

IRISH
GEORGIAN SOCIETY

BY DESMOND GUINNESS

IN 1908 the original Georgian Society was formed here by Dr. Mahaffy, and the first of six memorable volumes on Georgian architecture which they produced was prefaced in these words:

‘It requires no intimate knowledge of Dublin to perceive that it is not a provincial town, but a fading capital’.

It goes on to say that while Dublin’s houses can boast stately reception rooms, noble staircases, and highly ornamented ceilings:

‘Alas! most of these monuments of a brilliant society are doomed to decay and disappearance; many have already vanished’.

Exactly fifty years have passed since Dr. Mahaffy wrote these words, and what prophetic words they were! In 1957 alone Dublin has lost half of Dominick Street, a Prince among streets where each interior was a work of art, and the remaining two old houses in Kildare Place (see photos). There was a terrific outcry in the Press about the Kildare Place houses, which showed that public opinion was strongly opposed to their destruction. It was then that I decided to revive the old Georgian Society, in the hope that where individual protest had failed, an organised body with some funds behind it might have more chance of success.

The aims of the new Irish Georgian Society are:

- 1 To awaken an interest in Ireland's Heritage of Georgian Architecture.
- 2 To investigate reports from members on any Georgian buildings in danger of demolition or decay, and, where necessary, fight a campaign for their preservation.
- 3 To arrange expeditions to buildings of interest, which might eventually be made open to tourists.
- 4 To continue the work of the old Georgian Society in recording Georgian Architectural features, and later to publish a book of houses as yet unknown to the public.
- 5 To arrange lectures on Architecture, 18th Century decor, gardens, etc. Also discussions on repair and uses for problematical buildings.
- 6 To publish a quarterly bulletin, of which this is the first Number.

In spite of everything, Dublin can still boast a quantity of really first-rate Georgian buildings. Many of these are in the careful hands of one religious order or another, who look after them very well and will usually welcome anyone showing a serious interest in them. In fact compared with London which lost nearly all its beautiful streets and houses during the last seventy years of 'progress', Dublin has escaped lightly. Furthermore, slum dwellings have been reconditioned and turned into flats in the Gardiner Street area, under an enlightened town planning scheme which deserves nothing but praise and encouragement but receives none. The experts merely occupy themselves in finding fault with the detail. The result may well

be that the other half of Domnick Street will be rebuilt with ugly horizontal windows which will blend badly with the rest. A model example of what can be done today is Mr. Desmond Fitzgerald's brilliant reconstruction in Fitzwilliam Square.

One great difficulty with the terraced houses is that there is nowhere to put shops. The planners have quite rightly avoided having them on the ground floor in Gardiner Street, for example, because they would have broken the clean sweep of houses as they mount the hill, but the tenants object to the distance they must walk. Surely the answer is to have the shops in the basements, as they do in Denmark and Holland? The shopkeepers could live over them, so there would be no question of their being unfit to live in. The situation in the country is however very sad, as so many fine mansions have been deserted since the old Georgian Society visited them. But a few lovely houses still remain, and these are very much the concern of our Society.

Tudenham, near Mullingar was destroyed in 1957, and Dunsandle, Co. Galway is about to go: both great country houses designed by Richard Castle. Building costs are high; Ireland needs good country hotels. The Spanish Government uses beautiful country houses for its 'Paradors', or State-owned hotels. These are designed for motorists and off season are run by a couple; local people come in to help when needed in the summer. They have proved a great success, and people love staying in them because they are country houses.