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‘Such a piece of curiosity’: John Aheron’s *A General Treatise of Architecture*

Dr Christine Casey

John Aheron’s *A General Treatise of Architecture* of 1754 was the most ambitious architectural publication to emerge from Ireland in the eighteenth century. The treatise survives also in two manuscript versions, the first copy at the British Library and the second at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.¹ These laborious hand-written folios are striking evidence of John Aheron’s eccentricity. Remarkable feats of draughtsmanship, both volumes are meticulously executed in pen and ink to simulate the copper plates and printed characters of a published work. (Fig. 1)

Aheron’s emulation of copper-plate engraving is a bemusing achievement. Each drawing comprises hundreds if not thousands of narrowly spaced, impeccably ruled lines drawn in horizontal, vertical and diagonal configurations in order to distinguish light and shade, and to highlight the separate features of each design. The impetus for Aheron’s curious graphic technique and the stimulus of his architectural ambition can be attributed to Sir Edward O’ Brien Bt. of Dromoland in County Clare, whose patronage and support were clearly acknowledged by his Aheron in the initial manuscript treatise.² A volume of drawings of architectural and landscape garden designs formerly at Dromoland Castle contains pen and ink drawings by Aheron executed in an impressive hatched technique which simulates the dense burin-incised lines of copper-plate engraving.³ The Dromoland drawings are characterized by a curious archaic and Frenchified spelling. Aberrations such as the ‘niew’ garden, the ‘vorder’ ‘walek’, the ‘meashur’ or the door ‘haed’ appear to be the confused constructions of a young man who may well have begun life as an Irish speaker as do the frequent forays into French which occur throughout the inscriptions.

The Dromoland drawings which simulate the technique of copper-plate engraving are but an inkling of what Aheron was to accomplish in his two manuscript treatises. Each of these is a large folio volume executed entirely in pen and ink to simulate the appearance of a published book. They are undoubtedly among the most eccentric productions in the history of European draughtsmanship. While fair copies of manuscript books and maps were produced for monarchs and wealthy aristocrats during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were prized for their craftsmanship, John Aheron appears to have been unique in his peculiar zeal to rival copper-plate engraving.⁴ Not surprisingly, the execution of the two manuscripts took over a decade to complete.

Aheron’s purpose in pursuing this remarkable project was to achieve the publication of his treatise. In this he was clearly successful and there can be little doubt that the impact of these spectacular manuscripts upon prospective subscribers was of crucial importance to the book which finally appeared in Dublin in 1754. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Aheron’s manuscript treatises is the very fact that there are two in existence. Aheron hints at his reason

THE P R E F A C E

[Lined]

A Preface here is in a manner needless, the Title Page, and the foregoing Table so fully express the chief Matters in this Volume; however, lest the Reader might expect I should address my self to him by way of Preface, I shall in a small Room left me, first let him know who induced me to write this Treatise, and then give him a short View of the chief things contained therein, without troubling him by expatiating on the Excellency and Usefulness of the Art of Building, for giving of Instructions thereupon in this Place, would be no more than repeating over what has been already said by several learned Authors that came before me.

Having employed some Part of my time in the Study of Architecture, I drew a few Plans and Elevations of Houses, & other Pieces of Architecture, which I shew'd to some Friends of mine, well skill'd in the Art of Building, the Approbation and Praise of whom induced me (thinking it would meet with a favourable Reception and Encouragement from the Lovers of Art, and true Patrons of this Kingdom) to write the following Treatise, which I have divided into five Books; and so I wrote it chiefly for the Benefit and Improvement of young Beginners, and such who are yet entire Strangers to the Building Trade; I thought proper to deliver in my first Book such Rules and Examples as are absolutely necessary to prepare them for a thorough Digestion of what follows in the second Book; and that, in as plain and intelligible a manner as my design'd brevity could allow me.

In Book I. Geom. I. are exhibited Reductions of Arithmetick in whole Numbers in all its Branches, the single Rule of three direct, commonly call'd the Golden Rule, and by some, the Rule of Proportion; the double Rule of three direct, the double Rule of three revere, together with the Rules of Practice, all Explained by various Examples.

Chap. 2. Newtion, Reduction, Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, and Division of vulgar Fractions; also Decimal Arithmetick in all its Parts, very necessary for all Artificers, as being both for the ready finding the different Parts of all their Materials, and the exact measuring of their different kinds of Work.

Chap. 3. Definitions of Lines, Angles, and Surfaces, together with a large Collection, containing forty three Problems in Practical Geometry, most absolutely necessary for all Artificers to know, before they can possibly become good Proficients in any other Plans, Elevations, or Sections of any Building.

Chap. 4. Contains a true Definition of Sines, Tangents, and Secants ac. or those Lines belonging to a Circle; by which the Angles of every Right-lined Triangle are measured, together with their Construction, or Make; shewing how they are deduced from a Circle, and thence transferred to Right Lines; Also the Ratio, Reason or Habitude, which these Lines have in Respect of the Diameters of a Circle in natural Numbers; Likewise the instrumental Contrivances of the Lines of Sines, Tangents and Secants; also the Agreement that these Right Lines have in respect of the Radius or Semidiameter of a Circle.

Chap. 5. A brief and clear Explanation of the Logarithms of natural Numbers, and the Table of proportional Parts, usually subjoin'd therewith; and also of the Table of Sines, Tangents and Secants, together with their Use & Operations in the Arithmeticks; Also the admirable Use of the Logarithms in Arithmetick, shewing with what surprizing Ease and Expedition by the help of them, Multiplication and Division of either whole, mixt number, or Fraction may be wondrously performed, likewise the Extraction of the Square, Cube, or Squadrat Root.

Chap. 6. The Solution of all the Cases of Right-angled plain Triangles Geometrically and Arithmetically performed, and in Chap. 7. The Solution of all the Cases of oblique Angled plain Triangles performed after the same manner.

Chap. 8. sheweth how to Extract the Square Root; Chap. 9. sheweth how to Extract the Cube Root; Chap. 10. sheweth how to measure all kinds of Surfaces and Solids. This Book is concluded with several useful Tables, viz. first, A Table shewing how to find the Square and Cube Root of any Number not exceeding 100000000. Secondly, A Table of Artificial Sines and Tangents to every Degree and five Minutes of the Quadrant. Thirdly, a Table of Logarithms for any Number from a Unit to 100000. lastly a Table of Proportional Parts.

Book II. Contains a General Treatise of Architecture divided into twelve Sections; The first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh Sections of which I have taken from the most celebrated Architect *Sob. L. De Witt*, who is soverely allow'd by all impartial Judges, to have *know'd more of Architecture than any one man that ever wrote on this Subject, either since his Time or before it*; wherefore, (both for the Benefit of my Reader, and the Credit of his Work) I have chas'd him for my Guide in the beginning of this Book.

Section 1. Treats of Architecture in general, of the beautiful manner of Building, and the Knowledge necessary for an Architect to become eminent in, all the Orders of Columns; lastly of their different Orders. Sect. 2. Of the Tables, or the second Tables, of the Doric, Tuscan, and Corinthian Orders. Sect. 3. Of the Tables, or the third Tables, of the Ionic, Composite, and Corinthian Columns, Capitals, and Orders of Columns, Terms or Trunks, of Arches, or Portico's supported by Columns, of Entablatures with Returns of unequal Proportions, and of the Attic Story. Sect. 4. Of the Affinities of Orders. Sect. 5. Of Gates, or Doors, Windows, Pediments, Niches, Statues, and Pyramids. Sect. 6. Of Balustrades and Balustrades. Sect. 7. Of Pediments, or Fronts, together with some particular Observations.

Section 8. A brief Compendium of the Ground Rules of Architecture. Sect. 9. Of the proper Materials for building any Edifice with their Estimation; Rules to be observed in the measuring of all the Works belonging to a great Artificer relating to the building any Edifice, great or small.

Section 10. Containing a Description of several Sorts of Stairs. Sect. 11. Contains the set Rule for framing all manner of Roofs, whether Square or Bevel. Sect. 12. Here are Directions for measuring several Artificers Works, concern'd in Building, viz. Carpenters, Joiners, Diggers, Bricklayers, Plasterers, Masons, Glaziers, Painters, Plumbers, Pewsters, and Smiths; and under each Head the Prices of several Sorts of Work and Materials; collected from several approved Authors; Likewise a Table shewing both the Prices of the most common Materials used in Building, according to the London Art of Building; Also Arithmetical Rules and Analyses concerning Doors, Windows, Gates, Halls, Galleries, Antichambers, Chambers, Places, Chimnies, Jells, Kitchens, and Materials; Here is likewise given a Method for finding the exact Module or Diameter of any Column, or Pilaster in the five Orders of Architecture, in Proportion to any Height three several Ways: First, by Arithmetical Calculation; Secondly, Geometrically by Scale and Compass; and thirdly, by an Inspectional plain Table; and that in all the Variety of Cases that can possibly happen in Practice. See Page 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

London Palladia, Section 10. Containing a Description of several Sorts of Stairs. Sect. 11. Contains the set Rule for framing all manner of Roofs, whether Square or Bevel. Sect. 12. Here are Directions for measuring several Artificers Works, concern'd in Building, viz. Carpenters, Joiners, Diggers, Bricklayers, Plasterers, Masons, Glaziers, Painters, Plumbers, Pewsters, and Smiths; and under each Head the Prices of several Sorts of Work and Materials; collected from several approved Authors; Likewise a Table shewing both the Prices of the most common Materials used in Building, according to the London Art of Building; Also Arithmetical Rules and Analyses concerning Doors, Windows, Gates, Halls, Galleries, Antichambers, Chambers, Places, Chimnies, Jells, Kitchens, and Materials; Here is likewise given a Method for finding the exact Module or Diameter of any Column, or Pilaster in the five Orders of Architecture, in Proportion to any Height three several Ways: First, by Arithmetical Calculation; Secondly, Geometrically by Scale and Compass; and thirdly, by an Inspectional plain Table; and that in all the Variety of Cases that can possibly happen in Practice. See Page 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

Fig. 1 'The Preface'. Manuscript treatise of architecture by John Aheron. Pen and ink. British Library MS Kings 282. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

for producing two volumes in public subscription proposals of 1753. In an apology to subscribers who had already long since contributed to the project, Aheron explained that the delay in publishing his book was due to the compilation of a second 'vastly superior' treatise.⁵ This he hoped would reward the patience of his former contributors and stimulate increased support for the publication. Thus despite the fact that both volumes are inscribed with a completion date of 1751, it is clear that one preceded the other and that the second was considered by its author to be a more accomplished work.

The Dromoland Album firmly establishes that Aheron was employed by Sir Edward O'Brien as early as 1740, when he produced drawings of the Dromoland stable buildings. The second chronological sign-post in the development of Aheron's career is a Dublin newspaper report of May 1745, which provides the earliest reference to his projected treatise of architecture. This is worth quoting in full both for its description of the manuscript and for its vivid evocation of Aheron's *entree* to society in the capital. An account of proceedings at a meeting of the Dublin Society, article recounted that:

'Mr John Aheron of the County of Clare laid before the society, a treatise of architecture in folio, all written with his own hand in so fine a Roman character, that everyone who saw it could not believe but that it was print; and all the designs, cuts and plans of buildings which are near 200 and well executed are so exquisitely done with the pen, that they cannot be distinguished or outdone by copper plates. This is such [a] piece of curiosity, that the like is not to be seen in the best library's or collections, and shews a good taste and genius for architecture, though the author was never out of the kingdom, nor in Dublin till this time. This laborious work took four years in the composure and writing; and we hear he proposes to have it printed, when he can get a sufficient number of subscribers.'⁶

It is clear therefore that Aheron compiled his first manuscript between 1740 and 1744 in the provincial context of Dromoland in County Clare. Several tell-tale items included in the London manuscript clearly identify it as the initial version. These are a palace design signed and dated 1743, two designs for Dromoland House close to those in the Dromoland album, and a lengthy preface acknowledging Aheron's indebtedness to Sir Edward O'Brien. The Dromoland designs do not appear in the Metropolitan version and the tribute to O'Brien was pasted over by Aheron following an apparent breach between the two men.

Though different in several significant respects to the later Metropolitan manuscript and to the published treatise, the London manuscript contains all of the basic elements of Aheron's completed book. It is a blueprint which was successively refined and reduced to produce the final printed version. In it, the young copyist of engravings has become the presumptive spokesman for the entire European classical architectural tradition. Fired by his enthusiasm for architectural books Aheron, in this his first manuscript, proposes to condense the existing thinking on the subject, to subjoin to it a selection of his own architectural designs and thereby to produce a comprehensive manual for the student and enthusiast. The first book is an introduction to basic arithmetic, practical geometry and measuring practice. The second contains a general discourse on architecture together with advice and information on practical building construction. The third book is an account of the classical orders on the comparative method and books four and five contain designs for buildings and architectural details. The content of Aheron's treatise is highly eclectic and reflects the particular range of sources available to him at Dromoland, principally Sebastien Le Clerc, Fréart de Chambray, William Kent and Colen Campbell.

The illustrations of English seventeenth-century architecture in Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715–21) exerted a significant influence upon Aheron's style. The employment of giant orders, vigorously rusticated facades, monumentally scaled round-headed windows and large square attic windows seen throughout Aheron's designs reflects the provincial Baroque vocabulary of late seventeenth-century English country house architecture. In some instances particular models are discernible such as plate 32 of Kings 282 (Fig. 2) which is a paraphrase of Webb's Gunnersbury House as depicted in plate 18 (Fig. 3) in volume two of *Vitruvius Britannicus* attributed to Jones, or plate 30 which derives from Vanbrugh's Eastbury.

A virtuoso drawing of two brick piers in the Dromoland Album was based directly upon plate 61 of William Kent's *Designs of Inigo Jones* (1728) and the rendering of that drawing, in its remarkable reliance upon the engraved plate clearly demonstrated the origins of Aheron's idiosyncratic graphic style. In the London manuscript Kent is again Aheron's source of inspiration. The design for a 'magnificent palace' in book five derives from the first volume of the *Designs of Inigo Jones* in which William Kent illustrated Webb's schemes for Whitehall Palace, then accepted as Jones's designs. The grandeur of Webb's conception and

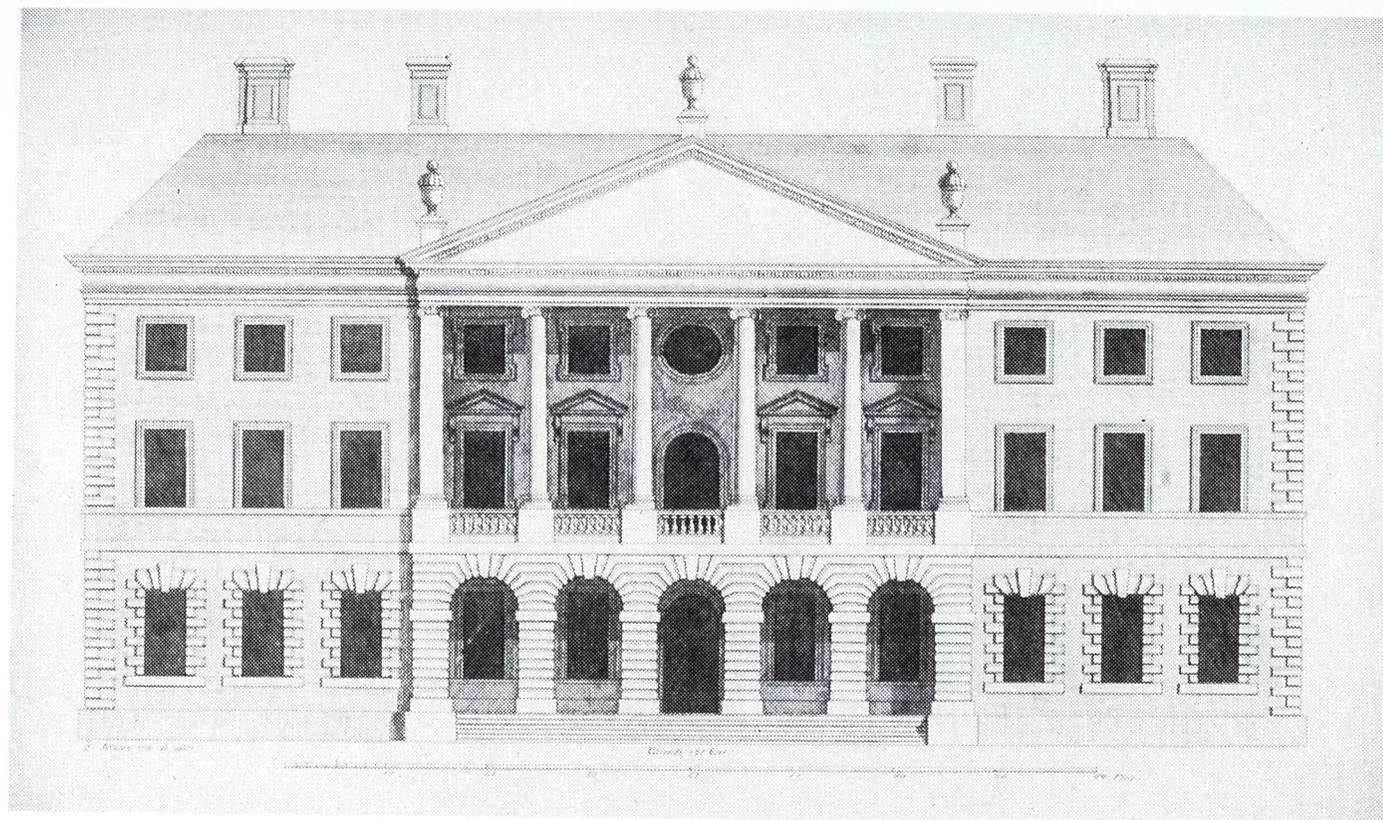


Fig. 2 'The main front of the foregoing house. . . .' 'Plate 32'. Manuscript treatise of architecture by John Aheron. Pen and ink. British Library MS Kings 282. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

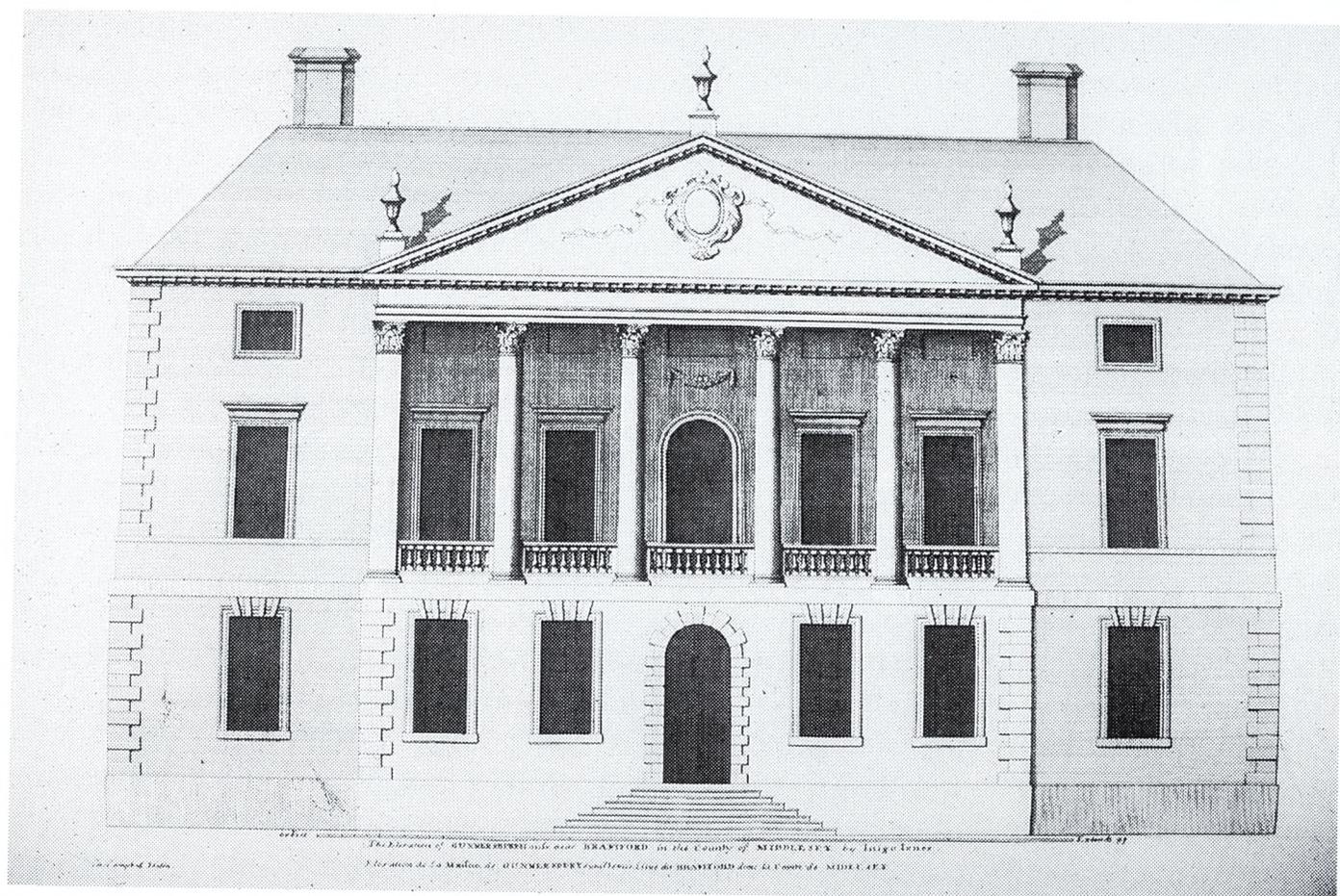


Fig. 3 'The elevation of Gunnersbury House near Brantford in the County of Middlesex by Inigo Jones' from Colen Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, vol ii, London, 1717. Plate 18.

the vigour of Kent's drawings were powerfully evoked in the plates of Cole, Huylsburgh and Foudrinier and these clearly were Aheron's youthful training ground. The finest drawings in Kings 282 relate closely to Kent's Whitehall plates and there can be little doubt that his virtuoso style was directly inspired by them (Fig. 4). A similarity in the scale of some drawings might even suggest that Aheron perhaps initially traced directly from his Jonesian models.⁷

Though Aheron claims to include designs for 'publick' buildings, apart from the palace scheme book five is entirely devoted to domestic architecture and principally to country-house designs. Most of these are grandiose plans for very extensive buildings. A mere seven designs out of 48 depict houses under 80 ft in length, while most average between 150 and 200 ft. In amalgamating the vocabulary of Palladianism with that of the English Baroque Aheron effects a peculiar hybrid style that is original only in its excessive employment of oculi, thermal window and pineapple finials. It is an eccentric provincial synthesis which clearly stems from the bookish ferment of Aheron's untutored architectural sensibility.

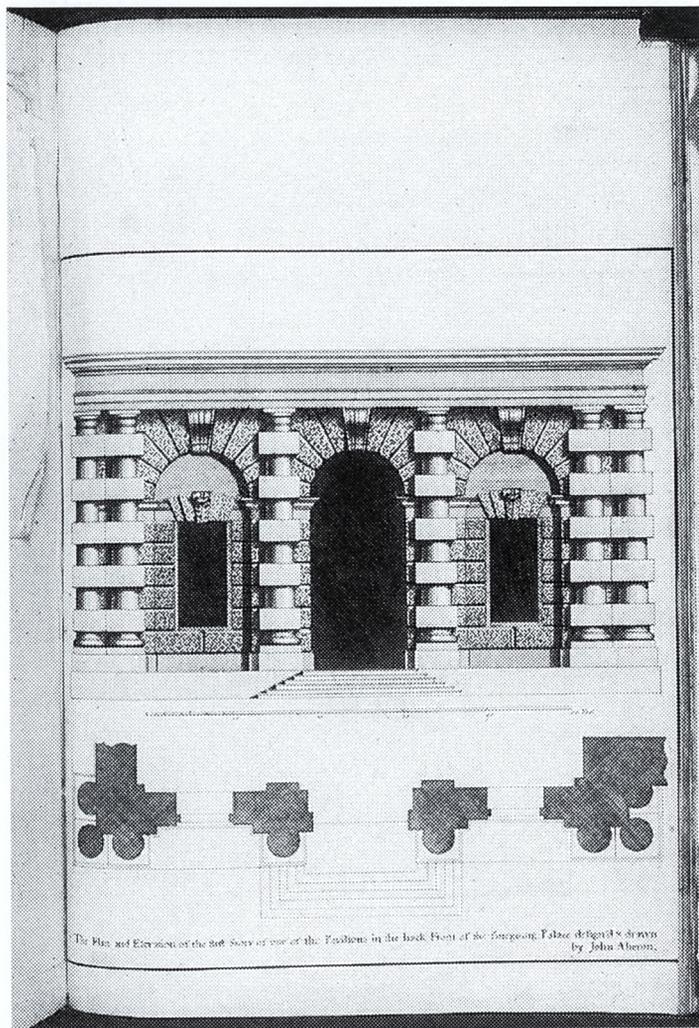


Fig. 4 'The plan and elevation of the first story of one of the pavilions in the back front of the foregoing palace design'd and drawn by John Aheron'. Manuscript treatise of architecture by John Aheron. Pen and ink. British Library MS Kings 282. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

The uneven preliminary character of Aheron's first manuscript is nowhere more clearly seen than in its actual physical composition. The book is a leather-bound folio volume composed of a variety of paper types and sizes. Nothing other than scissors-and-paste compilation can account for certain differences in the scale and execution of plates throughout the volume. The combination of large scale designs, hastily executed plans and pasted *pentimenti* are tangible evidence of Aheron's long and laborious task. However the most striking illustration of the volume's gradual and piecemeal composition is a group of eleven plates which are interspersed throughout book five, each of which appears to have been a presentation drawing in its own right.⁸ These are large, mostly fold-out plates each meticulously crafted and framed by a deep black border. Of the 11 drawings, two are for houses and nine are part of the palace scheme.

Among these is 'The ground plan and elevation of a house extending 325 ft designed and drawn by J. Aheron' which depicts an enormous nineteen-bay three-storey building with advanced wings, a central pedimented temple front over a loggia and three roof lanterns, with something of the air of a European governmental palace Aheron provides the principal elevation 'from an evening view', below it a plan of the building, and below this a second miniature elevation of the front 'by a small scale taken from a morning view'. (Fig. 5) This odd presentation is unique in Aheron's work and has all the air of a youthful virtuoso exercise. The

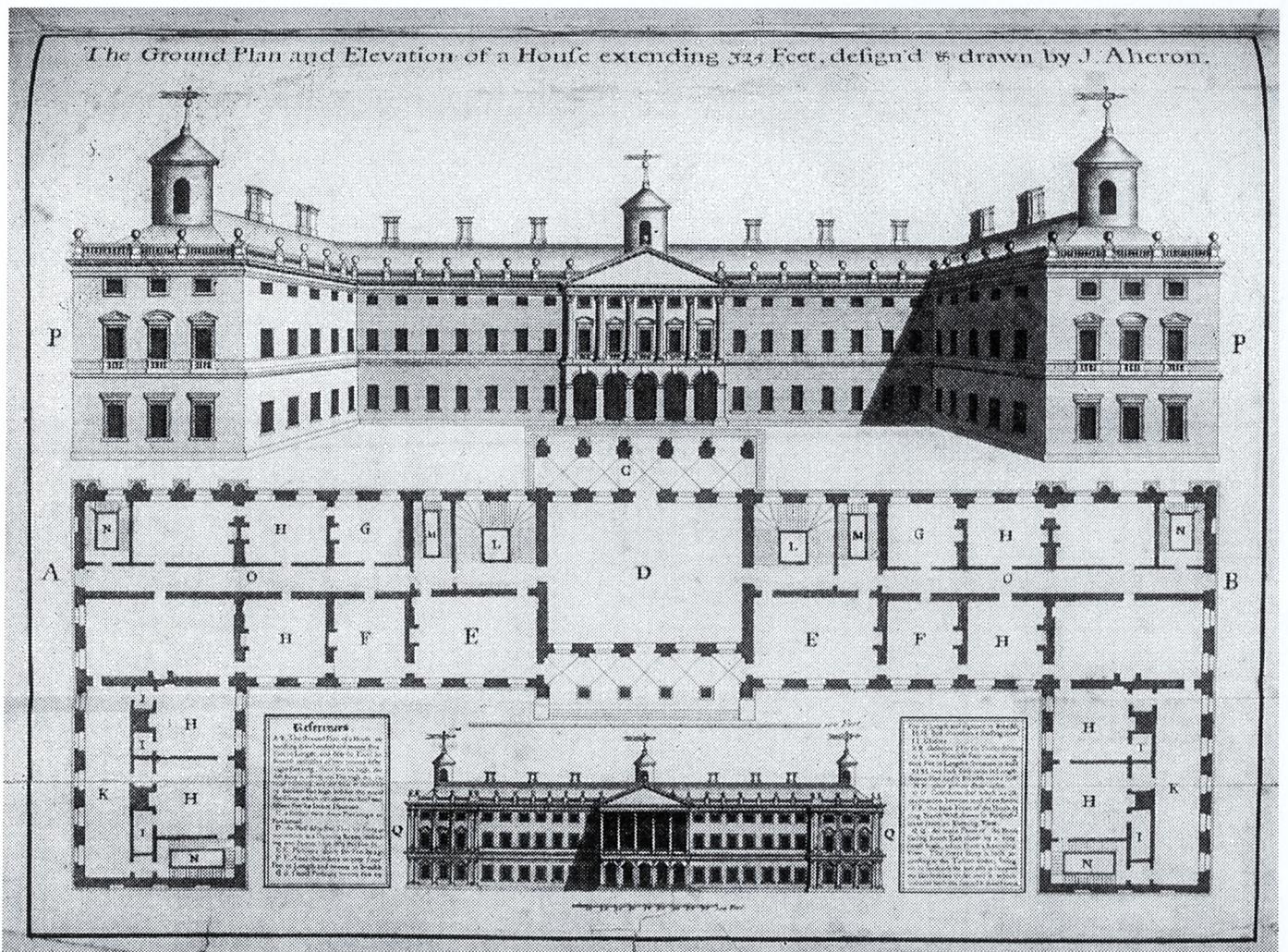


Fig. 5 'The ground plan and elevation of a house extending 325 feet design'd and drawn by J. Aheron'. Manuscript treatise of architecture by John Aheron. Pen and ink. British Library MS Kings 282. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

formal black-bordered plates for the palace project are undoubtedly the finest drawings ever produced by Aheron. Despite his reliance upon Kent and Jones, these are not straightforward copies of the Whitehall scheme. However here content is less significant and the primary interest of these drawings lies in Aheron's remarkable graphic style which does not simply emulate copper-plate engraving but consciously rivals it. There is here a freshness and vigour which Aheron was never again to accomplish.

In considering Aheron's manuscript as a whole and in the context of contemporary architectural publications, what is perhaps most striking is the dearth of designs for specific buildings. The London manuscript contains a mere three plates depicting tangible building projects. Plates 40, 41 and 42 of book five illustrate designs for two Irish houses. The latter are the plan and elevation for Dromoland House discussed in connection with the Dromoland Album, while the former is entitled 'A new design for the front of Stradbally-hall in the Queens County belonging to Poole Cosby Esq.'⁹

With the exception of the Dromoland and Stradbally designs, there is distinct aura of unreality about Aheron's treatise. The gigantic scale of his house designs with their grandiose plans and elaborate classical vocabulary stands in stark contrast to the reality of building activity in Ireland during the 1740s. Russborough and Powerscourt as the most ambitious building projects of the decade fall far below Aheron's notion of a country house both in scale and grandeur. Indeed the only Irish house of the period which would have approached Aheron's grandiose conceptions was Summerhill in County Meath built in the previous decade and undoubtedly the most ambitious country house ever built in Ireland. There can be little doubt that Kent's plates of Whitehall Palace had much to do with the shaping of Aheron's fantasy projects. Yet however amusing and entertaining to dilettantes and connoisseurs, such castles in the air were clearly not in sympathy with the utilitarian ethos of the Dublin Society.

It is worth briefly considering the reaction of Aheron's audience at the Dublin Society to the manuscript laid before them in May of 1745. While Aheron was accredited with 'a good taste and genius for architecture', his book appears to have been acclaimed for its graphic quality rather than for the value of its architectural content.¹⁰ Even the confused description of Aheron's drawings as 'cuts', demonstrates the spirit in which the manuscript was received. Though Aheron must have been gratified by the appreciation of his virtuoso talents, the altered scope of his second manuscript suggests that he was also strongly affected by the practical architectural concerns of the Dublin Society. The broader and more modern character of the second treatise suggests that at some point Aheron benefited from a thorough-going practical criticism of his initial manuscript. The meeting of the Dublin Society on the 18th May 1745 was a likely venue for such analysis, particularly as it was also the date for concluding the Society's sole architectural competition of the decade.

This was competition for designs of 'houses from two to eight rooms on a floor' which reflected the Society's concern for the design of modestly scaled country houses. The architect Richard Castle advised the selection committee on the merits of the submissions from six architects, among them Michael Wills and George Ensor. John Aheron witnessed the verdict awarding the premium to Ensor and very probably had an opportunity to examine the submitted plans. He may well have discussed both the competition designs and his own manuscript with George Ensor, Michael Wills and the other competitors, who conceivably were present for the announcement of the premium as they had been at the initial meeting on the 9th May. Wills' surviving plans for the competition with their lucid compact plans and 'oeconomick' considerations are a far cry from Aheron's late baroque extravaganzas.¹¹

The differences between the first and second manuscript treatises strongly suggest that

Aheron paid more than casual attention to the competition of 1745 and to the Dublin Society's notion of a practical economic approach to building. Aheron's own description in 1753 of the second 'superior' version of the treatise plainly suggests that the first manuscript was considered to be in some way deficient.¹² It is difficult to tell whether the changes in Aheron's scheme were prompted simply by a zealous response to criticism or by a lack of sufficient financial support for publication. Either way the lesson was a sobering one and the Metropolitan manuscript is far more down-to-earth in its scope than the London treatise. The volume is inscribed with the completion date 1751 and assuming that it demanded as much time as the first manuscript, we may conjecture that Aheron began to work on it in the year following his introduction to the Dublin Society.

The preface to the Metropolitan volume heralds the new developments in Aheron's scheme by admonishing Palladio and Inigo Jones for providing 'beautiful and magnificent designs . . . useful to men of superior fortunes only' and for 'the neglect of leaving small plans of houses suitable to gentlemen of small fortunes and farmers'. Aheron now proposes to remedy this situation by providing such designs, together with 'a method to guard gentlemen of small as large fortunes from being hurt by either the imposition or ignorance of unskilful pretenders to architecture'.

Reduction in the scale of designs and changes in the overall format of the treatise similarly reflect Aheron's altered sights. The palace for instance was reduced by 100 ft in length from the project in Kings 282, and was separated from the other designs to constitute a new sixth book. Whereas in the London manuscript a mere seven designs were given for small houses, here almost 50 designs were less than 100 ft in length. Larger houses were not abandoned however as book five had now 88 plates in contrast to 75 in the London volume, a third of which had been palace designs. Aheron thus managed to retain the bulk of his grandiose projects while tempering their effect by the addition of more practical schemes. Some of the grander house designs were reduced in scale and decoration was simplified.

The most obvious and significant of the changes evident in the second manuscript was clearly the provision of practical designs for public buildings. Aheron's design for a linen manufactory is remarkably the first instance of an industrial building type to appear in an architectural book.¹³ Of the seven church designs three are for very modest country churches and four for a large city church in a continental Baroque idiom. Combined with 50 designs for middle-sized houses and 30 for grandiose mansions, it is certainly a varied assemblage. However it is one which, unlike the London manuscript, clearly reflects the pattern of building activity in contemporary Ireland. The style of Aheron's designs similarly relate to Irish buildings of the period. Here the baroque character evident in the London manuscript is tempered by a more spartan Palladian idiom. The ubiquitous colossal order of Kings 282 is displaced by oculi, Venetian and Diocletian windows.

The New York manuscript contains seven drawings depicting designs for three Irish buildings. Plate 21 of book five displays 'the plan and elevation of a house extending 64 ft in length and 44 in breadth . . . design'd for Ballihigue in the County of Kerry, belonging to James Crosbie Esqr'. Plate 22 depicts 'the plan and elevation of a house extending 58 ft in length and 43 in breadth . . . designed for Courcy-Mont in the County of Cork belonging to the Rt. Hon. Lord de Courcy, Baron of Kinsale'. (Fig. 6) Five drawings, numbers 37-40, are devoted to the third Irish design for 'Rockforrest in the County of Cork, belonging to James Cotter esqr'. (Fig. 7) The latter, at 74 × 55 ft, though somewhat bigger than the former designs, was by no means grand in scale and the modest character of the three houses clearly reflects the only type of patronage which Aheron can have hoped for in Ireland during the 1740s.¹⁴

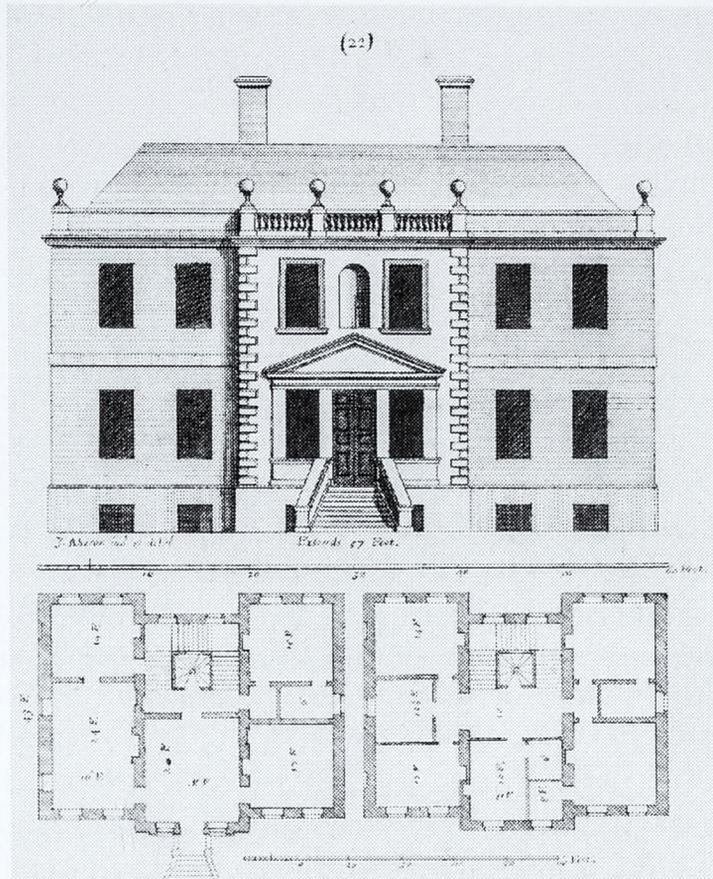


Fig. 6 'The plan and elevation of a house designed for Courcy-Mont in the County of Cork, J. Aheron invt. et delint.' Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Department of prints, (Harris Brisbane Dick Fund 1925. (25.47)). All rights reserved, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

While the London manuscript is conglomerate in character with abrupt changes in both the scale and execution of individual plates, the New York copy is a relatively uniform production displaying a similar style of execution throughout. The pasted *pentimenti* and the insertion of large fold-out plates in the London volume contrast with a neat and orderly format in the Metropolitan manuscript. A sense of certainty and of overall pattern manifest in the latter is absent in the scissors-and-paste aspect of the London volume. While it is not difficult to understand Aheron's preference for the second homogeneous copy as a more suitable marketable sample for prospective subscribers, the earlier volume has infinitely greater appeal. Quite apart from the curiosity of the changes and pasted additions, the London volume boasts some of Aheron's finest virtuoso drawings. The general impression derived from a comparison of the two manuscripts is one of depreciation both in spirit and in technique. It is not surprising that a sense of youthful and disorderly enthusiasm in the first draft should have given way to tidy yet unexciting workmanship in the second. After all, Aheron completed the Metropolitan volume 11 years after he had begun the first. A decade of painstaking labour must have curbed considerably his initial graphic and architectural zeal.

Nothing is known of John Aheron's activities between April 1751 when he completed the Metropolitan manuscript and March 1752 when he first published subscription proposals for the treatise. Surprisingly these proposals did not appear in an Irish newspaper but rather in London's *General Advertiser*.

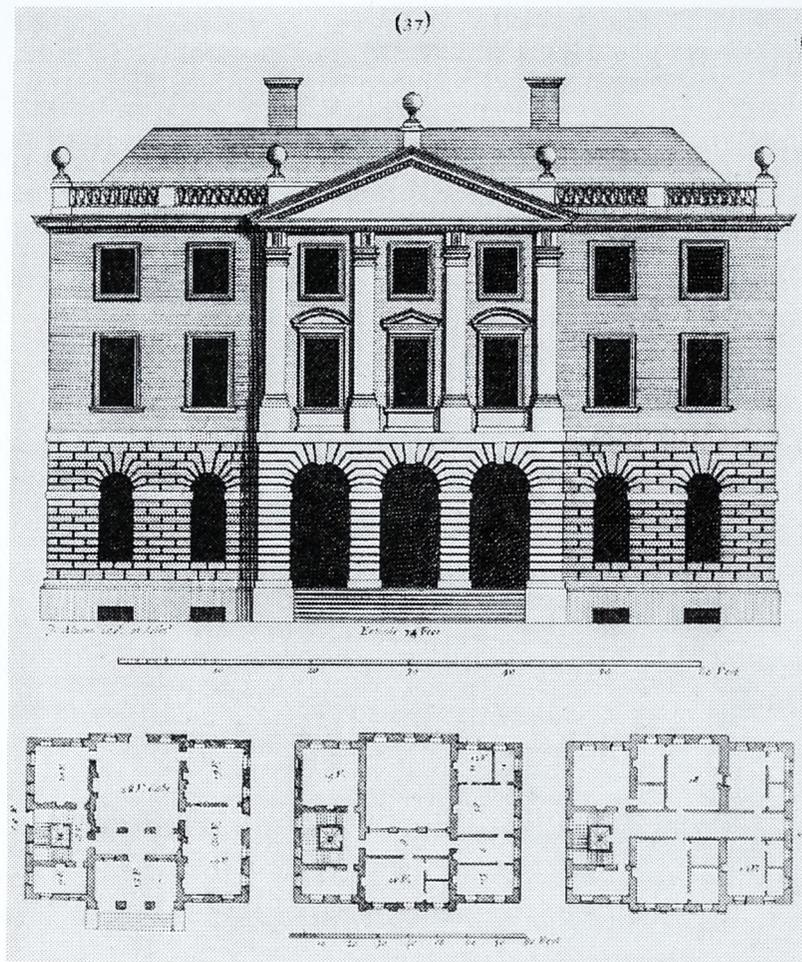


Fig. 7 'The plan and elevation of a house . . . designed for Rockforrest in the County of Cork, J. Aheron invt. et delint.' Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Department of prints, (Harris Brisbane Dick Fund 1925 (25.47)) All rights reserved, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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A LARGE TREATISE OF ARCHITECTURE in folio, at three guineas to subscribers, one half to be paid at the time of subscribing, and the other half at the delivery: the price to be raised to four guineas for non-subscribers.

Proposals may be seen at Mr. Haliday's, grocer, over-against the Red-Lion, Charing-Cross; where subscriptions are taken in by the author John Aheron, who will shew the manuscript copy to subscribers, at any time from eleven o' clock in the morning to one in the afternoon, and from three to seven, which is a large folio, near three inches thick, wrote in a Roman letter, counted by the best judges that saw it, to be such a piece of curiosity, that the like is not to be seen in the best libraries or collections: The drawings which are near 300 cuts, are done in so extraordinary a manner with common pen and ink, that they cannot be distinguished from or outdone by copper-plates: 'tis excessive copious of useful rules, remarks and observations, fully illustrated with 160 cuts: it also abounds with so great a variety of designs for buildings from 100 / expence to 100,000 / that a man in any station, from the poor farmer to the prince, can hardly fail of a design there suitable for his circumstances, with a calculation of the artificers works, and an estimate of the expence of each edifice, finished three different ways, viz. first, with common mortar; secondly; plaster of paris; thirdly wainscot, according to the prices of work and materials in the London Palladio.

The subscription will be closed the first of May next, at which time the author expects to have his work fit for the press, having already 130 of his plates engraved.¹⁵

Aheron appears to have moved to London either before he completed the second manuscript treatise in 1751, or shortly after its completion, as the plates for the treatise, virtually complete in 1752, were made by a London engraver.¹⁶ Aheron's motive in going to London was apparently two-fold; to gain fresh financial support for publishing his book and to have the plates engraved.

In the London subscription campaign Aheron was moderately successful, as the subscription list to the treatise includes prominent Irish landlords living in London, such as the Earl of Egmont and the Earl of Arran, and also several significant figures from English society and public life, among them the Duke of Devonshire, the Marquis of Tweeddale and Sir Thomas and Edward Southwell. However as in Dublin in 1745, the requisite number of subscribers was evidently not forthcoming and the treatise did not appear as promised in the summer of 1752. Eighteen months later Aheron was back in Dublin soliciting further subscriptions.¹⁷ It was now over eight years since he had presented his first manuscript to the Dublin Society and Aheron therefore clearly owed his Irish subscribers some explanation of the delay in publication. An embarrassing hiatus of eight years was politely disguised as 'some time ago' and the delay was attributed to Aheron's efforts in compiling 'a second treatise, vastly superior to the first' made in order to render the book 'still more worthy the names of his subscribers'.

These proposals were published in November of 1753 when the treatise was said to be then 'in the press'. Subscriptions were to be deposited at 'Mr Mellaghlin's in Loughboy' where Aheron, his manuscript and the copper-plates were to be seen. Loughboy was the market area of the city north of the river Liffey. Four Dublin booksellers including George Faulkner and John Smith also acted as subscription agents, as did the printer John Butler of Cork Hill. In May of 1754 *A General Treatise of Architecture* was finally published.¹⁸ Books were ready for collection at Mellaghlin's in Loughboy and rather surprisingly, having kept his audience waiting for nine years, Aheron urged subscribers to 'send for their books as soon as it may suit their conveniency' as the author was 'obliged in a few days to go into the country to see some buildings executed'. There is no record of the size of the edition but two printings were made with plates differently disposed in each.¹⁹

A General Treatise of Architecture was not a straightforward copy from the second manuscript treatise. Although the text of the treatise remained largely unaltered, there was one very significant change in the format of Aheron's published book, namely the omission of book six with its 23 palace designs. Further pruning reduced the number of designs in book five from 98 in the Metropolitan manuscript to 85 in the printed version. In one of the two printings three additional figures, not described in the table of contents, were squashed on to a final page. Ironically the grandiose palace which had consumed so much of Aheron's time and energy over the previous 14 years, and which had been the subject of his finest drawings, was now relegated to a mere three plates or at best four in those copies with the additional page. (Fig. 8) Clearly the decision to jettison book six and reduce the size of book five was prompted by economy and the high costs of copper-plate engraving. Despite Aheron's obvious attachment to his palatial schemes, by 1753 he presumably realized their irrelevance to contemporary architectural practice. The palace had become progressively smaller and more tame in character over the course of the previous decade, and it was the natural choice when drastic editing became necessary.

In his Dublin subscription proposals of 1753 Aheron took care to state that the copper-plates for the treatise had been engraved in London. Presumably this information was intended to impress prospective customers. The plates which Aheron refers to were engraved

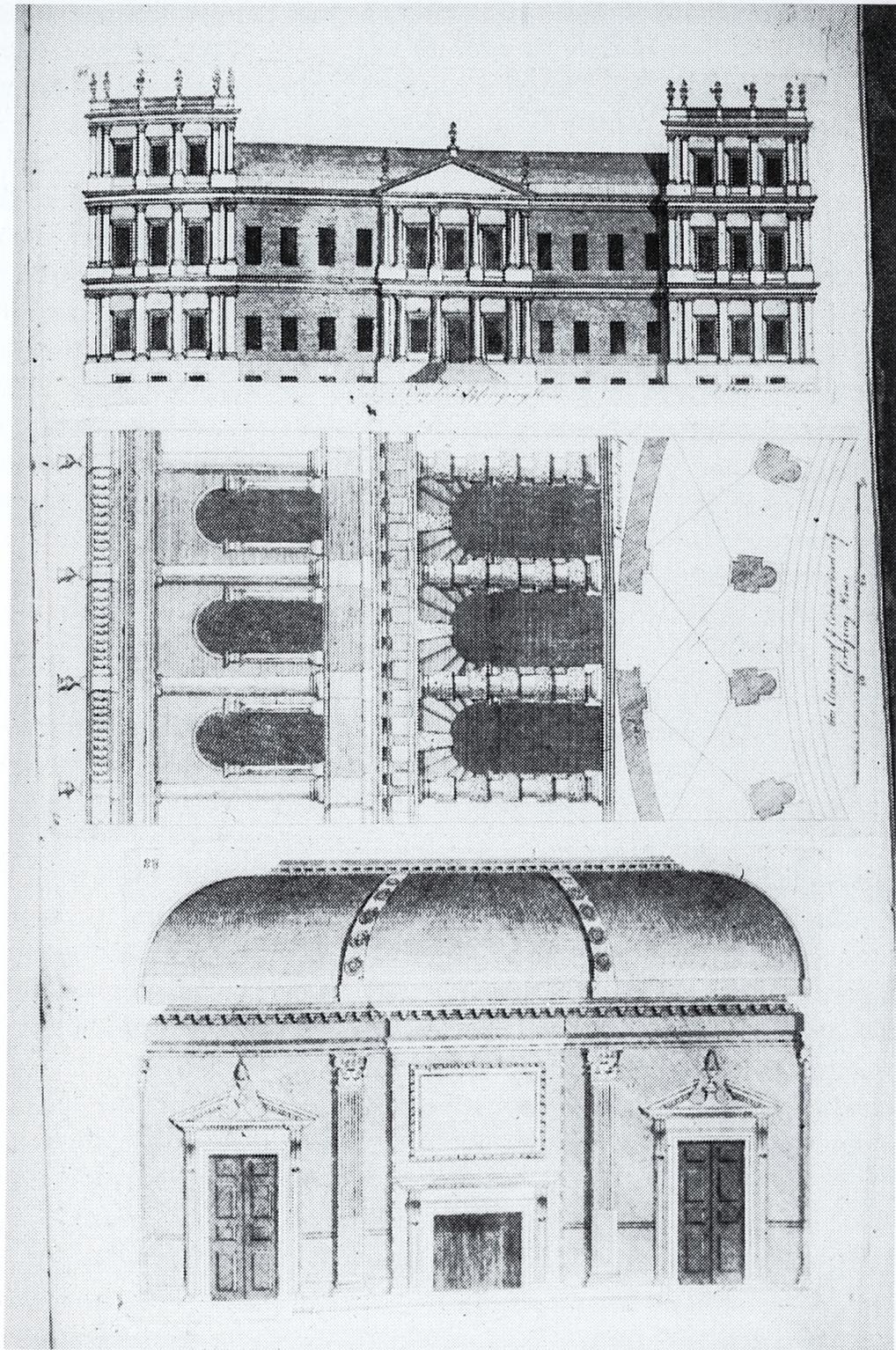


Fig. 8 John Aheron, *A General Treatise of Architecture*. Dublin, 1754.
Book V. Plates 86, 87, 88. Designs for a Palace.

by one J. Booth, whose career is apparently without documentary record. This is not surprising as his work was poor, and the plates to Aheron's treatise are a great disappointment in the wake of his meticulously crafted manuscripts. Not all of the plates however were engraved by Booth; Aheron himself engraved 20 of the plates for books four and five; and many of the plates of the orders in books two and three were left unsigned. While some of Aheron's own plates were a marked improvement on Booth's productions, overall the variety of cutting skills evident throughout the book is minimal. In some cases even quite an elegant

design is made to appear like a child's cardboard cut-out due to the simplicity of the engraving. (Fig. 9) A high incidence of simple line drawings interspersed amongst the more detailed prints leaves no doubt that at the eleventh hour economy and speed of production were uppermost in Aheron's mind.

The ill-effects produced by poorly-crafted copper-plates were compounded by an apparently hasty and careless printing. Oddly, Aheron's printer, John Butler of Cork Hill, appears to have had no difficulty in producing a neat and attractive typography for the text of the treatise yet the printing of the plates was a complete fiasco. Though Butler was an experienced printer, clearly Aheron's treatise was his first attempt at a large-scale illustrated book. It appears also to have been his last. In the several copies of the treatise examined for this study, many of the plates are badly spotted or smudged with ink and others are even crookedly impressed on to the pages. (Figs 10 and 11) There is a pathetic irony in the dramatic decline in quality from Aheron's remarkable drawings in a bogus engraved style to the real, but very mediocre, copper-plate engravings of the published treatise.

No records are forthcoming of contemporary reactions to Aheron's treatise and similarly there is no record of his architectural activity during the period. One possible indication of the book's success was the attempt by George Faulkner in August of 1754 to launch a *Vitruvius Hibernicus*.²⁰ A second indication that Aheron received some measure of acclaim for his treatise is a statement praising his ability, which appeared several years later in *An Essay on The Antient and Modern State of Ireland* (1759). Though published anonymously the essay is now thought to have been written by the poet, dramatist and propagandist, Henry Brooke.

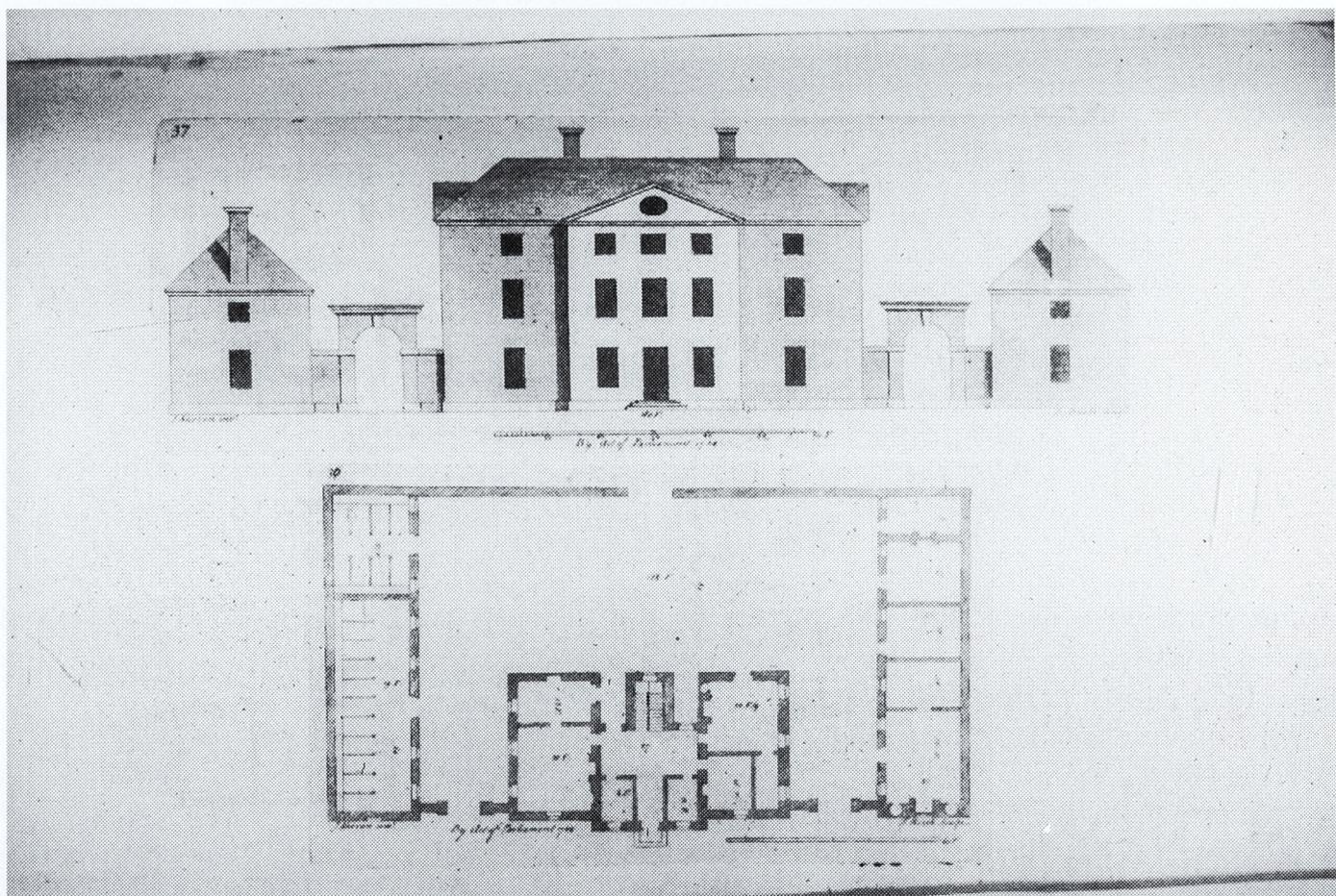


Fig. 9 John Aheron, *A General Treatise of Architecture*. Dublin, 1754. Book V. Plate 37. 'The plan and elevation of an Inn.'

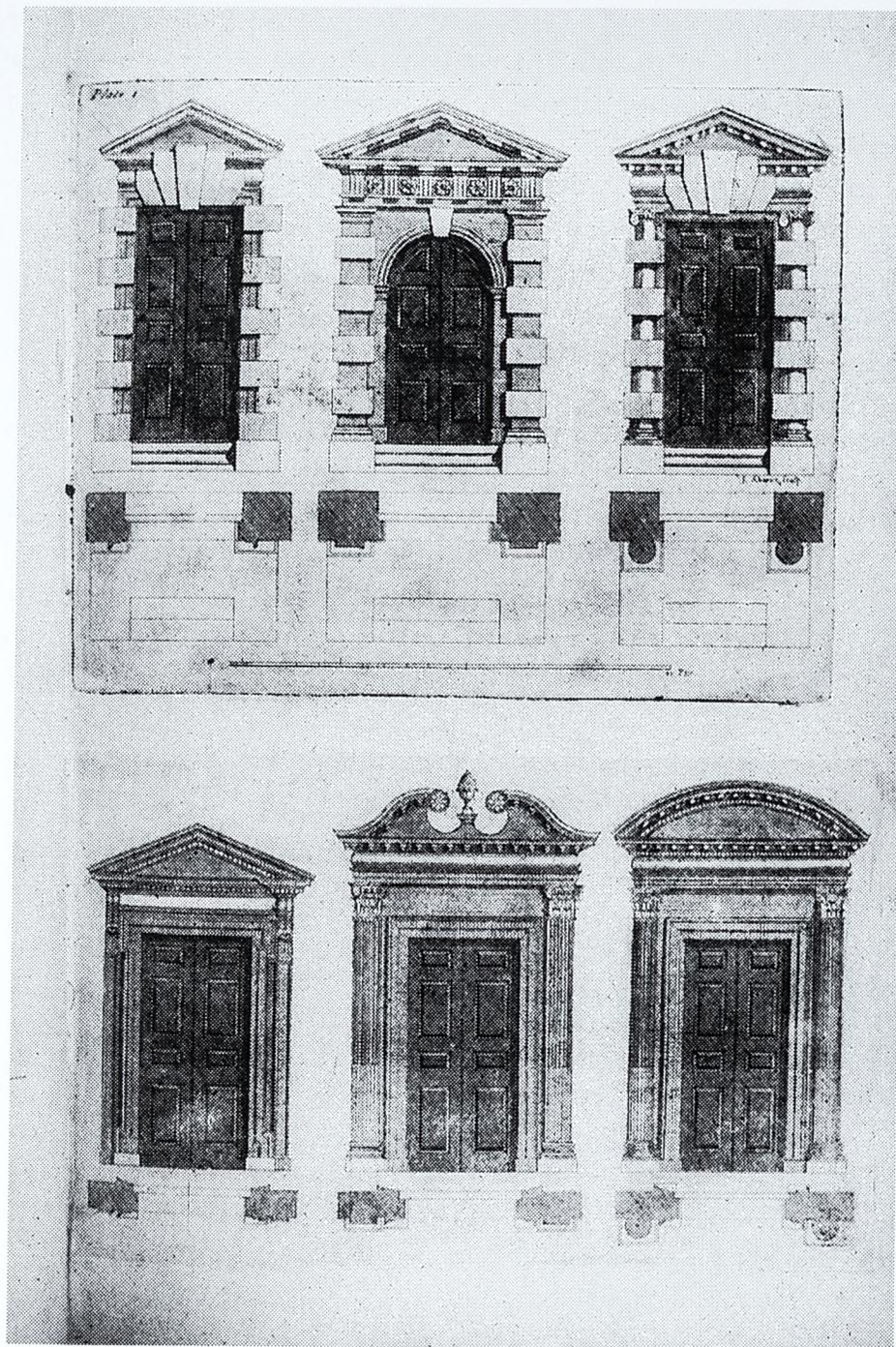


Fig. 10 John Aheron, *A General Treatise of Architecture*.
Dublin, 1754. Book IV. Plate 1. 'Rustic doors. . . .' Plate
2. 'Designs for inside, or outside doors'.

Architecture was one of the subjects discussed by Brooke to demonstrate the progress of modern Irish society. Here, as elsewhere, he was at pains to emphasize the folly of constantly seeking to emulate other countries and to import foreign architects and craftsmen.

'In the case of building, and in truth, in many others; we are (from our inherent hospitality) apt to set too high a value on foreigners: of whom some have appeared to be nothing more than forward prating, superficial pretenders. It is not the being a native of this country, that giveth real merit, judgment or taste; but a brain well adapted to calculation, and nice proportions; profound study; various readings; close application, and strict observation'. The Irishman chosen by Brooke to illustrate his argument was John Aheron, whom he maintained was 'if not superior, at least equal to any foreign architect that ever appeared amongst us'.²¹

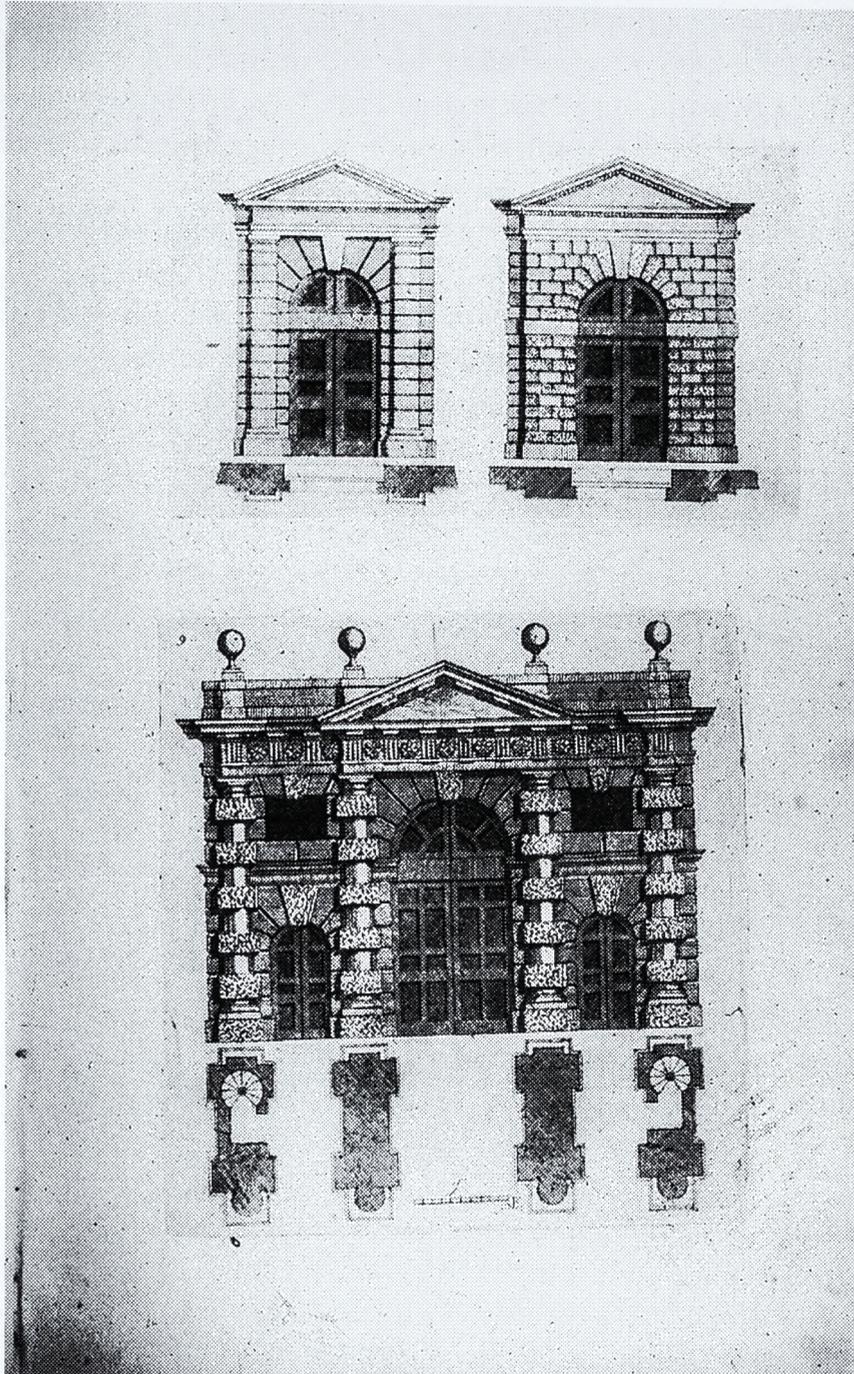


Fig. 11 John Aheron, *A General Treatise of Architecture*.
 Dublin, 1754. Book IV. Plate 8. 'Designs for rustic gates'
 Plate 9. 'A design for a grand entablature of the Doric,
 with block and column'.

Fear and resentment towards the influx of foreign architects into Ireland, as voiced in Henry Brooke's essay, was a common sentiment among the native architectural profession throughout the eighteenth century. John Aheron suffered from this self-same bug-bear. The only document of his career for the remainder of the 1750s suggests that he was a man disappointed in his professional ambitions and embittered by the preferment of foreign architects for all of the major public commissions of the mid-eighteenth century. Now framed as an ornamental print, this consists of a large folio sheet printed with two copper-plate engravings of designs for Trinity College Dublin, flanked on each side by a vertical half-sheet column of printed text entitled *Remarks and Observations on the Building Carrying on for a Certain College*.²²

Essentially this is a lengthy criticism of the west front of the building, accompanied by Aheron's proposal to take over responsibility for the design and complete it in a far more grandiose manner, for a fraction of the estimated cost.²³ In it Aheron echoes Henry Brooke's sentiments in accusing the college authorities of supposing 'that no native of this kingdom, can equal a foreigner in point of taste or judgment'.

An inscription on a piece of paper pasted into the Metropolitan manuscript offers the only other record of Aheron's activity during the 1750s. This is short and rather poignant. 'Bought this book from the author in Dublin 17th March 1758 for which I paid him 12(?) guineas'. Though the exact payment for the manuscript is difficult to decipher, the very fact that Aheron parted with this volume which had consumed almost a decade of his life, suggests that he was in straightened financial circumstances. If 12 guineas was indeed the price paid, the story is then even more pathetic, as four years previously the published treatise was being sold to non-subscribers for four guineas per volume. The only recorded professional work by Aheron between his Trinity College proposals and his death in 1761 was a series of rather mediocre drawings of Dublin buildings made for the *Dublin Magazine* c. 1760.²⁴ However his death on the 7th of January 1761 occurred not in Ireland but in London, at his lodgings in the cheap artists' quarter of the city in Long Acre.²⁵ Though the *Dublin Journal* noted his death, no obituary has been found. It was an ignominious end to a quite remarkable career.

Ruins of this building were photographed in 1882 by L. Fiorillo: photograph in the Royal Commonwealth Society Library, London.

NOTES TO PAGES 65–80

- 1 British Library. MS Kings 282. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Dept. of prints. Harris-Brisbane Dick Fund 25.47.
- 2 BL. MS Kings 282. 'My undertaking to write this treatise is greatly owing to Sir Edward O'Brien Baronet being the chief Person, who gave rise to my ambition and desire for the study of architecture . . . '.
- 3 The Dromoland Album is in a private collection and is now inaccessible to scholars. Photographic copies are available at the National Library of Ireland (MS 2791) and at the Irish Architectural Archive.
- 4 In the Irish context a good example of a fair copy in an architectural genre, is Jacques Wibault's 'Traité de l'Architecture Militaire' executed in 1701 for the Duke of Ormond. Map making offers more numerous examples. Collection of the Irish Architectural Archive.
- 5 *Pues Occurances*, 24 Nov 1753.
- 6 *The Dublin Courant*. 18 May 1745.
- 7 BL. MS Kings 282, book 5, plates 52, 54, 55, 58.
- 8 BL. MS Kings 282, book 5, Plates 12, 43, 53, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67.
- 9 Stradbally was largely rebuilt in the nineteenth century. A painting of c. 1740 depicts a bird's-eye view of the demesne and a house which differs only in detail from Aheron's design.
- 10 *The Dublin Courant*. 18 May 1745.
- 11 RIBA drawings collection. Michael Wills, 'Designs for private buildings of two, three, four five and six rooms on a floor and one of eight rooms. Dublin 9 May 1745.
- 12 *Pues Occurances*, 24 Nov. 1753.
- 13 Eileen Harris & Nicholas Savage. *British architectural books and writers 1556–1785*. Cambridge; New York, 1990. p. 105.
- 14 Courcy-Mont is now gone, Ballyheigue and Rockforrest, though still standing have been greatly altered since the eighteenth century.
- 15 *General Advertiser*, 16 March 1752.
- 16 *Pues Occurances*, 24 Nov. 1753. This refers to the 'plates which were engrav'd in London'.
- 17 *Pues Occurances*, 24 Nov. 1753.
- 18 *Pues Occurances*, 30 April 1754.
- 19 Harris & Savage op. cit. p. 105.
- 20 *The Dublin Journal*, 17 Aug 1754.
- 21 [Brooke (Henry)]. *An essay on the ancient and modern state of Ireland*. Dublin, 1759. 77.
- 22 Trinity College Library. Early Printed Books.
- 23 For the building of the west front of Trinity

College see Edward Mc Parland, 'Trinity College, Dublin – I', in *Country Life*, clix, no. 4114 (6 May 1976) pp. 1166–9.

- 24 *The Dublin Magazine for the year 1762*. Dublin, 1762.
- 25 *Dublin Journal*, 24 Jan. 1761.

NOTES TO PAGES 81–96

- 1 Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *J. Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1989, XLVIII, pp. 38–52.
- 2 Statute at Large, 9 Anne, c. 22.
- 3 e.g. by Howard Colvin in E. G. W. Bill, *The Queen Anne Churches*, 1979, pp. ix–xxi and M. H. Port, *The Commissions for Building Fifty New Churches*, 1986, ix–xxxiii.
- 4 Howard Colvin, *Architectural Review*, March 1950, pp. 189–96.
- 5 Lambeth Palace Library (LPL) MS 2690–2750, catalogued by E. G. W. Bill, 1979.
- 6 John Field, *Architectural Review*, 1962, 131, pp. 315–19; John Wilton Ely, *Apollo*. 1968, lxxxviii, pp. 250–9 and Terry Friedman, *James Gibbs*, 1984, p. 303 etc.
- 7 LPL MS 2690, 16 June 1712.
- 8 Ibid., 18 June and 30 July 1712.
- 9 Ibid., 18 June 1712.
- 10 Ibid., 9 July 1712.
- 11 Ibid., 6 August 1712.
- 12 LPL MS 2724, f. 3 and MS 2708, f. 8.
- 13 LPL MS 2690, 14 January 1713.
- 14 LPL MS 2724, f. 1.
- 15 LPL MS 2690, 14 January 1713.
- 16 Ibid., 4 February 1713.
- 17 Ibid., 14 May 1713.
- 18 LPL MS 2708, f. 7 and 2724, f. 2.
- 19 LPL MS 2690, 17 May 1715.
- 20 Ibid., 6 June 1716.
- 21 Ibid., 9 May 1717.
- 22 Ibid., 31 May 1717.
- 23 Ibid., 18 July 1717.
- 24 LPL MS 2691, 5 May 1727.
- 25 LPL MS 2690, 405, 7 December 1711.
- 26 Ibid., 28 November 1711.
- 27 Ibid., 12 November 1712.
- 28 LPL MS 2693, 17 November 1712.
- 29 LPL MS 2750, Nos. 20 and 21.
- 30 Statute at Large, 12 Anne c. 17.
- 31 The Great Square of Lincoln's Inn Fields had earlier, in the late seventeenth century, been proposed for a church to the design of Sir Christopher Wren (Paul Jeffery, *Architectural History*, 1988, 31, pp. 136–47.) and there is a reference to it 'in building' in 1696 (GL MS 4552/2, 2 June 1696). It is doubtful, however, if construction ever started. Hawksmoor commented 'Lincoln's Inn Fields . . . wants only a Church for its convenience &