‘An Irish Industrial Tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary’; Catholic Industrial Habitus in Sunbeam-Wolsey, Cork, Ireland, 1940-1960.

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Abstract | This paper challenges two widely-held concepts: firstly that secularism is a defining feature of modernity and secondly, that the Republic of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century was a rural, agricultural country which lacked high-tech industry.
Writers, including Hilde Heynen, Marshall Berman and Michael Saler, have intimated that de-sanctifying Western societies was almost a pre-requisite for their modernisation. Whilst this may be true in Northern Europe as a whole, during the period 1850-1980, Ireland (north and south) modernised whilst holding to traditional religious practice. Modern material culture was folded into ritual and belief: it was integral to, rather than in conflict with religion.
What is becoming clear from the work of the first generation of Irish design historians is that from the mid-nineteenth century, many people saw no contradiction in combining practices of modernisation with orthodox beliefs, and used physical expressions of their beliefs to gain status in their communities. Following Bourdieu, the Irish sociologist Tom Inglis has called this life-practice ‘Catholic *habitus*’.
Notwithstanding this, little work has been done on the role of Catholicism within the industrial sphere. This paper examines the Cork textile manufacturer Sunbeam-Wolsey, which employed 4,500 across the Irish Republic by 1968. In the absence of an accessible archive, this paper examines the architecture, recollections and reportage surrounding Sunbeam-Wolsey in order to understand the designed environment. In so doing, this paper argues that the firm’s devout founders combined international Modernism with Catholic practice in an integrated way.
From the 1930s, artificial fibres, Modern architecture and Fordist manufacturing principles were introduced to the company, alongside pilgrimages, industrial religious services (including the ‘Tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary’), philanthropy and memorials, the latter included a canteen dedicated to the founder designed by British consultancy, Design Research Unit. The evidence assembled points to a blind spot in Irish memory and design history.

Keywords: Factory, Ireland, Catholicism, Modernism, Everyday Life

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the relationship between industry and Catholicism in the 1950s in the Republic of Ireland as a way of challenging two dominant ideas. The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland is rightly seen by many to be monolithic and socially conservative. It was resistant to change even when change came from Rome itself. In terms of design, the Catholic Church did not commit itself to Modernism until the late 1950s (Hurley and Cantwell 1985). However, what is becoming clear from the work of the first generation of Irish design historians, is that from the mid-nineteenth century, many people saw no contradiction in combining practices of modernisation with orthodox beliefs, and used physical expressions of their beliefs to gain status in their communities. My case study focuses on the firm of Sunbeam-Wolsey based in Cork city who, contrary to many peoples' views of Ireland, consistently invested in state-of-the-art technology throughout the middle years of the century. Readers should be aware that during the 1950s, unlike most of Western Europe, Ireland's economy was severely depressed, and emigration raged. The population of the country was roughly the same size as it had been in the late eighteenth century, and was 5 per cent smaller at the end of the 1950s than it was at the beginning (Johnson 1963).

In the absence of an accessible archive, this paper examines the architecture, oral evidence and contemporaneous reportage surrounding Sunbeam-Wolsey with the purpose of understanding the designed environment. In so doing, this paper argues that the firm's devout founders combined international Modernism with Catholic practice in an integrated way. The founder (*patron* would be a better term) of the firm was William Dwyer (1885-1951), a member of a local family who had been involved in clothing and footwear businesses in Cork since the 1820s. He was a devout Catholic and practical philanthropist throughout his life, and a patron to Irish painters, sculptors and architects. There was a strongly paternalistic relationship between Dwyer and his staff.

Sunbeam Wolsey was founded in 1928 employing a handful of staff in a disused butter market in the centre of Cork. It moved into a nineteenth century textile mill in the northern suburb of Blackpool in 1933. After the Second World War the enterprise expanded strongly, partly as they were protected from foreign completion by tariffs. Due to hard work and this benign legislative environment it rose to a near-monopoly of certain sectors of the Irish textile market (Cullinane 2020). Dwyer's intention had been to establish a vertically-integrated textile business which would control its own raw materials, produce its own fabrics, process them into clothing and other products, as well as design, advertise, and market them across Ireland and abroad. By 1960, this had largely been achieved under the management of William and his son Declan (1915-1981).

By the end of the 1960s there were nearly 2,000 employees on the Blackpool site with 2,500 more in subsidiaries across Ireland and Britain (Sunbeam-Wolsey 1969). The firm, which was deeply Fordist and Taylorist in outlook, passed through three generations of the Dwyers before suffering financial difficulties in the 1970s and 1980s. After a change of ownership, it closed in 1990. The bulk of the site burnt to the ground in an accidental fire in 2003. (McCarthy 2003)

Sunbeam had begun by making wool socks and silk stockings. Immediately after the Second World War it diversified into Nylon tights, eventually building in 1954 an artificially-lit and fully air-conditioned plant for the manufacture of these. The business later made ready-to-wear clothing and swimwear, often utilising man-made fibres. Perhaps due to their understanding of the entire production cycle, from the mid-1930s the Dwyers were acutely aware of the value of design in a manner unusual in the Irish context. Over the years they commissioned local graphic artists and architects as well as the Australian Raymond McGrath, Jean Tronquet, (a minor French couturier, commercial artist and graphic designer who had worked with Jean Cocteau and Georges Simenon) and the British consultants Design Research Unit, Stanley Paine and Sandersons. Whilst Tronquet designed knitwear, designers at Allied Textiles, Chapelizod, Dublin, envisaged the garment in Figure 1. (Anon 1968). Dwyer Snr also had a close relationship with a local sculptor, Seamus Murphy, who created a number of works for him as well as conceptualizing a church at Blackpool, which Dwyer funded. (Dwyer 2021)

Figure 1. Women's ready-to-wear, Sunbeam Wolsey, 1969. Image courtesy Mr Kevin Dwyer. Catalogue design by David P Luke of Dublin.

The Dwyers were also interested in Modern architecture, and from the 1930s onwards the firm built factories and other buildings in recognisably Modernist styles. These included Millfield House (c.1934), a white Modernist block which sat on its own grounds beside the factory. It included several features which put it to the forefront of Irish domestic architecture at the time, including a flat-roof and steel windows, some of which had a double-aspect. Outside the house was a patio with a pergola, rose-garden and swimming pool (Figure 2). This house would not be remarkable on the European Continent, but at the time of its construction, there were perhaps a few dozen houses of this type in Ireland, the majority in the capital city, Dublin (Rowley 2016) (Rothery 1991).

Figure 2. Millfield House, Red Forge Rd, Cork, c.1934. Courtesy of Mr Kevin Dwyer.

Post-war modernist buildings included the Seafield Fabrics rayon plant (1946) in a streamlined Moderne style, and Blackwater Cottons (1952), a low-slung building with Wrightian overtones, both in Youghal, County Cork. In the 1950s or early 1960s the firm employed Raymond McGrath to redesign their Dublin offices, reviving a relationship that they had had with the designer in the 1940s when he designed and developed an colour-illustrated, advertising brochure (McGrath 1942).

2. The William Dwyer Memorial Canteen

After Dwyer's death in 1951, Declan became the Chairman. As a memorial to his father, Declan and the other directors paid for a new staff canteen to be constructed. Prior to this, Sunbeam had employed local architects, but for this project Misha Black and the British consultancy Design Research Unit undertook the work. Black had come to prominence as one of the architects of the 1951 Festival of Britain in London, and was perceived to be one of that country's leading designers (McDermott 1986). The building owed something to Black's work at the exhibition, especially the Regatta Restaurant, on which he worked with Alexander Gibson.

The Memorial Canteen was a far cry from most institutional dining rooms in Ireland at the time. Partly, this was because it also functioned as a music venue lending it a sense of theatre. The ceiling was painted in lime green with small black stars, and supported by elegant laminated timber arches. (Barrington? 1957) The walls were painted a mushroom colour and washed with light supplied from custom-designed DRU uplighters (Figure 3). The floor and wainscoting were timber, and the room was illuminated from the south through light green diaphanous curtains – a technique Black and Gibson had used in the Regatta Restaurant (Cotton 2011). This being the 1950s, there was access to a bomb shelter in the basement via the kitchen. There is excellent evidence that Black regarded the project as a triumph, since he preserved newspaper clippings, an aide memoire in his diary (indicating that he wished to promote it when speaking to other clients) and a DRU Christmas card illustrating the restaurant in his personal archive (Black 1958).

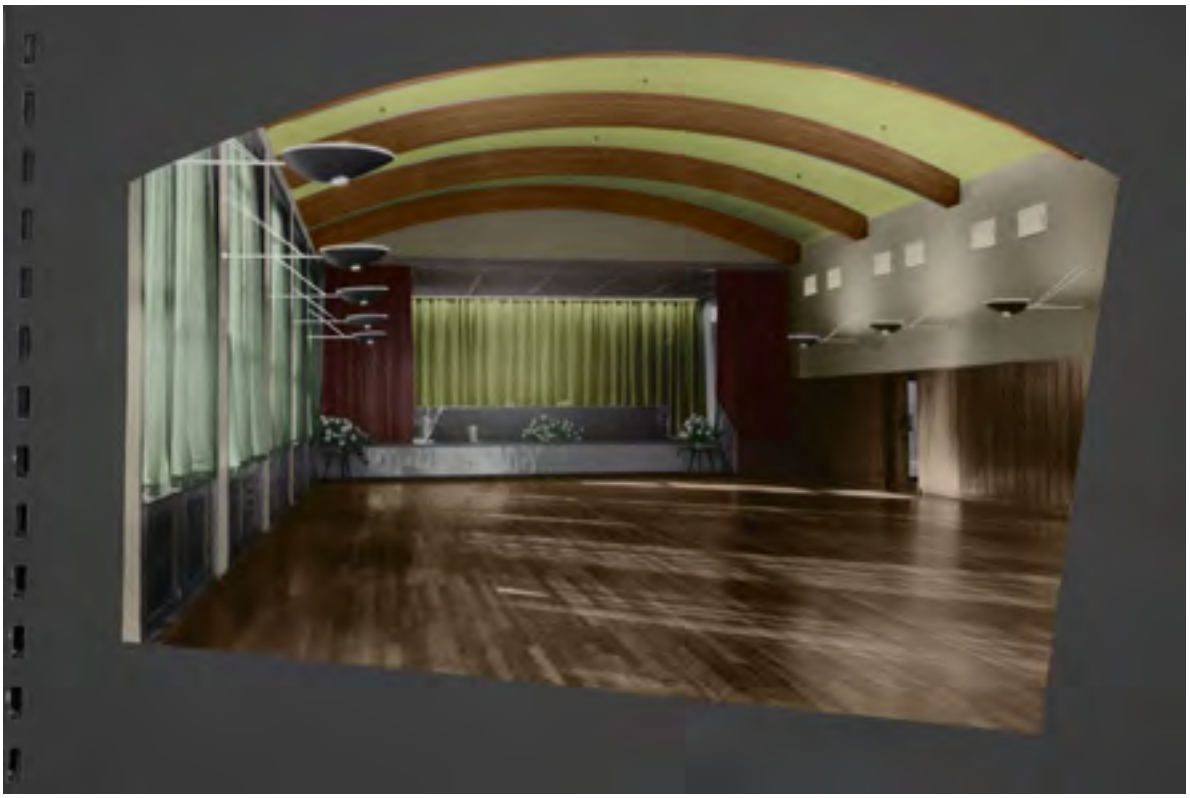

Figure 3. Wm Dwyer Memorial Canteen, Sunbeam-Wolsey, Cork: Misha Black, John Diamond, Kenneth Bayes (DRU) & John E Wilkinson (Cork). Image courtesy of Kevin Dwyer, hand coloured by the author.

The opening of the canteen would not have been considered 'official' to the Irish in 1957 had not a Catholic priest been present. The then-Bishop of Cork, Cornelius Lucey, who was a family friend, was invited to bless the canteen. The Bishop was notably conservative, even in the context of the hierarchy at the time (Daly 2016, 210). Figure 4 is a powerful image of him: legs apart, his knuckles on his hips, bracing his arms against his body, his traditional biretta and robes somewhat at odds with the sleek Contemporary interior, flooded with winter sunshine.

Figure 4. Bishop Cornelius Lucey at the Opening of Wm Dwyer Memorial Canteen, 1957. Courtesy of Mr Kevin Dwyer.

Three years earlier Lucey had visited Sunbeam during what was called the 'Marian Year', which commemorated the centenary of the Promulgation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX (which stated that as well as Jesus Christ, Mary was born free from sin). As a result of this celebration, Irish devotion to Mary, which was always strong, was reinforced. To celebrate, Sunbeam held 'an Irish Industrial Tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary' which included a full mass led by Lucey. The setting of the ceremony was unusual since the 'two-thousand workers knelt amidst silent machines on the factory floor' (Anon, Industrial Tribute to Our Lady' 1954). They, and the leading members of Cork's trades' unions, listened quietly to an anti-Communist sermon, whilst the Bishop looked on from a temporary throne beside an altar 'beautifully canopied in blue and white' textiles of the firm's own manufacture (Anon, Industrial Tribute to Our Lady' 1954).


Youghal Workers' Marian Shrine

Figure 5. Marian Shrine at Seafield Fabrics, Youghal, Co. Cork, 1954. 'Irish Independent' image.

The behavior and attitude of the staff and management in Sunbeam could be described as part of a specifically Catholic *habitus*. Catholic habitus is a phrase coined by Irish sociologist Tom Inglis (after Pierre Bourdieu and Marcel Mauss), whereby social status is enhanced through the adoption of particular religious rituals, processes or products, to increase what Inglis refers to as 'embodied religious capital' (Inglis 2003). According to Inglis, Ireland at this time was 'unique' due to the 'domination of the Church in … social fields and the importance social capital … had in attaining dominant positions' in non-ecclesiastical realms (Inglis 2003). As a result of this, religious observance in industrial settings was not unusual in Ireland from 1950 to 1980, indeed it was typical of the time.

Patrick Doyle and Sarah Roddy have sought to nuance this argument in a recent paper (Doyle and Roddy 2021). Following the American sociologist Viviana Zelizer, they hold that Inglis' thesis is simplistic as it downplays the personal agency and decision-making of individual donors (many of whom were female) and overplays the

eagerness of churchmen to attract donations. Instead, they propose that each side of the lay/clerical relationship could draw something slightly different, yet valuable and intimately-related from the interaction.

Religious observance in industrial settings like the Mass mentioned earlier, was not unique to Sunbeam-Wolsey. Shrines to the Virgin Mary were also present at: Smithwick's Brewery Kilkenny, (Anon, Final Tribute to Memorable Year 1954), Dubbary Shoes, County Galway (Anon, Building Marian Shrine 1954), CIE's (the Irish transport monopoly's) garage at Donnybrook (Lappin and Walker 2015, 78) and at their railway works at Inchicore in Dublin (Anon, Statue Blessed at Railway Works 1954), Irish Tanners, Portlaw, County Waterford (Anon, Portlaw's Paen of Marian Praise 1954), Denny's Bacon, Co. Laois (Anon, Close of Marian Year 1954) and Harringtons & Goodlass Wall in Cork, where regular devotions were part of the working day. The anonymous designer of the shrine in Figure 5 at Seafield Fabrics appears to have taken some cues from the streamlined factory nearby in terms of the cantilevered canopy, prismatic geometrical forms and concrete structure. The Marian grotto-type shrine at Irish Tanners was erected at a cost of £1,000, subscribed by the employees and modeled on the site of devotions at Lourdes, France. It included a life-sized figure of Mary, carved in Carrara marble which was flood-lit at night. (Anon, Portlaw's Paen of Marian Praise 1954) (It is striking that what emerges from research such as this is the literal 'putting on a pedestal' of one woman, Mary, by largely male workforces in a country whose treatment of women at the time was poor, to say the least.)

Cork's Ford plant, founded in 1917, presents what seems to be a dichotomy: the first single-storey vehicle assembly plant in Europe, and a pioneer of modern factory design (Skinner 1997), housed a Marian shrine which in part dictated a daily religious rhythm (McAleer 2017). In some cases, such regular religious rituals can be seen to be detrimental to the efficiency of the firms. One Sunbeam machine operator in the early 1950s remembered the

> 'rosaries said aloud, with designated workers giving out the decades, or the stoppages to recite the Angelus at noon, or the penny collections to buy candles for St Martha's shrine, or the extra half-hour allowed for Mass on holy days of obligation.' (Leland 2007)

The fact that the management encouraged this strongly suggests three things. Firstly, that faith and ritual were seen as compatible and comparable in importance to industrial efficiency, secondly, that many employees were content to engage in these activities at the time and thirdly, that the firm was profitable enough to encourage them. Furthermore, these practices were part of a larger milieu which notably included the chartering of a small fleet of aircraft to fly Sunbeam-Wolsey staff and others to Rome on pilgrimage in 1950 (Sunbeam-Wolsey 1950).

4. Marian Material Culture in the 1950s

More broadly, we can view the relationship between faith and industry as an aspect of the material cultural of a larger phenomenon. In terms of material culture, Catholic habitus usually took the form of *personal* items such as rosary beads, or *domestic* decorations, such as statues. However, there are many examples like the shrines mentioned above, almost all undertaken by lay volunteers, which were *public demonstrations* of faith. In some cases professional building contractors or tradesmen or even civil engineers, but not academically-qualified architects, were involved (Anon, Marian Shrine at Blackpool 1954) (Rowley 2016, 198). A good example of this is the early twentieth century cast iron street cover from Cork shown in Figure 6. Apparently, the original diamond pattern of grips had worn and it required repair as it had become a slip hazard. Whilst it would have been simple to try and reinstate the original pattern using a welder, instead, some members of Cork Corporation's road crew spot-welded their initials onto the slab alongside the date and 'Marian Year' as a practical celebration of their faith and identity.

Figure 6. Street Cover with Marian Year decoration, John St, Cork, author photo.

A similar, but larger Cork example of this d.i.y. religious urge was a 16m illuminated crucifix fabricated by a taxi driver, Bill Sorensen in his front garden in 1958. Sorenson installed it above a local graveyard which had been used in the 1840s to bury victims of the Irish Famine (RTE 1968). These objects raise questions as to their relationship with design. They are one-offs made by semi- or unskilled people, rather than mass-produced items designed by professionals. Conversely, the use of modern technology (arc welders, scaffolding, concrete and electric lighting) distances them from contemporaneous craft practice. Another aspect of these artefacts is that they can also be seen in the long tradition of religious folk art, albeit facilitated by new technology.

5. Conclusion

The hegemonic understanding of modernisation suggests that de-sanctification was almost a pre-requisite for industrialized modern societies during the twentieth century (Berman 2010 [1982]) (Saler 2003) (Heynen 1999), perhaps this may primarily only be true for parts of North American and Northern Europe. My evidence supports the idea of a process whereby Ireland modernized whilst holding to traditional religious practice.

Lisa Godson has argued that, from the 1840s a number of Continental and Irish businesses manufacturing or selling mass-produced standardized objects for the religious market, played a part in 'embedding a sacramentalist, devotional Catholicism in Ireland' (Godson 2015). In other words, that Irish Catholics adopted the aspects of modernity which served to promote their agenda and project their values. During the late nineteenth century (the so-called 'devotional revolution') the Vatican attempted to synchronize and standardize religious practice across Europe. Sacred material culture (such as printed books, colorful religious pictures, textiles and the marble statuary mentioned above) was strongly influenced by Italian and French examples (Bolger 2011). Godson suggests that these 'standardized objects may have been a significant factor in regularizing religious expression and experience' (Godson 2015). In other words, engaging with modernity and novelty was a way through which conformity to new dogmas was blended with a sense of 'unchanging' tradition within a commercial marketplace for religious artefacts.

The modern material culture illustrated above was folded into belief and ritual by Irish Catholics: it was seen as integral to, rather than in conflict with, religion. The evidence of material culture suggests that the management and staff of Sunbeam (and other citizens of Ireland) saw no contradiction in implementing modern design, materials, technology and work-practices alongside a social system which promoted a form of paternalistic Catholicism. The foregoing implies that a continuing reassessment of the relationship between religion and aspects of Modernism and technology in the 1950s is merited. It would also be instructive to

compare the Irish situation with other Catholic countries such as Salazar's Portugal or Franco's Spain, or with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East which combined Islam with Modernism in the same time period.

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