



The arts past and present

Ireland: Rebuilding after the rebellion and civil war

Male voice

Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Narrator

The Irish nationalist proclamation of the Republic of Ireland made from the steps of the General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916.

Narrator

In the fierce battles that followed, the General Post Office and many other buildings in O'Connell Street were destroyed. They weren't the last. By the time the Irish Free State was established by the Anglo Irish Treaty of 1922, war against the British and the civil war had badly damaged many Dublin landmarks. The Four Courts and the Custom House lay in ruins and the new state had to decide what to do with them.

Barry Murphy

As far as I can see, there is no overt policy, yet the actions of government can show that there was a policy for rebuilding certain buildings and for not interfering with others and allowing them to decay over time.

Narrator

The government put Dublin's damaged buildings in the hands of the Office of Public Works. This department of the new Irish state, a survival from British rule, was responsible for rebuilding.

Barry Murphy

The, if you like, driving force behind the OPW's actions in restoring the Four Courts, the Custom House and GPO, I would say, was mainly from a functional point of view. That's not to say that they weren't conscious of the history of these buildings and the fact that they were by particularly famous architects, Gandon in the case of the Four Courts and the Custom House; Johnson in the case of the GPO. But there was a degree of functionality and that is one of the key elements.

Narrator

The cash strapped government laid down two key principles for all rebuilding. Firstly, only Irish materials could be used in restoration. The Custom House is a clear example of this. Originally built throughout in Portland stone from England, the reconstructed dome used a darker native Irish limestone. The government's second principle shows the complex relationship between the nationalists and their country's past.

Barry Murphy

The government decided to abandon certain buildings. Dublin castle was one and the RHK, the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham, was the other. One of them, Dublin Castle, was the seat of British power. The Royal Hospital of Kilmainham was where the commander of the British troops in Ireland lived. And in the case of Kilmainham, this was used as a kind of a dump for national museum material. The abandonment of Dublin castle was a very specific thing. There is nothing written on it, but there is an anecdote that when De Valera came to power in the early thirties his followers wanted Dublin Castle raised to the ground, and, simply to obliterate the memory of English rule from it. And his reply was that the key should be turned

in the gate of Dublin Castle and it should be left to future generations to decide what happened.

Narrator

If Dublin Castle and Kilmainham Hospital were abandoned because of their colonial associations, the Post Office was a potent reminder of Irish martyrdom and was adopted as an emblematic building of the new state. The Office of Public Works undertook a careful and for its time, lavish restoration, completed in 1929. A memorial to the martyrs of 1916 underlines the status of the building. It depicts the mythical Irish hero Cú Chulainn who bound himself to a tree to hold his courage in the face of death.