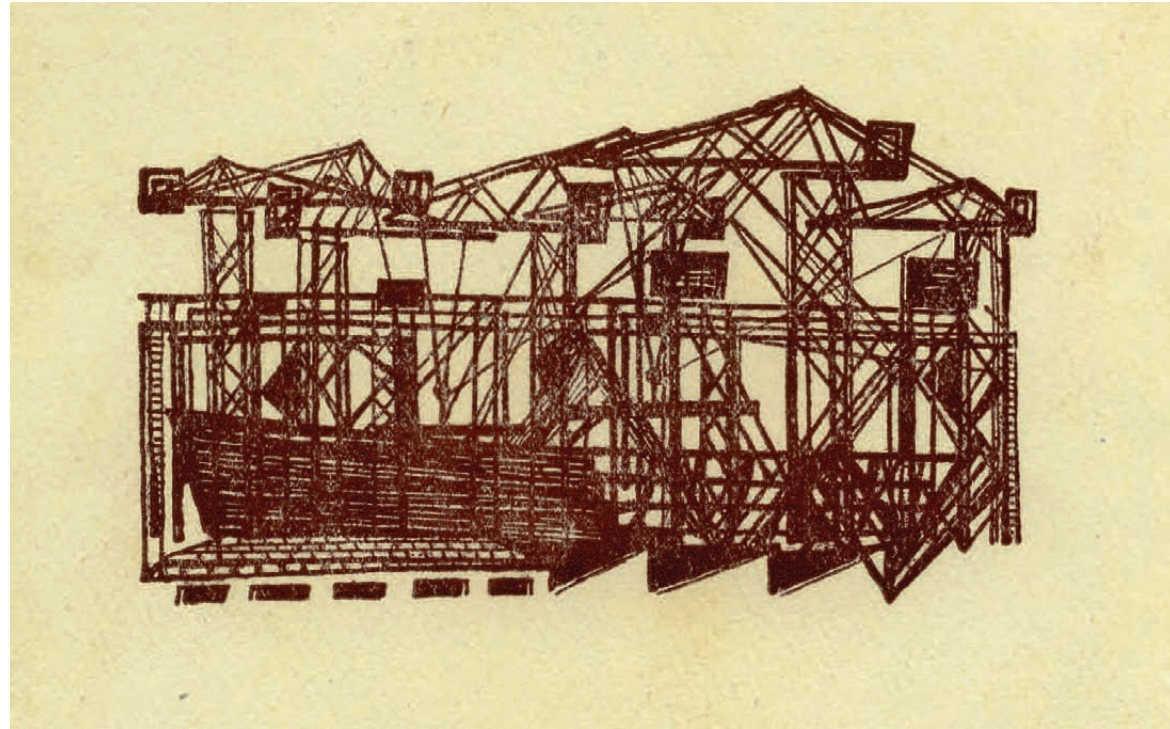


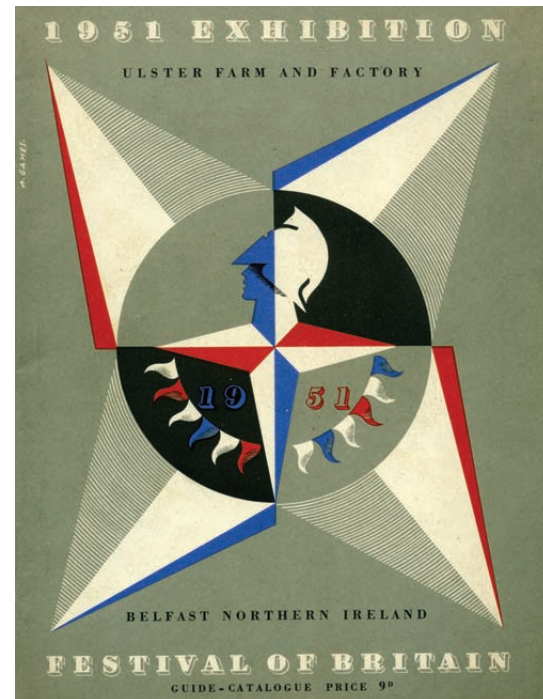
FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1951



Above / Design by Colin Middleton for the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland Guide-Catalogue

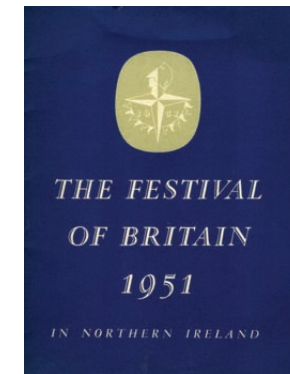
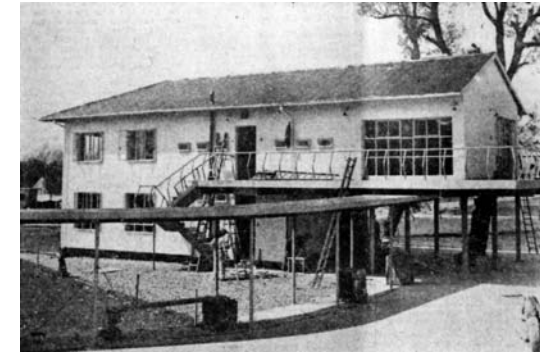
Following the success of the imperial exhibitions in inter-war Britain a series of colonial exhibitions were planned for 1949 but were eventually ditched in favour of a great exhibition to be held in London in 1951. This would, as the historian John MacKenzie has pointed out, not only 'propagate the 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 refocus 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



Above / Still from the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland documentary film 'The Land of Ulster'

Left / Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland Guide-Catalogue



Above / Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland 'Farmhouse of the Future'

Far left / Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland Official Souvenir Book

Left / Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland Programme Booklet

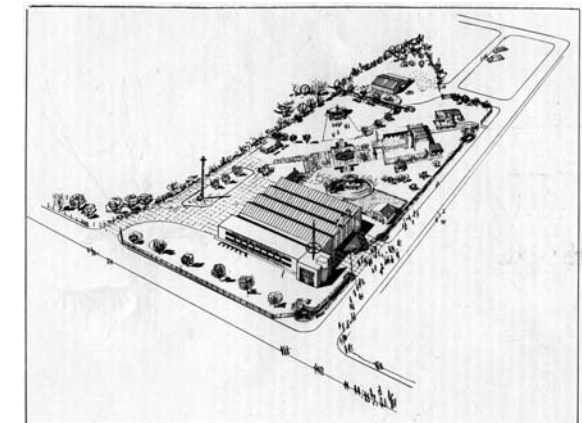
Ireland, hoped that the exhibition would demonstrate the North's contribution to Britain's economy and thus help reaffirm the province's place within collective national identity. The exhibition further suggested that the North's vernacular material culture was the root of its modern industrial achievement.

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 Alanbrooke Road, at the foot of



Above / Henry Lynch-Robinson, Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland 'Castlereagh Farm and Factory' building

Below / Plan of the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland 'Castlereagh Farm and Factory' building





Above / Design by Rowel Friers for the Festival of Britain in the Northern Official Souvenir Book

► the Castlereagh Hills, already housed factory buildings that had been erected in 1945 by the Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce.

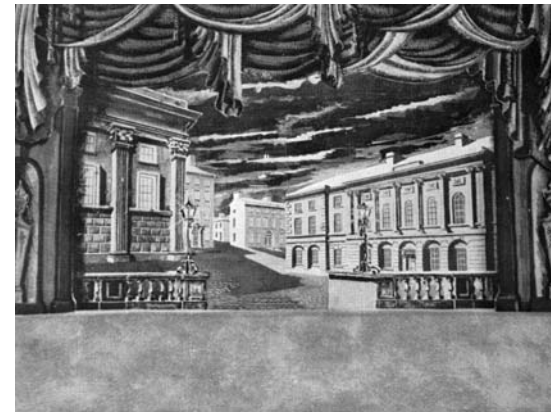
These were embellished and expanded by Lynch-Robinson to reflect the Modernist aesthetic that was established in the architecture at London's Southbank; the Festival's principal venue. Creating some sense of harmony and uniformity with the Southbank exhibition meant that Lynch-Robinson's ideas only really saw light in his designs for the interiors for several of the plays that were put on in Belfast's premier theatre spaces during the exhibition. The RSUA itself put on an exhibition of architecture bringing many important images of Modernist architecture to the Northern Irish public for the first time. The spirit of Modernist ascendancy at the Festival was even evident in the Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland guide-catalogue, the programme booklet and official souvenir book which all had the iconic Abram Games design on their cover in striking hues of grey and blue. The Castlereagh exhibition was designed around a specially reconstructed 'Ulster Farmstead of 1851' which was surrounded by a series



Above / Festival of Britain in Northern Ireland 'Cottage of 1851'

Right / Sidney Smith, 'The Flight of the Huguenots' mural in its original location at the Festival of Britain Northern Ireland 'Castlereagh Farm and Factory' Exhibition

of displays showing 'Irish Linen, Rayon, Shirtmaking, Woollens, Poplins, Cotton, Shipbuilding, Tea Machinery, Engineering, Ropemaking, 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



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

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 (it now languishes in the basement of North Down 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 ►



Above right / John Knox, 'The Gleaner' sculpture in its original location at the Festival of Britain Northern Ireland 'Castlereagh Farm and Factory' Exhibition



Above / George MacCann, St. Columba sculpture at the Londonderry Guildhall

► Nicholson, Felix Topolski, Eric Fraser and Victor Passmore. 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 decorations 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 MacCann. They depict St. Columba and The Four Just Men of the Derry Guilds, executed in a style reminiscent of low-relief carvers 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 Labour government in power, and a finalized programme of de-colonialisation within the British Empire which saw the

declaration of a separate independent Republic in southern Ireland in 1949. In 1952, the newly-formed Irish Export Board in southern Ireland responded in some ways to the Festival of Britain's aims of promoting Modernist ideas of 'good design' as it assumed responsibility for design matters, and, under the direction of William Walsh, the Board made the promotion of 'good design' a priority. In 1961, the Board invited a group of distinguished Scandinavian industrial designers and educators to Ireland to prepare a report on the current state of Irish design. The now legendary Design in Ireland Report was completed in April 1961 and published in February 1962 and its severe criticisms of Irish design immediately ushered in a 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 Ireland committee and in 1962 William Walsh went to Oslo to investigate Norwegian design and on a visit to the Plus Crafts Workshops at Frederikstad he was inspired to establish a similar enterprise in Ireland. After securing premises in Kilkenny, a land-locked county south-west of Dublin, the Irish Export Board set up the Kilkenny Design Workshops in 1963 which is still believed to have been 'the first industrial design practice set up by a government'. Although the Kilkenny Design Workshops were subject to a major retrospective exhibition in 2005 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 MacCann, works such as Sidney Smith's mural or John Knox'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 McBrinn



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