

Christmas in the Graveyard? Nativity scenes on County Louth headstones

Harold Mytum

One of the most unusual designs for gravestones can be found in a small number of burial grounds in County Louth, where elaborate Nativity scenes have been carved above the inscriptions on early 19th-century headstones. As a seasonal contribution, Harold Mytum illustrates the skill of the carvers, with two stones signed by P Corigan.

Irish gravestones are frequently enlivened by symbolism, usually associated with the crucifixion but also with symbols of mortality, cherubs and, most frequent of all, the I H S. These are all easily explicable, relating to the frailty of the human form, the sacrifice of Christ to enable resurrection (also seen in the symbols of the Passion), and with the cherubs representing either angels or the soul rising to heaven. Other memorials display heraldic designs, and a few have symbols of occupations, all reflecting the identity of the deceased, but these County Louth Nativity scenes are the only ones with this subject known in Ireland, or indeed anywhere in the world.

Ada K Longfield briefly noted the existence of the County Louth Nativity designs, but only knew of four of the five examples now identified. However, her analysis was relatively brief and largely concentrated on identifying the carver Patrick Corigan, who also produced other designs in the area (Longfield 1947, 1948). We are now reconsidering these designs and carrying out a more detailed analysis of the compositions and qualities of the carving, allowing the identification of four of the memorials as the work of Patrick Corigan, but with the first example being by a different, unknown, hand.

The earliest monument with the Nativity scene is at Dromin (Fig.1), erected by Anthony Hand in memory of his daughter Anne, who died in 1805. This monument establishes the format of the design, which is always on headstones of the same general shape, even though each is of slightly different size and proportions. In the semi-circular tympanum is the I H S and cherubs with trumpets, and beneath is the Nativity scene. Mary sits on a bench covered with hay, holding the Christ-child on her lap. Joseph looks on nervously on the right. The setting in a stable is emphasised by the ox and donkey on the right, with a hay rack above the animals, and a winged cherub head above that. On the left are two angels, one kneeling and the other standing, both with their hands in positions of prayer and adoration. In the heavens above, are cherub heads in the clouds, each directing rays of radiance down onto the scene. Just in case the message is not clear, 'THE NATIVITY' is inscribed above the scene, and immediately below is "And again when he bringeth the first begotten into the World he saith and let all the Angels of God worship him. Hebrews Chap. 1 Verse 6." This verse is on several, though not all, of the nativity stones, and it is unusual to have Biblical passage near the top of Irish headstones.

The Dromin stone is well-carved and, as far as I know, has no antecedents on mortuary monuments. It is unclear who carved it, but for a memorial to Patrick and James Toner (died 1793 and 1813) which was erected in the Cord cemetery, Drogheda (Fig.2), we do know. P. Corigan signed the stone near the bottom of the front face, and thanks to an impressive campaign of site clearance organised by the Drogheda Civic Society this can now be clearly seen. The Dromin stone had the Nativity scene cut back from the surface used for the I H S, and also has additional winged cherubs in the upper portion. Corigan replaced these with a banner, on which he inscribed "Soli Deo Honor et Gloria", a motif he uses on all his Nativity scenes, though in this case he mis-judged the spacing of the words, and in the end leaving the last part of the banner blank (Fig.3).

A further three headstones with Nativity scenes were erected at Termonfeckin, only a little to the north-east of Drogheda, all a little later in date. One of these is also signed by Corigan, but given the similarity of all these and the Toner stone at Drogheda, it is likely they are all by his hand. The only significant differences are the way in which the "Soli Deo Honor et Gloria" text is arranged on the banner, which varies each time. As all the stones differ in dimensions and proportions, even though

their basic shape is similar, there is a variable amount of space for the angels, cherubs and animals in each composition. They were clearly each made individually but to the same general composition.

The Termonfeckin stone for Margaret McDonnell (died 1818) has been cleaned and re-set and another is relatively easy to discern, and this is the monument with Corigan's signature (Fig.5). It is similar in many respects to the Drogheda stone, but the text on the banner is well balanced in its composition (Fig.6). In 1819, Cath King died and her husband erected a Nativity stone, and the following year Jane Sheridan died and had another put up, though this is now broken, leaning and heavily covered with lichen (Fig.7). Like those puzzles noting the differences between two cartoons, it is possible to examine each part of the composition of all the Nativity stones and see slight differences in arrangement and treatment, even though all have basically the same components. In each case the treatment of Mary's clothing and how she holds Christ is different and sometimes her halo is radiate; the bench she sits on is also unique on each stone. Joseph varies on his position and angled forward he stands; the proportions and number of struts in the hay rack is not consistent, and the ox and ass move about slightly on the variously treated bedding. However, the scroll border beneath the scene all have beaked animal heads on what are the Corigan stones, unlike the earlier Dromin design which has scroll terminals – another indication that this was by a different carver.

The mystery is why the Nativity was chosen for gravestones at all. The headstones commemorate men and women, and none died around Christmas. One clue comes from the Cath King stone at Termonfeckin where there is also a text "In Nativitate Domini" above the I H S, a text also used to refer to inexpensive prints of the Nativity (Fig.8), one of which was probably the inspiration for the original Dromin design and may have been widely available in the area. Whilst gravestone symbolism of Christ's crucifixion are common, it must have been the coming of God as Man which someone – carver or client – decided was the first pivotal moment in the narrative that could lead to salvation, as indicated by the HIS and the trumpeting cherubs on the top of the stones. These Nativity stones thus mark the beginning and end of Christ's earthly presence, and so provide a particularly topical subject.

Reading

Longfield, A K 1947. Some Late 18th and early 19th Century Irish Tombstones. V. Subjects not related to the Crucifixion. Saints and Scenes by Kehoe, at St Mullins, and by an unknown carver, at Termonfeckin. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 77, 1-4.

Longfield, A K 1948. Some Late 18th and early 19th Century Irish Tombstones. VI. East County Louth. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 78, 170-174.

Bio

Harold Mytum is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Liverpool, and has been recording and researching Irish graveyards and their monuments for many years.

Images and captions



Fig. 1 Nativity scene on the Mary Hands (died 1805) stone, Dromin, Co. Louth.



Fig. 2 Nativity scene on the Toner stone, Cord cemetery, Drogheda.



Fig. 3 The top of the Toner stone, with a banner below the cherubs; note the asymmetrical arrangement of text on the banner.



Fig. 4 The Margaret McDonnell (d. 1818) stone at Termonfeckin Co. Louth, cleaned and re-set on a new base.



Fig. 5 Signature on the McDonnell stone, 'R Corigan – Sculps'. The inscription below the signature is a much later addition to the stone.



Fig. 6 The Nativity scene on the McDonnell stone, this with a symmetrical inscription on the banner.



Fig. 7 Spot the difference - Mary and Joseph on the Cath King (died 1819) stone (top) and the James Sheridan (died 1820) damaged stone (bottom).



Fig. 8 'In Nativate Domini' illustration with many of the components arranged as on the Nativity stones.