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Roundtable

The Catholic Footprint in Victorian Dublin

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Religions make their mark in cities already bearing the legacies of earlier spiritual encodings, decodings and re-codings. We might describe these marks as a sort of footprint. The Catholic footprint, then, would, in the manner of the urban figure-ground relation, include the churches, schools, hospitals or other edifices that comprise the mission of the Catholic Church.[1] It would extend to various street- and place-names that, for many people, have Catholic associations. Less tangible but still evident, the Catholic footprint in a city might include land owned by the Church, and the control that this allows over urban development. All senses might register the Catholic footprint. Candles and incense are most intense within the walls of a church, but even they are occasionally carried in procession into city streets. Bells call the faithful to mass or, as with the Angelus, to other religious observance. The footprint extends to the realm of memory and cities are replete with religious relics, from graveyards to sites where once stood religious institutions, or where in time past sacred matters transpired. Some of these sites are invested with commemorative practice and in this way become places of public memory.[2] Others are more covert, haunted by histories of state-perpetrated violence or under the erasure of active state suppression, they serve as a spectral trace of injury and elision.[3]

In many cities, faith-based communities are not hegemonic and in claiming a space must contend with competition both from a range of secular functions, and from communities expressing a different or even no faith.[4] Hervieu-Léger describes the legal and political settings in which religious expression must be negotiated as framing the 'territorial modalities of the communalization of religions', and how in turn this shapes the 'religious symbolizations of space'.[5] The Catholic footprint in Ireland's cities is an expression of just such a contentious history. As in many parts of northern Europe, the Reformation devalued Catholic institutions in Ireland and claimed their property for other purposes, some religious some not. However, the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* was only ever an aspiration in Ireland and unlike in the rest of Europe the religion of the vast majority of the people did not follow that of their nominal ruler. In these circumstances, the spectres of Catholic hegemony were more insistent in Ireland than in most nominally Protestant countries.

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1 Spiro Kostoff, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

2 Stephen Legg, 'Contesting and Surviving Memory: Space, Nation, and Nostalgia in Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23 (2005), 481–504.

3 Karen Till, *Mapping Spectral Traces* (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2010); Karen Till, 'Wounded Cities: Memory-work and a Place-based Ethics of Care', *Political Geography*, 31 (2012), 3–14.

4 Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont, 'Geographies of Postsecular Rapprochement in the City', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37 (2013), 27–51; Eoin O'Mahony, 'Connecting the Local and the Global in Post-Secular Urban Settings', *Geographical Review*, 109 (2019), 3–26.

5 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 'Space and Religion: New Approaches to Religious Spatiality in Modernity', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26 (2002), 99–105 (pp. 99, 100) [emphasis removed].

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1. FROM REFORMATION TO INCORPORATION

The Catholic footprint in Ireland was dramatically reduced with the dissolutions of monasteries and friaries in the years after the Act of Supremacy of 1536. In Dublin, this included the lands and buildings of St Mary's Abbey (see Figure 1, based on a map of 1847). Alongside this erasure in the mid-sixteenth century, the Catholic presence in the city was suppressed further with the Penal Laws from the late seventeenth century, which contained an injunction that magistrates 'demolish all crosses, pictures, and inscriptions that are anywhere publickly set up and which are the occasion of popish superstitions'.[6] The Catholic religion was cast as an obscenity.

The social and economic dispossession achieved through dissolution and penal laws had perpetual effects upon the landscape of Dublin, although the repression of practice was somewhat relaxed after the transfer of wealth and power had been achieved. Yet, the Catholic community did not regain either of the Dublin cathedrals and, even with political independence, the capital of Ireland never yet claimed a central site for a prominent Catholic edifice. Nevertheless a renegotiation of the Catholic presence was undertaken and while it crept into central city side-streets it marched all over the suburbs. In Dublin, the 'Catholic community entered a vigorous phase of church building in the latter half of the eighteenth century as penal restrictions were eased and confidence grew'.[7] The restoration of the Catholic footprint was buoyed by the sustained religious practice of the majority of the population. It was also supported by the return of religious orders to the city. The complexity of this return and its relations with the Catholic footprint may be elucidated if we attend to a set of intersecting continua.

The impact of an element upon the landscape may vary between discreet and profound. An urban space may be to differing degrees porous or cloistered. The function of a service may be religious or secular. The class it addresses may be rich or poor. Each of these polarities is unstable but together can nonetheless help in characterizing the impact of religious orders. The cloistered presence of religious orders within the cities might at first seem discreet but the particular articulation of religious institutions put the religious orders at the heart of the Catholic revival. From the mid-eighteenth century, they were essential to the establishment of religiously inflected medical, refuge, and educational services in the city of Dublin. In myriad ways, these services funded Catholic practices more broadly. We may identify a nexus of Catholic institutions that served in many parts of city and suburb as an engine of urban development installing itself at the heart of new communities with profound expression. From the mid-nineteenth century until the late twentieth, and with state co-operation under both British and later Irish rule, the refuge function for the poor, or for social scapegoats, became at least as penal as penitential and the cloistered lives endured behind high walls became a profound element of the Catholic footprint with the warmth of compassion chilled by the discipline of deterrence.

During the nineteenth century, nuns, in particular, were able 'to use government subsidies to expand and extend their functions' and in this way 'played a vital role in extending the power of the Catholic church'.[8] This incorporation of religious orders into state medical, poor

[6] 8 Ann c.3 (1709) An Act for Explaining . . . an Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery.

[7] Rob Goodbody, 'Dublin 1756 to 1847', in *Irish Historic Towns Atlas, No. 26, Dublin, Part III, 1756 to 1847*, ed. by Rob Goodbody (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2014), pp. 1–9 (p. 5).

[8] Maria Luddy, 'Religion, Philanthropy and the State in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform*, ed. by Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 148–67 (p. 149).

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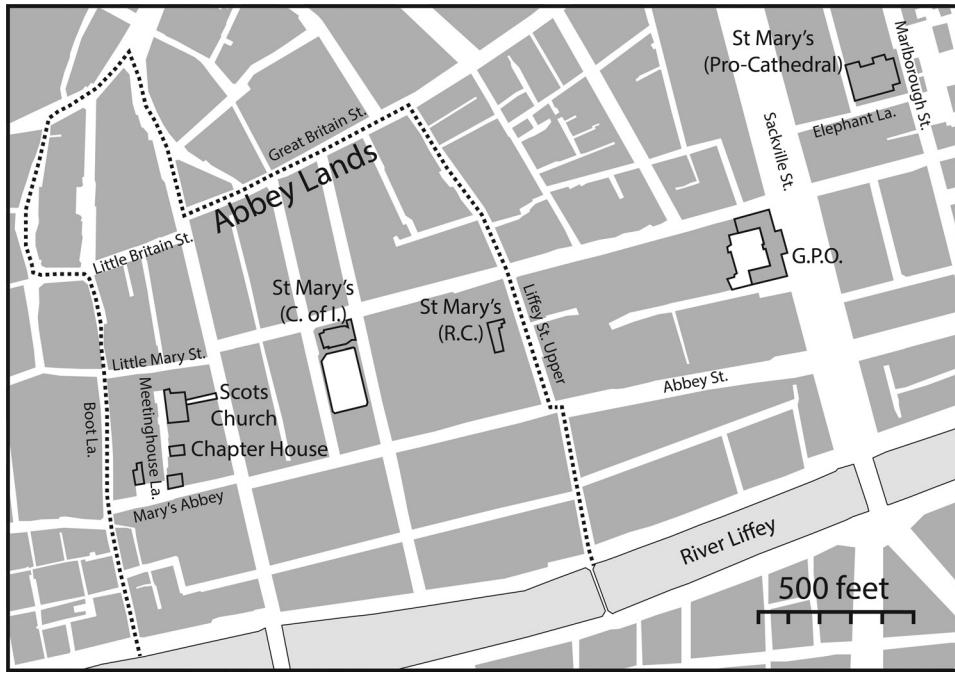

Figure 1. The Spectral Traces of St Mary's Abbey. Copyright Gerry Kearns, 2019.

law, and educational provision removed the proselytizing taint from these services and may at times have given them a more compassionate hue.[9] Furthermore, after independence in 1921, the further subcontracting of significant areas of social policy to the Catholic church in Ireland re-branded secular institutions as religious and further extended and embedded the Catholic footprint, but dissolution and the penal laws bequeathed a profound legacy. A Catholic footprint that is so manifestly based on services to the poor reinforced the marginalization produced by the failure to re-establish a Cathedral on a prominent site.

2. ERASURE AND OBSCENITY

The *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* counts 26 Church of Ireland places of worship on the 1847 Ordnance Survey (OS) map for the city of Dublin.[10] 12 of these were on the sites, and in many cases incorporated buildings, that had been Catholic churches or cathedrals before the Reformation. The abandonment of other Catholic edifices following the dissolution of 1539 left many others to ruin. These processes of erasure may be illustrated from the fate of twelfth-century St Mary's Abbey and the way it left traces in the landscape of nineteenth-century Dublin.

[9] Mary Daly, 'Catholic Dublin: The Public Expression in the Age of Paul Cullen', in *Cardinal Paul Cullen and His World*, ed. by Dáire Keogh and Albert McDonnell (Dublin: Four Courts, 2011), pp. 130–45; Virginia Crossman, '"Attending to the Wants of Poverty": Paul Cullen, the Relief of Poverty and the Development of Social Welfare in Ireland', in *Cardinal Paul Cullen and His World*, pp. 146–65.

[10] 'Topographical Information', in *Irish Historic Towns Atlas, No. 26, Dublin, Part III, 1756 to 1847*, ed. by Rob Goodbody (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2014), pp. 9–103.

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On Figure 1, the extent of the lands of the abbey is shown in outline.[11] This comprised a quadrilateral known as Abbey Parks and, following the names of 1847, extending between Petticoat Lane/Boot Lane/Arran Street East and down to Arran Quay on the west, Denmark Street/Upper Liffey Street/Lower Liffey Street and down to Ormond Quay on the east and up to Little Britain Street/Great Britain Street to the north. This was the area developed by Humphrey Jervis (1603–1707). The other part of the abbey lands, to the north-west, was known as the Abbey Green. The primary buildings of the abbey were at the western end of these lands around the street known from at least 1756 as Meetinghouse Lane.[12] St Mary's Abbey was perhaps the most wealthy of Catholic institutions in the early sixteenth century, owning territories across Ireland amounting to some 36 square miles.[13] Left to decay, the stones of the abbey were repurposed to make Essex Bridge in 1676.[14] Yet the erasure was incomplete. While the five-foot-to-the-mile OS map of 1847 labels no ruins as remaining, the trace of the former abbey is retained in the names of the streets that bordered the site on its south, Mary's Abbey, and north, Little Mary Street.[15] The name had also been taken by at least three other religious institutions that were established on the former lands of the abbey. A little over 100 yards to the east of the site of the old abbey, in 1704 the Church of Ireland had opened its new church of St Mary's as the focus of a parish of that name serving the suburb that Jervis developed on the former abbey lands.[16] This church is named as Mary's Church on Rocque's map of 1756 and is given the cross-hatched shading Rocque used for public buildings.[17] It is recorded as St Mary's Church on the map of 1847. On both maps its extensive graveyard abutting to the south is detailed.

Within and upon the buildings of the old abbey, three Presbyterian meeting houses were established. The first of these was opened in 1667 at the top end of Meetinghouse lane, to which the Presbyterians had given its name. The congregation purchased properties on Capel Street and in this manner established the opening to their east that is shown on the map of 1847 and which gave it the name Capel Street Meeting House during the 1760s and 1770s until, after a significant re-build, it took the name St Mary's Abbey Meeting House.[18] By the 1840s the building was known as the Scot's Church and this is the label it had on the map of 1847 (see Figure 1). From 1739 to 1762 there was another Presbyterian meeting house at the south-eastern corner of Meetinghouse Lane. The Presbyterian meeting house on the site of the former abbey building took over a building that had been granted to the Bank of Ireland upon its formation by act of parliament in 1783. This site at the south-western corner of the entrance of Meetinghouse Lane was taken by the Presbyterians in 1815. By 1835, the property had passed to a Methodist congregation and was in turn taken up as a Jewish synagogue in 1836. The groups of Presbyterians that had moved out of Meetinghouse Lane rested

[11] The map is based upon: Ordnance Survey, printed town plan (1:1056), Dublin city, sheets 13, 14, 20, and 21, 1847. The extent of the abbey's lands is taken from: Colm Lennon, 'Dublin 1610 to 1756', in *Irish Historic Tows Atlas, No. 19, Dublin, Part II, 1610 to 1756*, ed. by Colm Lennon (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2008), pp. 1–9 (p. 5).

[12] It was so shown on Rocque's map of 1756; Colm Lennon and John Montague, *John Rocque's Dublin: A Guide to the Georgian City* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2010), p. 16.

[13] C. Ó Conbhuí, 'The Lands of St Mary's Abbey, Dublin', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 62 (1961–1963), 21–86 (p. 26).

[14] John McCormack, *A Story of Dublin: The People and Events that Shaped the City* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2000), p. 80.

[15] Ordnance Survey, printed town plan (1:1056), Dublin city, sheet 14, 1847.

[16] Frank Cullen, *Dublin 1847: City of the Ordnance Survey* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), p. 35.

[17] Lennon and Montague, *Rocque's Dublin*, pp. 18–19.

[18] 'Topographical Information', *Dublin 1756–1847*, p. 47.

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in various parts of the city during a history of secession and amalgamation but when some of them re-united again as a single congregation in what is now Parnell Square they recalled these origins in styling themselves the Abbey Presbyterian Church.

Under the repression of Penal Laws in the seventeenth century, Dublin's Catholics had resorted to various mass houses. Over the course of the eighteenth century the grip was relaxed. In 1729 Irish Catholics raised funds for a discreet chapel, St Mary's, running behind six shopfronts on Middle (later Upper) Liffey Street, a couple of hundred yards east of the old abbey (see Figure 1).[19] Unlike the Church of Ireland establishment, this had no graveyard, nor any opening onto the street, being accessed through the back of one of the shops.

This obscurity of the Catholic presence was a consequence of urban development and state policy. Urban development explains the competition for prime sites but state policy was suffused with the spirit, if no longer the letter, of the Penal Laws. The crowding of Catholics into obscure private buildings resulted in building failure and personal fatalities. After one such catastrophe on St Patrick's day 1745, when a mass celebrated in a store in Cook Street ended with the collapse of the building and several deaths, the Viceroy declared that he would permit some Catholic places of worship.[20] Under this dispensation, a few more chapels were opened, '[b]ut they were always hid away in back streets and lanes'.[21] The building of St Mary's Pro-Cathedral both addressed and was constrained by this circumstance. Installed as Catholic Archbishop of Dublin in 1786, John Troy had the 'ambition of replacing the old St Mary's chapel in Liffey Street with a large modern church in the centre of the city'.[22] A site was acquired on the newly widened Drogheda (later Sackville, and now O'Connell) Street but this was given up in favour of one down a side street, Elephant Lane (now Cathedral Street), there adjoining.[23] This was an act of self-denial intended to mollify Protestant opinion, and thus the General Post Office was later developed at the site on Sackville Street whereas at the junction of Elephant Lane and Marlborough Street a new Catholic chapel was projected.[24] On this basis, the Lord Lieutenant acceded to the politically sensitive project of building a Metropolitan Chapel. To this chapel were brought items, including furniture, pillars, cornices, and shrines, from the old St Mary's of Middle Liffey Street and the continuity was secured also in the name of the new chapel: St Mary's (The Immaculate Conception) from its opening in 1825. It was a cathedral in all but – very significantly – its name. During construction, the pope sent a new gold chalice 'for the new Cathedral being built in Dublin'.[25] During the years of the penal laws, Catholic bishops had used various churches as their metropolitan chapel, or cathedral *pro tempore*, until the awaited restoration of Christchurch, the pope's designated cathedral for the archdiocese.

[19] Nicholas Donnelly, *Roman Catholics: State and Condition of R.C. Chapels in Dublin, both Secular and Regular, A.D. 1749* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1904), p. 22. The location of the chapel as shown on Figure 1 is taken from Rocque's map of 1756 although by 1847 the building had been given up and was in commercial use; Lennon and Montague, *Rocque's Dublin*, p. 18.

[20] Austin Carroll, *Life of Catherine McAuley: Foundress and First Superior of the Institute of Religious Sisters of Mercy* (New York, NY: D. and J. Sadleir, 1866), p. 46.

[21] J. Godkin, 'Irish Cathedrals. II. Roman Catholic', *Graphic*, 19 (15 March 1879), 270–71 (p. 270).

[22] Christine Casey, *Dublin: The City Within the Grand and Royal Canals and the Circular Road with the Phoenix Park* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 126.

[23] Dáire Keogh, '"The Pattern of the Flock": John Thomas Troy, 1786–1823', in *History of the Catholic Diocese of Dublin*, ed. by James Kelly and Dáire Keogh (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), pp. 215–36 (p. 233).

[24] 'History of the Pro Cathedral', *St Mary's Pro Cathedral* <www.procathedral.ie> [accessed 3 November 2019].

[25] 'History of the Pro Cathedral'.

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There were 36 Catholic churches among the 51 churches and chapels on the OS map of 1847. For Catholics, this was a little shy of their share of the population. In 1861, the professed religion of Irish people was counted for the census and in the City of Dublin were recorded 49,251 members of the Established Church (19.3% of the population of the city) and 196,549 Roman Catholics (77.1%).[26] The modesty of the Catholic provision is more evident in the scale of the buildings and grounds and in the way they address the street. Both ancient Catholic cathedrals, Christchurch and St Patrick's were in use by the established Church of Ireland. As Catholic churches inserted themselves into the fabric of the city with the waning of the penal laws, they found sites that were often already hemmed in by other development. None addressed the street with anything of the pomp, reach, or splendour of many of the ancient churches. The Pro-Cathedral was the largest church opened in Dublin since the Reformation but it was down a side street and had no surrounding grounds to foreground its magnificence. In contrast, the older cathedrals were framed by a site that was more than twice the ground plan of the church itself. After the so-called Emancipation with the removal of most civil disabilities by the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, Catholics projected a church that was equal in extent to the Pro-Cathedral and in 1835 they dedicated the church of St Andrew on Westland Row. Casey concludes that '[f]ew buildings in Dublin so tangibly evoke Catholic middle-class aspirations in the wake of Emancipation'.[27] Its frontage was wider than the Pro-Cathedral and it addressed a principal thoroughfare, although neighbouring, as it did, a railway station, it was hardly the most prestigious location in Dublin and the buildings again occupied the whole of the site disabling the perspective demanded by its grandeur.

3. OBSCURITY AND MODESTY

In summary, then, as late as 1847, the landscape of the city of Dublin yet bore the 'spectral traces'[28] of the wealthiest Cistercian institution of pre-Reformation Ireland, some three centuries after its dissolution. Were one to walk from the site of its former abbey towards the young Pro-Cathedral, one would pass along a street called Mary's Abbey and onto another called then, as today, Abbey Street. One would pass the sites of Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Catholic churches that had borrowed the name of St Mary's Abbey. And, having crossed Sackville Street where it framed the magnificent General Post Office that commanded the street as once a Catholic cathedral was projected to, one might move from the broad vista of Dublin's principal thoroughfare into the strait of Elephant Lane to discover the occluded pretension of the church of St Mary's (The Immaculate Conception).

Outside Dublin, the Catholic communities of the larger Irish cities had better fortune in securing extensive and prominent sites for their new churches,[29] but in the capital the ambition of Catholics was clipped by the legacies of dissolution and the penal laws; even three centuries after the first and a century after their most vigorous subjection to the second. The work of erasure was so complete that when, in the eighteenth century, the basement Chapter House of the Abbey was again uncovered it was considered a rediscovery, only to be then impressed into use 'as a potato and grain store'.[30] Again, in 1884, the room was excavated, this

[26] BPP 1863 LXI [3204-IV] Census of Ireland, 1861, Part. V, General report, p. xxvii.

[27] Casey, *Dublin*, p. 451.

[28] Till, *Mapping Spectral Traces*.

[29] Niamh NicGhabhann, '"A Development of Practical Catholic Emancipation": Laying the Foundations for the Roman Catholic Urban Landscape, 1850–1900', *Urban History*, 46 (2019), 44–61.

[30] Tony Canavan, 'St Mary's Abbey', *History Ireland*, 19 (2001), 52–53.

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time from beneath a bakery, and again it was experienced as a find.[31] Despite the hope that Christchurch would revert to use by Catholics, Dublin continues to bear the traces of penal times with the so-called Pro-Cathedral on Marlborough Street.

In an intriguing postcolonial addendum, and giving the cathedral project one of Dublin's Victorian afterlives, the government of the Republic of Ireland nearly restored the Catholic footprint to something like the centrality it claimed in the lives of contemporary Irish citizens.[32] In legitimating the Irish Free State from 1922, the Catholic Church claimed a central place in both social policy and public ritual for independent Ireland.[33] The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 culminated in a benediction in Dublin attended by perhaps half the population of the state, and it announced to the world that the Irish Free State was a leading member of a commonwealth of Catholic countries.[34] This was followed by a new constitution in 1937, modelled in large part on those of other Catholic states, such as Poland, and incorporating the advice of Dr John McQuaid, a priest who was President of a prominent Catholic school, Blackrock College, and a regular adviser to the head of Government, Éamon de Valera.[35] In 1940, McQuaid was elevated to Archbishop of Dublin and, perhaps with some confidence, took up the unfinished business of giving Dublin a Catholic cathedral with the footprint of a palace like Notre Dame. He set his sights upon Merrion Square, a prestigious place close to Trinity College and abutting the seat of national government. It was only when, in 1944, the government of de Valera threw Merrion Square open to the public thwarting the ambitions of a primate then at the height of his circumstance,[36] that this branch of the long road back from dissolution was finally recognised as a cul-de-sac.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

31 Casey, *Dublin*, p. 87.

32 Francis O'Gorman, 'Victorian "Afterlives"', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), 277–78.

33 Michael Nolan, 'The Influence of Catholic Nationalism on the Legislature of the Irish Free State', *Irish Jurist*, 10 (1975), 128–69; Lisa Godson, 'Religion, Ritual and the Performance of Memory in the Irish Free State', in *Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising*, ed. by Joanna Brück and Lisa Godson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 249–54.

34 Gary A. Boyd, 'Supernational Catholicity: Dublin and the 1932 Eucharistic Congress', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 5 (2007), 317–33.

35 Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937: Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Cork: Mercier, 2007).

36 John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 193–95. Cooney's account draws upon materials from the Dublin Diocesan Archives, including notes kept by McQuaid of his phone calls with de Valera. The purchase of the land in Merrion Square for the purpose of building a cathedral had been publicly known since 1930: 'New Cathedral for Dublin in Merrion Square', *Irish Times*, 19 July 1930, 1.

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