Ireland, hoped that the exhibition would demonstrate the North's contribution to Britain's economy and thus help reaffirm the province's place within collective national identity. The exhibition further suggested that the North's vernacular material culture was the root of its modern industrial achievement.

The Festival of Britain celebrations in Northern Ireland were centred on two events: first a large exhibition of local, historical and regional industry, held at Castlereagh in east Belfast; and the decoration of two of the region's most venerable buildings, Belfast City Hall and Derry Guildhall. The newly formed Council for the Encouragement of the Music and Arts (CEMA) in Northern Ireland oversaw the commissions for architectural decoration. On the board of CEMA were John Hunter, Art Inspector for the Ministry of Education, and Henry Lynch-Robinson, who was also the architect of the Castlereagh exhibition. Willy de Majo was the co-ordinator and chief designer of the Belfast exhibition but he worked by correspondence from London. Although the Festival of Britain was officially opened on 3 May 1951 the Castlereagh ‘Farm and Factory’ exhibition did not open until the 1 June, running to 31 August. The exhibition was designed by Lynch-Robinson as a “narrative” exhibition (not a trade show) and was intended to ‘describe the growth of the linen industry and development of craftsmanship and skill in other local industries.’ The Castlereagh site, at the junction of Montgomery Road and Antrimgrove Road, at the foot of the Valley of the White Streets, was the site of a 17th century linen mill.

Following the success of the imperial exhibitions in inter-war Britain a series of colonial exhibitions were planned for 1949 but were eventually ditched in favour of a great exhibition to be held in London in 1951. This would, as the historian John MacKenzie has pointed out, not only ‘propagate the ideas of the post-War Labour Government’ but also allow ideas of Empire to be refocused on national imagery. The very naming of the 1951 exhibition the Festival of Britain demonstrated a national rather than an imperial ideology. It was decided that in order to show how the nation had grown in the century since 1851, taking the Great Exhibition of that year as a point of departure, that as well as a major London exhibition, a series of provincial exhibitions were also to be held; principally in Cardiff, Glasgow and Belfast. The Festival of Britain aimed to re-focus national identity but also sought to introduce high modern ideas into architecture and design on a nation-wide scale. The Belfast Festival of Britain event took the form of an exhibition which drew attention to the ‘positive relations’ between North Irish ‘Industry and Craftsmanship’. Sir Roland Nugent, Chairman of the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland, hoped that the exhibition would demonstrate the North’s contribution to Britain’s economy and thus help reaffirm the province’s place within collective national identity. The exhibition further suggested that the North’s vernacular material culture was the root of its modern industrial achievement.

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the Ulster Farmstead of 1851’ which was surrounded by a series of displays showing ‘Irish Linen, Rayon, Shirting, Woollens, Poplins, Cotton, Shipbuilding, Tea Machinery, Engineering, Rope making, Whiskey, Pottery, Mineral Waters, Tobacco’, as well as ‘General and New Industries’. The Ulster Farmstead of 1851’ was contrasted with a ‘farmhouse of the future’. This materialisation of domestic modernity proved popular with the public and the exhibition had 156,760 visitors during its three-month run.

As part of the display, mural paintings were commissioned from local artists and at the centrepiece was, not surprisingly, the linen mural. It was completed by Lynch-Robinson’s protégé Sidney Smith and depicted The Flight of the Huguenots (by now languishing in the basement of North Heritage Centre in Bangor). Its huge dynamic structure showed Smith’s talent for large-scale compositions and decorative design and, even before its installation, it was attracting praise. George MacCann also designed murals for the Castlereagh exhibition and he apparently completed a mural for the South Bank Exhibition in London, alongside work by John Piper, Ben Nicholson, Felix Topolal, Eric Frazer and Victor Pasmore.

A specially commissioned documentary ‘The Land of Ulster’ was also screened at Castlereagh and CEMA produced a book on The Arts in Ulster. Following criticism of the temporary nature of the art-works at the exhibition, two commissions to commemorate the Festival in Ulster and counter the ‘transient’ nature of the Castlereagh murals were proposed. The subsequent decarations commissioned by CEMA were for the Province’s two most venerable buildings: Belfast City Hall and Derry Guildhall. Eventually mural paintings at Derry Guildhall were mooted in favour of sculpted bas-reliefs by George MacCarr. They depict St. Columba and The Four Just Men of the Derry Guild, executed in a style reminiscent of low-relief carves such as Eric Gill. For Belfast City Hall, however, a large mural was commissioned for one of the four lunettes below the central dome. The commission was first offered to William Conor and Colin Middleton, who both declined. The third artist asked to submit designs was the younger local artist John Luke, who had studied at the Slade School of Art in London, and who was awarded the commission which he did not complete until 1952.

The Festival of Britain along with the Coronation of Elizabeth II of 1953, as the historian Gillian Mcintosh has pointed out in her recent study of Unionist identities in Northern Ireland, became performances of ‘ritualised consensus’ which affirmed Northern Ireland’s place within Britain, in a period with a new high-profile period of design reform, which sought to reconnect rural craft traditions with new urban industrial operations. Norway was the only Scandinavian country not to be represented on the Design in Northern Ireland. In 1962 William Walsh went to Oslo to investigate Norwegian design and on a visit to the Pika Crafts Workshops at Frederikstad he was inspired to establish a similar enterprise in Ireland. After securing premises in Kilkeary, a band-located county south-west of Dublin, the Irish Export Board set up the Kilkeary Design Workshops in 1963 which is still believed to have been ‘the first industrial design practice set up by a government’. Although the Kilkeary Design Workshops were subject to a major retrospective exhibition in 2003 by the Crafts Council of Ireland, the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland has received nothing but the most cursory reference in studies of the region’s architecture. With the survival of the two major commissioned art works, in Belfast and Derry by John Luke and George MacCarr, works such as Sidney Smith’s mural or John Luke’s sculpture, graphic designs for the local guide-catalogue and official souvenir book by Colin Middleton and Rowel Friers, an almost full archive of relevant documentary papers and photographs at PRONI, as well as the actual Castlereagh ‘Farm and Factory’ exhibition buildings in east Belfast, it is inexplicable that no further research has yet happened. The abeyance should be, and could easily be, corrected.

Joseph McBirn

Above / Design for theatre set by Henry Lynch-Robinson reproduced in the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland Official Souvenir Book

Above / Design by Rowel Friers for the Festival of Britain in the Northern Ireland Exhibition of Architecture bringing many important images of the Arts in Ulster. Following criticism of the temporary nature of the art-works at the exhibition, two commissions to commemorate the Festival in Ulster and counter the ‘transient’ nature of the Castlereagh murals were proposed. The subsequent decarations commissioned by CEMA were for the Province’s two most venerable buildings: Belfast City Hall and Derry Guildhall. Eventually mural paintings at Derry Guildhall were mooted in favour of sculpted bas-reliefs by George MacCarr. They depict St. Columba and The Four Just Men of the Derry Guild, executed in a style reminiscent of low-relief carves such as Eric Gill. For Belfast City Hall, however, a large mural was commissioned for one of the four lunettes below the central dome. The commission was first offered to William Conor and Colin Middleton, who both declined. The third artist asked to submit designs was the younger local artist John Luke, who had studied at the Slade School of Art in London, and who was awarded the commission which he did not complete until 1952.

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Above / Final drawing for John Luke’s mural in Belfast City Hall