapes ‘stood ranged in long lines from his hall to his painting-room, and they who came to sit to him for their portraits... rarely designed to honour them with a look as they passed them.’ The Earl Bishop of Derry wrote to Thomas Jones with the suggestion that he dispose of his unsold landscapes in Ireland, and offered him accommodation in his home. The very fact that their talented elder contemporaries such as Barret and Carver had moved to London left Roberts and William Ashford at an early point in their careers as the leading landscape artists in Dublin. So for Roberts, precociously successful at home and the early recipient of gratifying patronage, the attractions of London might not have been quite as inducive as they appear at first sight and, while he did exhibit work in London, his engagement with the metropolis follows a somewhat different pattern from the familiar trajectory of the careers of Irish academicians such as Barret and Nathaniel Hone.

While Barret, Ashford and Mullins exhibited at the Royal Academy, Roberts, though a prolific exhibitor in Dublin, showed work at the Society of Artists and the Free Society, venues which were considerably less prestigious and at a rather low ebb in reputation, suffering from defections to the glamour and royal patronage of the Academy. Roberts’s London exhibits form a rather disparate, even random, grouping, especially when compared to the consistency of quality and variety of subject matter which he showed in Dublin, where every year he exhibited an impressive number of works (up to eleven paintings in 1772).

Roberts first exhibited in the Free Society, London, in 1771, with two works A Landscape and Pointer and a View near Castlebar, in Ireland, of the mountain called Croagh Patrick, lake and islands (cat.). It seems likely that this latter work is identical with one shown the previous year in Dublin, then titled [A View of the large lake above Castlebar, and great hill, Croo Patrick from a lady’s sketch].

In Dublin the painting was paired with a further work of the Castlebar area showing the seat of Sir Charles Bingham, again after a drawing by the same hand, which, it is suggested in chapter 3, is very likely to have been that of Bingham’s wife Margaret. If the London and Dublin Cregagh Patrick paintings were indeed one and the same, it seems to be the case that Roberts had simply sent over for exhibition in London a work for which he had been unable to find a buyer at home, and one which, anomalously in his oeuvre, was derived from a preparatory sketch by an amateur. This hardly indicates a well-thought-out strategy to find fame in the competitive world of the London exhibitions.

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In 1775, while William Ashford was exhibiting at the Royal Academy (where, as has been discussed in chapter 9, his work was admired by Thomas Campbell), Roberts sent two views of Lord Powercourt’s Park to the Society of Artists. In 1777, A Group of Cattle by Roberts was included at the same venue. This was, no doubt, a modest work similar to catalogue x and, now that his date of death has been correctly established as March of that year, can be shown to be a posthumous exhibit. Roberts’s pair of Powerscourt pictures shown in London two years earlier, when he was at the very height of his powers, recall in their subject matter Barret’s first exhibits in London a decade previously, when he too had shown views of the County Wicklow estate. However, it is not clear if Roberts’s choice of subject matter was a deliberate strategy to offer novelty to a metropolitan audience or, as suggested with the Castlebar picture, simply because those pictures were readily available for exhibition.

It has been noted that Barret’s 1764 exhibits were the earliest recorded images of Ireland to be shown at a public exhibition in London, and further argued that they conveyed an image of the Celtic fringe as ‘a wild yet noble landscape’. Barret’s Powerscourt work depicts a transformation of the Irish landscape that, it is argued, is stamped with a certain Englishness suggestive of peace and the taming of the land: “peace” is indicated by the Palladian solidity of Powerscourt, as well as the appropriation of the language of universal classicism. By contrast, Roberts’s one known landscape of Powerscourt (catalogue) eschews both the ‘sublime’ landscape of the famous Waterfall, and also omits reference to the Palladian house built by Richard Castle for the Wingfields. Equally, in a work to be discussed in this chapter – and the painting which was his primary delineation of Ireland for a London audience – Roberts foregrounds not the ‘language of universal classicism’ but an older, medieval past.

It would appear that Roberts was present in London for the 1775 exhibition; his address is given in the catalogue as ‘Dublin and 64, Margaret Street’! Margaret Street and the surrounding area on the north of Oxford Street was much frequented by artists (fig. 112). Wright of Derby gave an address in Margaret Street in 1765, while from 1777, the year of Roberts’s death, William Ashford stayed at No. 69 on visits to London. In the same year that Roberts is recorded in Margaret Street, George Romney set up his studio at nearby Cavendish Square. Margaret Street lies one street north of Castle Street, where James Barry was to take up residence in the next decade and Roberts was just a few streets distant from his erstwhile master and landlord George Mullins, who gave an address of Newman Street from 1772 to 1775. Mullins had previously given his address as ‘At Mr Robert Carver’s, Great Newport Street’, suggesting that, as they had in Dublin, Irish artists moved in circles of physical con-
giguity which would have served as a support network for the young Roberts arriving in London. However, in addition to the 1775 visit, it is quite possible that Roberts was in London on other occasions. As is argued in chapter 7, a painting of 1773, Mares and a Foal in a Wooded Landscape (cat.), suggests that he had seen the work of George Stubbs. However, his apparently modest attempts to promote his art in the London exhibitions do not give the impression of an ambitious artist trying to make a name for himself. Nonetheless, Roberts somehow won a prestigious commission to paint a pair of landscapes to be hung prominently in the newly built mansion of one of the leading connoisseurs and collectors of the day, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, the great ‘Welsh Marcesas.’

Sir Watkin was one of the wealthiest men in Britain with, by 1778, an annual income of some £27,000. He was born in 1749, the year after Roberts, and while still an infant inherited vast estates in north Wales, most notably Wynnstay. Williams Wynn was not only a collector and patron on a grand scale, but a genuine connoisseur and a friend to many painters. He was an amateur artist himself
and an early, and active, devotee of the picturesque in landscape. Keenly aware of the antiquity of his family, and very conscious of his Welsh origins, he was also imbued with admiration for the classical past, which was reinforced by the Grand Tour on which he embarked in May 1768.

In Rome Sir Watkin was painted with two friends by Batoni in one of the most ambitious of all Grand Tour portraits (fig. 11b). Like Lord Charlemont, he encountered Piraiese – though with less acrimonious results – and purchased his complete set of engravings. He patronised Anton Raphael Mengs and Gavin Hamilton and sat for a bust to the Irish sculptor Christopher Hewetson (National Gallery of Ireland). Indeed, Sir Watkin encountered many Irish artists in Italy. He took drawing lessons from the landscape painter James Forrester; ordered a landscape from Hugh Primrose Dean while both Solomon Delane and James Barry vied for his attention, with Barry, characteristically, complaining that Delane, Forrester and Hewetson had somehow prejudiced Sir Watkin against him.13 In Italy, Williams Wynn also encountered the Marquis of Kildare, who, as the 2nd Duke of Leinster, was to be one of Roberts’s most important patrons. Together they left the ‘horrid, ugly’ town of Milan, and ‘made a jaunt to the Lago Maggiore’.14 While Sir Watkin’s reaction is unrecorded, Kildare in a letter to Wynnstay. Up to 15,000 guests were catered for by ‘three coaches full of cooks sent from London for ye its own artists. Thomas Wright, Richard Wilson’s early biographer, wrote that Wales inspired Italy, Williams Wynn also encountered the Marquis of Kildare, who, as the 2nd Duke of Leinster, was to be one of Roberts’s most important patrons. Together they left the ‘horrid, ugly’ town of Milan, and ‘made a jaunt to the Lago Maggiore’.14 While Sir Watkin’s reaction is unrecorded, Kildare in a letter to his mother (quoted in chapter 12) gives an enthusiastic, if somewhat conventional, description of the scenery, suggestive of the appreciation of the Italian landscape through which he and Sir Watkin trave-

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that the payment to Roberts a month earlier was a settling of accounts before this gala launch. It is not clear how Roberts was introduced to Sir Watkin but there were several intriguing social and professional connections between artist and patron. As noted above, Sir Watkin had travelled in Italy with William FitzGerald, Marquis of Kildare, later to be 2nd Duke of Leinster. Although Williams Wynn’s patronage of Roberts predated Leinster’s Carton commission (discussed in chapter 12) by a year or two, Roberts had already worked for the FitzGeralds, painting William’s brother’s horse (catalogue). A further overlap of patronage is with Lord Charlemont. Both he and Sir Watkin were elected to the Society of Dilettanti in 1775, the year in which Roberts was paid for his work at St James’s Square and by which date Roberts had already painted Charlemont’s Casino (catalogue). Lord Harcourt, Roberts’s one known English patron – and yet another member of the Dilettanti – has also been suggested as a source for the introduction.

On a less elevated social scale, it is possible that Roberts was brought to Sir Watkin’s attention by a fellow Irish artist. Hugh Douglas Hamilton, who drew Roberts and was a brother-in-law of Mullins, had worked for Williams Wynn in 1772; Mullins himself had exhibited landscapes of Llangollen with Wynnstay in the background at the Royal Academy in 1773, and so may have known Sir Watkin in Wales or come to his attention through these Academy exhibits. With such affiliations in mind, there are a number of possible routes through which Roberts and Williams Wynn may have met and it certainly does seem likely that the commission arose through a recommendation of some sort. As we have seen, Roberts had at this stage exhibited in London on only one occasion and none of his paintings is known to have been in an English collection. Of particular interest is the apparent distinction in which Roberts’s work was held. For the rather mundane task of painting sets for his private theatre in Wynnstay, Sir Watkin had employed his friend Paul Sandby, a founding member of the Royal Academy. By way of contrast, Roberts had received the more important task of contributing to the decoration of Sir Watkin’s London townhouse – a much more public and high profile commission.

all artists, Roberts, who had no experience of Wales and its scenery, was commissioned by Sir Watkin, who had toured, admired and himself had sketched the landscape of his native land. Sir Watkin’s interest in architecture that was clearly developing through his contacts with Byres and Gandon manifested itself gloriously in the building of one of the grandest houses in London at 20 St James’s Square to designs by Robert Adam. In it Adam ‘reached the zenith in the development of the terraced town house’ (fig 11d). The purchase of the site with its existing house cost £18,500, while a further £50,000 was expended on the programme of building works. It was for this mansion that Roberts was commissioned to paint two landscapes which flank a copy of Raphael’s Transfiguration on the magnificent staircase (fig 11e). Roberts’s involvement is recorded in one of the very few secure documents relating to his life and career. In a ledger among the Wynnstay manuscripts in the National Library of Wales recording ‘sundry disbursements’ for the building and furnishing of St James’s Square House a ‘Mr Roberts of Dublin’ is recorded as having been paid £53 10s on 3 April 1775 ‘for 2 landscapes placed on the great stair case’ (fig 11f). Roberts’s prices compares favourably with the £480 that Richard Wilson was paid a few years earlier by Sir Watkin for two large landscapes, to be discussed shortly.

The wording in the Wynnstay ledger suggests that this was a full and final payment to Roberts and so provides a precise terminus ante quem for the two canvases. Eighteenth-century noblemen were not known for prompt payment. Sir Watkin, for example, paid Wilson’s final installment for one of his works two months after it had been exhibited at the Royal Academy. It is likely, therefore, that Roberts’s works for Sir Watkin were largely painted in the course of 1774, and perhaps finished in early 1775. As noted above, it seems that Roberts was in London around the time of the exhibition at the Society of Artists in 1775, when he could have viewed the pictures in position in the staircase of St James’s Square, or even, depending on the length of his stay, have overseen their installation. The building history of 20 St James’s Square is documented in an inscription on a lead cistern now hanging in the Porter’s Hall (fig 11g). It gives a start date of August 1771 with completion in August 1774. This suspiciously precise three-year span probably relates to construction work, after which attention could have turned to auxiliary decorative features such as Roberts’s paintings. The house itself was not officially unveiled until 1 May 1775, when Sir Watkin held a musical breakfast, suggesting perhaps
The fact that Sir Watkin did not actually own Dinas Bran – it was part of the estate of his neighbours and political opponents, the Myddeltons – but nevertheless specified it for inclusion in Wilson's work (as well as in Reynolds's double portrait with his mother (Tate Britain)) emphasises the 'patriotic iconography' of this 'Welsh national subject'.

Taken as a whole, Sir Watkin's patronage can be seen as deliberate manifestation of national sentiment and pride. Nevertheless, for one of the most prominent positions of his new house, Sir Watkin picked Roberts who was then, at least in London terms, an obscure Irish artist. Furthermore, Roberts proceeded to paint an evocation of the antiquarian past, but not the ancient Welsh tradition of liberty that Wilson celebrated, nor indeed of classical antiquity, Sir Watkin's other great passion – which would have been entirely appropriate in the setting of Adam's interior – but of medieval Christian Ireland.

The first of Roberts's two pictures in St James's Square – that most distant from the viewer on approaching the stairs, and to the left when looking over the rail on the first floor landing – shows a waterfall pouring down the side of a cliff with trees buffeted by the wind (fig 11j). Heavy rain clouds streak the top of the canvas. Two hardy goats in the foreground seem unperturbed by the approaching storm; above them and to the right a family emerges from a rise in the terrain. The man in front clasps his tricorne hat to his head and holds his coat tight against the wind. If he is an active figure battling against the conditions, his wife and child look exhausted and dejected. The mother is dragged to one side by her son's clinging hand as they struggle up the hill. The composition is unremarkable, echoing in general form many similar works by, for example, George Barret. It reflects, at some degree of remove, the mountainous landscape of County Wicklow that Roberts had painted earlier in his career.

Storm scenes were something of a staple among Roberts's contemporaries, including Thomas Jones; the sub-genre ultimately owed its popularity to its being a favoured subject of Gaspard Dughet. If Sandby was a more senior competitor – in Lord Harcourt they shared a client – the level against which Roberts's work would be judged is evident by Sir Watkin's purchase in 1773 of one of Poussin's greatest works, Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake (National Gallery, London) (fig 11h). On his first, and only, London commission, Roberts was thus facing a daunting challenge, working for a client whose taste had been formed on the Grand Tour and whose wealth could buy a masterpiece by one of the most revered of all landscape painters. Roberts was suddenly in the mainstream of British artistic endeavour and patronage. In the summer of 1774, as the Irish artist worked on his pictures for Sir Watkin, Gainborough, the greatest British landscape painter of the eighteenth century, made his decisive move from Bath to London.

In addition to Roberts's youth and lack of prior public acclaim in London, other aspects of his winning this commission do not tally with what is known of Sir Watkin's patronage. Williams Wynn was renowned for 'support of Welsh artists and promotion of Welsh subject matter'. He formed close relationships with artists such as Richard Wilson, acquiring a portrait of the landscape painter, which suggests their relationship was one of friendship as much as of business. The Transfiguration after Raphael that forms the centrepiece to the staircase in St James's Square was painted by another Welsh artist, William Parry, while living in Italy, a trip which Sir Watkin had funded; Parry acted as something of a 'resident artist' in his household. Sir Watkin was also active in the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, the focus for Welsh intellectual activity in London. In the same year that Roberts was paid for the pictures, Sir Watkin was chosen as its second president.

Williams Wynn could trace his pedigree back to the ninth-century king of Wales, Rhodi Mawr, and exploited his ancestry as one means of enhancing his status in contemporary eyes. Although there existed an element of burlesque in this celebration of his nationality – he appeared in the costume of a Druid in a London masquerade, and on another occasion as St David mounted on a Welsh Goat – Sir Watkin also translated this interest into high art. Shortly after his return from his Grand Tour he commissioned from his compatriot, Wilson, two enormous canvases showing his ancestral lands round Wrexham (fig 11i). Wilson prominently included the fortress of Dinas Bran, one of the few Welsh ruins that, as was noted at the time, could be shown to predate the English conquest. Wilson's pictures, which hung in St James's Square, have been interpreted as emblematic both of Sir Watkin's beneficent rule of his personal fiefdom and expressive of a mythic continuity with the Welsh past.
in the landscape, as do, for example, the figures in one of the Harcourt pictures (catalogue), here it seems as if the gentleman traveller on a horse has sought out this site and is arriving at his destination, guided by a local. The two figures are differentiated both by the respective means of transport and their dress. The rider wears a tricorn hat, his guide a broad-brimmed one; the former is in a fancy blue costume, the latter in a workaday brown cassock. Compared to Robert's more usual staffage, the travellers are more in keeping with those antiquarian tourists visiting ancient sites that appear in drawings by Gabriel Beranger. This tradition also translated into easel pictures by Robert's contemporaries, with perhaps the most notable depiction of the growing cultural appreciation of the Irish past being the group depicting themselves among the ruins of Cloghoughter Castle in a work by William Ashford (fig 11l).

This interest in the ruins on the part of the travellers is rather forced on the viewer too, for the picture is unique in Robert's known oeuvre in its foregrounding of the architectural element. In paintings such as the Harcourt landscape medieval ruins are relegated to the distance. Even in commissioned views of demesnes, Robert preferred to introduce his clients' houses elliptically and only in the case of Lucan (a house that was about to be demolished (catalogue)), and the Casino (newly built and the whole raison d'être of the painting (catalogue)) did he express an interest in painting architecture. Here, by contrast, the viewer finds himself confronted up close with a detailed portrayal of the building. This dramatic change from Robert's usual viewpoint is in part disguised by an enormous tree, which takes up almost half of the painting. The result is a complex and dynamic composition. The free-flowing lines of the branches contrast absolutely with the architectonic uprights of the tracery and the bases of the columns with which they are so deliberately juxtaposed. (This ironically prefigures in reverse a comment on the work of Robert's brother Sautelle, who was criticised in 1814 on the grounds that 'his trees all resemble the stone fretwork of a Gothic cathedral' – not a comment that could be applied to his more talented brother.) If, in the companion picture, man seems insignificant in comparison to the force of the elements, here the works of man and God are given equal

entitled Landstorm, while in 1769, the Dublin public had the opportunity to compare works in the genre by Robert and two of his teachers, James Mannin and George Mullins. Robert's exhibit, entitled Landstorm with a Waterfall, may be identifiable with catalogue, a work unusual within his oeuvre in introducing a tragic note to the figures who rail against the elements, rather than merely struggle through them. This more romantic approach to landscape painting was to be the element in Robert's art that his brother Sautelle expanded further. A further anomalous work by Robert is the Sea Storm (catalogue) (National Gallery of Ireland), probably the picture he exhibited in Dublin in 1771. This is something of a pastiche of the style of Vernet, who had been patronised by at least three of Robert's Irish patrons, the Earls of Leeson and Charlemont, and Richard Dawson – and possibly also by Sir Watkin himself. Somehow not suited to Robert's style, or temperament, the Sea Storm was not to be an experiment that he appears to have repeated. However, more ambitious landstorms were to follow. The overall composition of the storm scene that Robert painted for Sir Watkin, as well as particular details, including the family group, are repeated in a group of important works that Roberts painted in the mid-1770s, which will be considered later in this chapter.

Robert's second picture (fig 11k) in St James's Square is altogether more interesting, if largely for its anomalous position within Robert's oeuvre and the puzzle – which here remains unresolved – as to why it was thought appropriate for the setting. Two travellers, one on horseback, cross a bridge to approach an impressive group of ecclesiastical ruins. In the distance, a further group of monastic buildings is depicted. The standing figure gestures with a stick in the direction of the church in the foreground. Instead of being oblivious to the ruins, or taking them for granted as just another feature

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importance, though the ruined state of the buildings is suggestive of the impermanence of human achievements, unlike the ever-renewing force of nature.

The interior of 20 St James’s Square is a statement of uncompromisingly classical intent. John Olley sees the stair hall (where Roberts’s pictures hang) as an inner façade, the ‘sacrum’ of the house. Eileen Harris notes its triumphal arch configuration.42 Adam’s interior decoration has been interpreted as a combination of classical learning and familial and national pride. Plaster panels link Romulus with Britannicus; the Latin tag SPQR is replaced by SPQR to equate the Roman and British empires. The Wynn crest with the eagle of Snowdon surmounts antique trophies. Sir Watkin’s Welsh patrimony is Antonio Zucchi, whose work features elsewhere in the house, Roberts’s scene depicts a large Gothic Adam often specified capriccio views of classical ruins for such spaces, recommending artists such as

In this context Roberts’s pictures on the staircase present something of a conundrum. While Robert Dance and Sir Joshua Reynolds of appropriate subject matter – ‘Orpheus Lamenting the Loss of Eurydice’ and Saint Cecilia – witnessed the Bards that grac’d the Celtic clime, whose images were bold and thoughts sublime.43

In addition to this mingling of the Welsh and the classical, more generally, in the house’s decoration, iconography follows function, so that every detail seems to be considered and appropriate to its setting within the whole scheme. The music room, for example, was hung with paintings by Nathaniel Dance and Sir Joshua Reynolds of appropriate subject matter – ‘Orpheus Lamenting the Loss of Eurydice’ and Saint Cecilia, the latter given a Welsh accent by her attribute of a harp rather than an organ.45

In Roberts’s picture, five tiny figures can be detected around the distant ruins, two of them standing close to the base of the round tower. Clearly these are not agricultural workers, and they may represent other tourists coming to view the medieval remains. Alternatively, and intriguingly, Roberts may have alluded to the rite of the ‘pattern-day’. Throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, the ancient sites of Irish Christianity were still visited and seen as holy places. Early in the next century, for example, Isaac Weld described the scene at the ruined Muckross Abbey: ‘these poor people, clad in long russet garments, prostrated on their knees and counting their beads with all the enthusiasm of devotion.’46 These holy ruins could be appreciated in divergent ways, for religious solace or antiquarian delight, and Weld notes how he found these figures ‘quite in character with the solemnity of the scene’. A similar group of miniscule figures seem to cluster round the ruined church in the background of a storm landscape by Roberts (catalogue); while in his view of Slane Castle (cat), Roberts, much more explicitly paints a scene of Irish ritual in the even less likely setting of a landscaped demesne. These instances anticipate the more fulsome rendering of this resolutely Irish subject matter in George Pettie’s Last Circuit of Pilgrims at Clonmacnoise (fig. 11n) of about 1828 – but without the overblown melodrama. Closer in date is an anonymous painting in Florence Court, County Fermanagh, showing the monastic site on Devenish Island complete with round tower, a site
very close to where Roberts had painted extensively at the beginning of the 1770s (fig 11 q). Dateable to about 1760, it includes a detail of a funeral procession which, having landed from Lough Erne, processes towards the group of churches. Although clearly shown as in ruins, these buildings retained spiritual significance for the local community. Something similar may be the intention of the detail which Roberts included at St James’s Square. If this is the case, while it might have meaning to him as an Irish artist who had visited and drawn the medieval antiquities of the country, it can have had little meaning to his metropolitan viewers.

St John’s, Kilkenny, which appears in the background of Robert’s picture, does not have an accompanying round tower and for this he turned to another source. This conflating of different aspects of medieval remains was not unusual practice; archaeological accuracy was far from being a prime concern. About four years later, in a work painted for the FitzGeralds of Carton, William Ashford combined into the one building the nave and east window of Muckross Abbey, with a tower taken from a structure similar to Timoleague Abbey (National Gallery of Ireland) (fig in chapter 9).50 On close examination, it is clear that the round tower in Robert’s picture is battlemented. Battlements were used to replace the fallen conical caps of a number of towers from the late Middle Ages into the eighteenth century and the fact that this is what Roberts shows, rather than the more generic conical-topped form, suggests a specific source.51 Possible candidates are Kildare Cathedral, Castledermot also in County Kildare, or perhaps St Canice’s in Kilkenny – since replaced with a new cap. In favour of the last of these is the possibility that Roberts is here reusing motifs gathered on a sketching tour of Kilkenny when he could have seen St John’s and St Canice’s, and combining them as he turns the page of a sketchbook looking for inspiration. In favour of Castledermot as the source for the round tower – and assuming the same working practice – is the fact that the large group of ruins in the foreground of the painting is based on the Lady Chapel of this Kildare Franciscan Friary. The elegant window at Castledermot was added in the fifteenth century; the chapel itself dates from 1247. It was destroyed by a local farmer in the mid-nineteenth century – concerned at the risk of fragmented columns, while generically correct, is untypical of Irish medieval buildings and here structurally unconvincing. The relieving arch usually signifies the presence of a crypt and makes little sense in this context, except to give some additional interest to the surface of the wall and to pleasingly echo the bridge over which the travellers cross. The most unusual feature, however, of the building is the presence, high up on the wall, of a sculptural group with two figures kneeling beneath an empty cross (fig 11 q). The architectural elements are supported by skull-faced corbels indicating that it is a funerary monument of some sort. The positioning of this memorial high on the wall is a whim by Roberts, or rather, as this is the only inside view of the church, the monument is placed for the convenience of the viewer of the picture rather than as it would have actually appeared much lower down the interior wall.

The source of Robert’s knowledge of St John’s is uncertain. He had engaged in antiquarian draughtsmanship, as the presence of copies of his drawings in Beranger’s album (catalogue) attests, and he was also connected with the ambit of William Burton, who owned Wheatley’s later drawing of the Friary. In a Dublin auction of 1813, a view of Kilkenny Castle by Roberts was sold (in the same sale was a view of Slane Castle, perhaps catalogue number or a version of it), so, although no paintings of the Kilkenny area by the artist are now known, he clearly made a trip into the county at some point, when he could have sketched St John’s.52 Alternatively, Robert’s contemporary, Jonathan Fisher, is known to have sketched both Castledermot and St John’s and could have provided him with drawings.53 Whatever the case, Roberts had access to accurate, and generally well-understood, drawings of Irish ecclesiastical remains. Although they are in the background, and taken from two different sources, the spatial relationship between the round tower and church is plausible, echoing, for example, the configuration at Cashel. Robert’s close study of sites such as St Peter’s Abbey (cat) had given insight – and no doubt respect – for the great medieval ruins of Ireland. The view into the inside of St Peter’s in the copy of the lost drawing by Roberts is essentially similar to the disposition of the church in the St James’s Square painting. In addition to his documented study of antiquarian remains, his father’s practice as an architect would have further honed Robert’s understanding of the intricacies of buildings such as St John’s and Castledermot.

The two pictures in St James’s Square are the only known upright, or portrait-shaped, pictures, by Roberts. This is obviously dictated by the available space which he has been asked to fill and in itself is not unusual. It is likely that, on receiving the commission, Roberts recalled the four upright pictures that Mullins had painted for Lord Charlemont in 1768, when he was living with his master in Temple Bar (fig in chapter 2). No doubt Roberts saw them being painted, and may even have had a hand in their execution. Although no record survives as to where or how they were originally displayed at Marino, the experience of observing the production of a series of site-specific paintings would have been helpful when Roberts came to tackle the Williams Wynn commission. Equally, Mullins was resident in London when the pictures were painted and he may have acted as a source of guidance or given practical assistance. However, it must immediately be acknowledged that in St James’s Square Roberts simply does not rise to the challenging circumstances of the task. There are difficulties both within individual pictures and in the whole concept of the decorative scheme. In the storm scene, Roberts does not succeed in adapting his landscape formulae to the upright format. There is too much within individual pictures and in the whole concept of the decorative scheme. In the storm scene, Roberts does not succeed in adapting his landscape formulae to the upright format. There is too much empty space on the right hand side of the composition and the receding planes of aerial recession, which usually give Robert’s paintings so much of their evocative charm, are wholly missing. Although this is emphasised by the grieve with which the picture is now covered, the scale of the setting in
which it is housed, and the distance from which the picture was to be seen, rendered redundant this appealing aspect of his landscape painting and it is not offset by a bolder approach on the part of the artist. Nor did Roberts amend his palette. His picture, even when newly painted, would have seemed muddy and indistinct beside the vibrant, electric colours that any copy of Raphael’s Transfiguration must embrace, and set against Adam’s white walls.

In the companion piece showing the ruins of Castledermot, while individual elements are strongly conceived – the dominating tree, for example, is a highly effective way to fill the upright space – the overall composition is unusually piecemeal and unintegrated. More generally, however, the pictures simply do not work as part of Adam’s overall scheme. It is noteworthy that architectural historians of the house pass over these paintings, prominent in Adam’s magnificent stairwell with an almost total – perhaps embarrassed – silence.

There are three main viewing points for the pictures: from the entrance hall (fig 11r), from the first floor landing and from the upper balcony looking down (fig 11s). However, due consideration is only given to the second of these. The pictures make visual sense only when viewed head on, and work best of all when looking through the open door of the second drawing room. The vital di sotto in su angle as the stairs are mounted is wholly neglected (fig 11t). This is in stark contrast to the highly appropriate and well-considered placing of Parry’s Transfiguration with its strong upright thrust, as Christ appears to ascend into the enormous space that Adam devotes to the stairwell. Although the Transfiguration was delivered in October 1775, some months after Roberts had received payment for the landscapes, Parry had begun work on it as early 1773, and it seems very likely that its positioning was decided on at an early stage in the design for the stairs. Roberts had no doubt been made aware of the architectural context and informed that his paintings would hang next to Parry’s copy after Raphael, but he does little to vary the scale of his standard landscape composition to take account of the boldness of the figures in the Transfiguration or, indeed, the enormous amount of space – and the richness of Adam’s stucco decoration – above the paintings when in situ (fig 11t). In comparison with the Transfiguration, Robert’s figures are tiny, while details such as the funerary monument on
the wall of the church are almost illegible. This may even suggest that Roberts painted the pictures in Ireland and sent them over, not having previously seen, or fully understood, the space in which they would be hung. There is certainly a contrast with the portrait of Sir Watkin’s sons, also by Parry, which hung in the Eating Room, its unusual circular format a perfect complement to Adam’s geometrical manipulations of space.68

The compositional peculiarities of the paintings are, however, not as perplexing as the subject matter of the second painting. For whatever reason, when painting this work for the aggressively classical surroundings of Sir Watkin’s house, Roberts abandoned his usual preference for landscape and allows the architecture to dominate, and, in the most visible setting in the house, appears a depiction of Gothic ruins rather than a classical capriccio. It is impossible to imagine that Adam would have looked favourably on his exquisitely conceived Gesamtkunstwerk being compromised by these paintings, which do not adhere to the essential unity of his scheme, compositionally, stylistically or iconographically. Most puzzlingly of all is why Sir Watkin, that ardent supporter of all things Welsh, would have commissioned such specifically Irish subject matter rather than, for example, views of the scenery and antiquities around Wynnstay, just as he had from Wilson a few years earlier. St James’s Square, it has been argued by Peter Lord, displayed Sir Watkin’s ‘Welshness...for the benefit of the visiting gentry and intellectuals throughout Europe’, except, it seems, on the main stair hall.

Perhaps Roberts’s ruins were seen as generically antiquarian and Gothic, their uniquely Irish qualities not understood or appreciated. If this indifference to subject matter is indeed the case, it suggests that the precise contemporary significance which has been placed on individual ancient sites in works by Wilson has been overstated.69 Ironically, Julius Caesar Ibbetson decorated the Music Room at Kenwood, another Adam interior, with roundels, in the more deliberately picturesque style of the end of the century, showing Welsh scenes with which Sir Watkin would have been familiar, Llengollen, Caernarvon and Anglesey.70 His patron here was the Scottish Earl of Mansfield, for whom the resonances of these particular places would have been generic rather than personally significant, their inclusion decorative rather than iconographically charged. Somehow, however, a similar casualness to content and its meaning seems alien to St James’s Square, and Ibbetson was no Richard Wilson. Sir Watkin, a man alive to symbolism – particularly Welsh – and known to have overseen every aspect of Thomas Gray’s poem of the same name, it mourns the loss of Welsh freedom through the conquest of Edward I, but the scene is set in a landscape reminiscent of Gaspard Dughet.62 So within Sir Watkin’s circle there were ready-made iconographies to combine the classical and the national, which makes the appearance of Castrledermot and the Round Tower all the more difficult to explain.

It is interesting to consider, however speculatively, the relationship between Roberts and the almost identically aged Sir Watkin. To date, Roberts had worked for patrons who were considerably older than himself, but here he found himself employed by a coeval, albeit a high-born and very wealthy one. Could the fact that they were near contemporaries, who perhaps developed a rapport, explain the decision by the otherwise discerning Sir Watkin to hang pictures in his new residence that were clearly incongruous with their surroundings? Did Sir Watkin see the potential in this young Turk and grant him free range to paint what he pleased? He certainly seems to have afforded William Parry a certain latitude in subject matter.72 Whatever the significance to Sir Watkin – if any – of the Irish ruins, their unusual prominence and sheer incompatibility to context does suggest that they had some meaning to the artist. If nothing else, Roberts was an adaptable artist, capable of changing his style and subject matter as appropriate. The fact that in this most high profile of commissions he exaggerated – rather than diminished – the Irishness of the scene invites comment.

The ruins that littered Ireland were interpreted in different ways: as the remains of monkish superstition or as ‘testimony to the accomplishment of previous generations’.73 Certainly William Gilpin’s later comment that Cromwell had his ‘share of picturesque genius’ who ‘omitted no opportunity of adorning the countries through which he passed with noble ruins’ could resonate differently in Ireland than in England.74 The prominence and respect that Roberts here accords the ruined remains of the medieval Irish church is unusual and there is a nice irony that, after Roberts’s premature death, his father was to build the first Catholic cathedral in Ireland since the Reformation. We know nothing of his own religious, social or political beliefs, and in the absence of such knowledge speculation should be appropriately cautious as to the precise interpretation to be placed on the scene of Irish Gothic antiquity with its prominently placed funerary monument and distant round tower. Perhaps the best context is to see it as part of the general antiquarian movement associated with his patron and friend William Burton to whom Grosse’s Antiquities of Ireland was dedicated, with verses that closely echo the mood of Roberts’s capriccio of Irish ruins:

Now be my theme Hibernia’s ancient Glories,
Druvadic monuments and Danish forts:
Tall slender conic towers, whose date and use
In vain have antiquaries toild to find.
Let us likewise her mouldering abbeys view
Shrouded in Ivy...66

Unusual the ‘Irish capriccio’ may be, but Roberts is still a long way distant here from the mystical romanticism of the Philosopher in a Risen Abbey of 1790 (Yale) by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg’s (Fig. 11v) — an artist who painted a pair of pictures for Roberts’s colleague in Dublin, Jonathan Fisher.67 However, in both pictures similar ruined Gothic sites are charged with emotion. If Roberts – typically – disavows de Loutherbourg’s heightened sensibility and overwrought drama, nonetheless a feeling of melancholy and loss pervades the depiction of an Irish abbey church in decay. The ruins invite meditation on Ireland’s past, as Thomas Whateley had articulated in his influential Observations of Modern Gardening published in 1770, just a few years before Roberts painted.

All remains excite an enquiry into the former state of the edifice, and fix the mind in a contemplation on the use it was applied to...Whatever buildings we see in decay, we naturally contrast to its former state, and delight to ruminate on the comparison.68

While rumination on the state of classical ruins, with its gently melancholic themes of the transience, mortality and the fall of empires was one of the most well-worn commonplaces of an educated eighteenth-century gentleman who knew his Vergil, a similar line of thought applied to the destruction of the antiquities of the pre-Reformation Irish church was politically somewhat more ambiguous. It must be emphasised, however, that that this is not to impute a crypto-Catholic subversion to Roberts or his patrons. As is discussed in chapter 5 while William Burton was happy to tolerate a ritual of native Irish worship in his demesne, and even had it incorporated into Roberts’s view of his castle at Slane, he was firmly against Catholic Emancipation. Instead, the symbols of pre-settlement Ireland were appropriated into a particular branch of Ascendancy Irish patriotism.

Gilbert White, writing in 1775, gave a standard assessment of English knowledge, or lack of it, concerning Ireland. He was aware of ‘modern improvements in arts and agriculture’ but he associated the landscape of Ireland with its Sublime elements: ‘noble castles and seats, the extensive and picturesque lakes and waterfalls, and the lofty stupendous mountains’.69 The list recalls the subject matter of several of Roberts’s landscapes. White wanted to find out more of the ‘wild natives, their superstitions, their prejudices, their worldy way of life’. Unveiled in the same year as White’s comments, Roberts’s pictures for Sir Watkin answer critics such as the Selborne parson, by illustrating the civilization of the Irish Middle Ages suggesting the antiquity of native Christianity, ‘Hibernia’s ancient Glories’, and placing it alongside Adam’s classical architecture and next to a copy of Raphael’s most famous work. Ironically in this context, the result is not dissimilar to the way in which Wilson’s landscapes, notably Dinor Bran painted for Sir Watkin, had emphasised the priority of Wales in early British history. Although the end product is quite different, Roberts’s motivation for this most unusual feature of the decoration of 20 St James’s Square may be similar to that of Petrie in his Last Circuit of the Pilgrims at Clonmacnoise (fig 11n): ‘It was my wish to produce an Irish picture somewhat historical in its object, and poetical in its sentiment – a landscape composed of several monuments characteristic of the past history of our country’.70 Why Sir Watkin and Adam allowed (or encouraged?) him to do so is a question unlikely ever to be satisfactorily answered.

Despite the perceived failings of the St James’s Square pictures, it seems that Roberts received a further commission from Sir Watkin. The essential format of the landstorm picture, here adjudged comparatively unsuccessful, was to be repeated in a group of highly impressive landscapes of similar subject that date to 1774 and 1775. It is difficult to determine priority here, though some dates are fixed. As noted above, Sir Watkin’s pictures for Roberts occurred in April 1775. A large work (more than two metres across) shows a further landstorm similar to the left-hand picture in St James’s Square. It is signed and dated 1774, the year it which it is reasonable to assume that Roberts was engaged on his commission for Sir Watkin (Fig w – Working Catalogue 52 Weston). The picture hang
in 20 St James’s Square until the early twentieth century, so very likely it, too, was a commission from Sir Watkin. Whether it was painted before the picture in the stair hall as an example of Roberts’s art, or subsequent to it, is impossible to determine. The right hand side of the composition, with a torrent of water crashing over large boulders, is almost a mirror image of the storm picture in the staircase hall. The figure clamping at his hat is repeated almost identically, but moved from the family group to the left foreground, where he tends a white horse hauling logs (extra fig detail of Cat 52 fig w). The family group itself is repeated in a variant form. They cross a picturesque bridge composed of unusually ornamental branches. The family is here led by a barefoot woman with a pained expression and the group recalls the wayfarers at the side of the road in one of the Harcourt pictures (catalogue).

The repetition of the motif throughout the series of mid-decade storm pictures does militate against too much weight being placed on their significance in the Harcourt picture which, given its patron, inevitably, but perhaps irrelevantly, brings Goldsmith’s Deserted Village to mind. A large part of the purpose of the figures in the storm pictures is quite simply to act as a foil to the effects of the weather. This differentiates this group of pictures very much from the anomalous, and as suggested above, rather earlier storm scene, with its animated, gesticulating figures (cat).

In the 1774 Landstorm, the whole composition is effectively managed and tied together by the unity of palette. Roberts works here on a larger scale than usual but to great effect, highlighting the fact that the minuteness of finish and small size of earlier pictures – like the Lucan series or the paintings for Lord Harcourt – for which he is best known, represent only one dimension of his landscape art. If there is a certain monumentality to the picture – and the sense of the power of nature is clearly present – it certainly still falls short of what could be termed sublime landscape in any meaningful sense. The travellers are discommoded by the storm rather than awestruck by the forces of nature; the motif of catching one’s hat against the wind is almost comically distant from the scenes of death and destruction landscapes of the previous decade by Sir Watkin’s former drawing teacher James Forrester (illustrate 11x), or indeed in the Destruction of the Children of Niobe by his friend Richard Wilson (illustrate 11y).
Several further works (catalogue) display variations on the ‘landstorm with travellers’ theme associated with, and perhaps initiated in, Roberts’s St James’s Square picture. A further large canvas, only recently re-discovered, is dated 1775 (fig 11z = Working Catalogue 54). As he does on occasion, Roberts adds to the signature and date the location where it was painted, ‘Ireland’, which confirms his presence in his native land and confirms that his sojourn in Margaret Street in London that year was not prolonged. This is an equally or, if anything, more impressive work than the painting of the same subject dated the previous year. Again there is a grandeur of concept and orchestrated feeling of control, as if the artist relished his command over the elements. Every constituent detail is
subordinate to the whole and somehow it is a more effective composition because of the suppression of anecdotal detail. The figures are smaller than in the 1774 picture and instead the main ‘character’ of the piece is the large swaying tree placed just off centre, its animated state painted lovingly. In the depiction of the rocks and trees there is something of Francis Towne’s distinctive graphic landscape style of the 1780s in the way that somewhat schematic marks coalesce into an organic and believable rendering of nature. As noted in the previous chapter, Roberts’s pencilling was a quality admired by several early critics and he sees almost to draw in paint.

When the picture was sold in 1950, it was paired with a further painting, the location of which is now unknown but which was described as a Rained Church amongst Trees. This is a rare instance of Roberts painting a pair of pictures on this scale. If the subject of the surviving work recalls the landscape painted for Sir Watkin, the title of its companion is reminiscent of the second of the St James’s Square pictures with the Irish monastic antiquities, suggesting that his London commission works of an utterly different tenor and genre, indicates that in 1775 Roberts’s art was flourishing and moving rapidly in different directions. This rather emphasises the point made by John Warren the following year about the ‘several branches of landscape painting’ in which Roberts excelled.73

In ways, however, the large storm scenes of 1774–75 were crucial to Roberts’s re-engagement with serene landscape painting at Carton. The control he learnt at painting on this scale fed into the Carton pictures and is what differentiates them from earlier works in the genre such as the Lucan or sombre painting. See Cato 2008, 166-67.

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