

All Saints, Drimoleague: clarifications and new discoveries¹

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Since the publication of my article on Catholic visual culture in Cork in the 1950s in last year's journal, some new material has come to my attention that allows for both some clarifications as well as some new insights. Following Peter Harbison, I speculated that the artist of the altar mural may have been the Austrian Hans Schröder (1931-2010), and that it must have been painted 'between June 1956 and early 1957'. It is now possible to say with a great degree of certainty that the artist was in fact a different man, Hans V. Schroetter (1891-1965), of Graz, Austria, and that he worked in Drimoleague between June and December 1956. An extraordinary article in the *Cork Examiner* in 1956, 'The sadness of Hans Schroetter', gives a summary of his most unusual life: as a soldier in the First World War he was condemned to Siberia for a time but returned to Europe to paint portraits.² He left for America in 1928 to work on 'frescos in churches in New York', and later took up a professorship at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Making a rather unpropitious return to Austria on the eve of Hitler's invasion, he ended up a soldier in the German army. Stationed for a time in the Balkans, in what he termed the 'dirtiest' phase of his army life, he was involved in the widespread 'liquidation' of 'Russian partisans'. Twice during his service he was accused of sedition by informers, and he managed to escape death only by good luck and the cessation of hostilities. Afterwards he resumed painting, and in 1955, 'an Irish architect on the Continent' told him of the building of Drimoleague church, and Schroetter submitted a design. The author of this biographical piece repeatedly stresses Schroetter's 'intense Catholic spirit' and comments that his Drimoleague mural is a 'representation of the Irish peasant worshipping the Almighty with traditional humility'.

In my article I also suggested that the stained glass in All Saints Church could be understood as a ‘programmatically working through of the core political and social values’ of Bishop Cornelius Lucey in the 1950s, and speculated that the Bishop and perhaps the local priest had controlled the design process. Art historians are by nature interested in the role that patrons play in the production of artwork. In the case of Drimoleague, a collection of over fifty letters and a dozen colour drawings (the latter freely available online) in the Harry Clarke Studios collection in Trinity College Dublin proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Bishop Lucey took personal responsibility for the design of the glass.³ A full analysis of these letters is beyond the scope of this short note, but they reveal Lucey’s preoccupation with every last detail – from the length of girls’ dresses (‘the little girls are not in white as they should be, their dress is too short and their veils are too long’) to the way in which the dead man in the seventh window holds his crucifix (there are things, Lucey writes, that ‘dead hands cannot do’).⁴

Lucey was adamant that the windows should show the reality of Catholic life in the 1950s, and not delve into historicism. Over six years of correspondence, he constantly rejected or demanded alterations to schemes put forward by William Dowling of Harry Clarke Studios. An early programme based on the seven Sacraments was superseded by Lucey’s idea of showing ‘the various steps of life’.⁵ One of Dowling’s unexecuted designs for the first (Baptism) window, showing parents instructing their children in religion, featured a mother wearing a shawl and a father holding a lit torch. Lucey was unimpressed: ‘no single figure in it is real – the mother with a shawl inside at home – . . . no father ever held a torch while the children were praying’.⁶ In the end, he vetoed the image. Similarly, for the sixth window – ‘Work and play’ – he insisted that the men should be shown playing football (‘the local game is football, not hurling’) and that the two girls shown chatting nearby should not be shown wearing ‘long’ skirts and a veil.⁷ ‘Why not a couple of girls sitting on a seat,’ he added, ‘looking on and talking? Something natural and modern rather than stylised!’⁸

The parish priest at the time, Richard Dalton, made little or no contribution to the design, and keenly pointed out that approval could only come from the Bishop; he limited himself mostly to providing ladders and building equipment.⁹ Lucey and Dalton both searched for local donors and were careful not to commission windows until funding had been secured. But what control if any did individual donors have over the design process? It appears not very much. One of the donors was the church's architect, Frank Murphy, who paid for the second window (family prayers). But Lucey had already set out the design and Murphy's only input was to request that the grandmother's face should be 'slightly altered' as she appeared 'a little too sad'.¹⁰

Lucey's involvement with the design of the glass, between 1956 and 1962, was so profound that we should really consider the glass as being by 'Bishop Lucey and Harry Clarke Studios', and not the other way around.¹¹ Compared with other Harry Clarke Studios commissions at the time, such as Bantry in the 1960s, the Bishop's personal interest in Drimoleague is striking.¹² He appears to have been preoccupied with the idea that the windows should show an ideal yet realistic depiction of rural Catholic life at a time of great change, a working out in glass of his sociological teachings. The letters pose as many questions as they answer. Why did Lucey focus his energy on Drimoleague, a church whose architecture he describes rather cursorily as 'very unusual'?¹³ And how do we square his passion for Drimoleague's glass with the commonly held view today, following Brian Fallon and others, that the Catholic clergy in the 1950s were cultural and artistic 'philistines' and maintained little interest in aesthetics? Clearly a great deal remains to be written on the subject.

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² *Cork Examiner*, 14 Dec. 1956. See also *Southern Star*, 29 Dec. 1956; Mary Goggins, ‘Who was Hans Schroetter?’, *Drimoleague Community Newsletter 1999* (privately published), pp. 54-56.

³ Correspondence relating to Drimoleague Catholic church, 1956-62 (Trinity College Dublin archives, Harry Clarke Studios collection (hereafter ‘TCD, HCSC’), MSS 6089/7/1-76); Drawings for Drimoleague Catholic church, c. 1956-60 (TCD, HCSC, MSS 11182/182-194).

⁴ Bishop Cornelius Lucey to William Dowling (hereafter ‘Lucey to Dowling’), 31 Aug. 1957 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/18); Lucey to Dowling, 7 Jan. 1959 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/37).

⁵ John Barrett (Bishop Lucey’s secretary) to William Dowling (hereafter ‘Barrett to Dowling’), 20 April 1956 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/2).

⁶ Barrett to Dowling, 21 May 1956 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/4); Drawing for the ‘Baptism’ window at Drimoleague, n.d. (TCD, HCSC, MS 11182/185).

⁷ Barrett to Dowling, 19 May 1958 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/29).

⁸ Lucey to Dowling, 2 Sept. 1958 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/33).

⁹ Richard Dalton to William Dowling, 13 Nov., 14 Nov. 1957 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/20-21).

¹⁰ Frank Murphy to Fr. Powell, 10 April, 16 April 1957 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/13, 15/1).

¹¹ Harry Clarke Studios costings book, 1956-59, folios 26, 89-90, 103-04, 154-60, 344-46 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6075).

¹² Correspondence relating to Bantry Catholic church, 1966-67 (TCD, HCSC’), MSS 6089/1/1-103).

¹³ Barrett to Dowling, 20 April 1956 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/7/2).