4

Seeing and Believing, 1900–1965

It is not often that the priest dilates upon the future happiness of good men, but when one eloquent curate, within my knowledge, expatated with godly fervour on the splendours of the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse to an old man dying in misery in a hovel near the village of Ballinamuck (the town of the pig), he only obtained this recognition of his efforts: ‘Well, yer reverence, as ye’re so intimate with th’ Almighty, I wish you’d tell him from me, that if it’s the same to him, I’d sooner stay in Ballinamuck’.

J.P. Mahaffy, 1912

Iconography and hymnography

‘Service in the church on Derryvud hill was tiresome, dull, comfortless, in those terribly straight-backed pews’, Sean Bullock remembered in his fictionalised autobiography of life in rural Fermanagh in the late nineteenth century. ‘Very dreary’, was Lady Alice Howard’s entry in her diary after a service in 1882; ‘Such a dull old parson and the church nearly empty.’ A novelist took up the theme: ‘... a dismal, barn-like building so cold and damp that even in summertime it struck a chill through one. The floor is ill-paved, the plaster peeling off the walls, the cushions moth-eaten.’ Harold Nicolson had a different, but equally un-spiritual, recollection of services in the 1890s when as a child he stayed with his kinsman, the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava. The huge party from the big house went to church in a procession of assorted vehicles carrying the marquess, the family, and the servants, and then made an
'entry into Bangor Church [which] had about it the solemnity of a State procession’. Many years later, Nicholas Mansergh attended a service in St Anne’s Cathedral, which ‘is hideous, lacks proportion, style and beauty’, as he noted in his diary, adding that he was ‘bored to extinction’ by the sermon. And if church services were seen in this unspiritual and rather joyless light, so too was the Protestant Sunday. It was with modified rapture that the Presbyterian missionary, Matthew McCaul, remembered his boyhood Sundays in Londonderry in the 1890s. Coming from a respectable household – his father was a doctor, and an elder in Strand church – he observed a ritual which was widespread among middle-class Protestants. Sunday school was at 10.00 a.m. followed by church at 12.00 noon. Dinner at 1.30 p.m. was followed by a walk, and church again at 6.00 p.m. Tea was at 7.00 p.m.; hymns and prayers ended the day. Meanwhile, ‘we were expected to read only “good books”, that is, religious books’. Sir Henry Hervey Bruce’s grandson recalled Sundays at his grandfather’s house at Downhill, which ‘would have given even Calvin some hints in austerity for his government of Geneva’, with a ‘ban on everything except waiting for the next religious exercise’. Dublin Presbyterians clamoured about ‘the subject of Sabbath desecration in the city and suburbs’, and claimed that the ‘Greatest Question for the Church today’ was ‘how the latter half of Sunday shall be spent by Christian people’. Anglicans too worried about ‘the passing away of Sunday as a day or rest’, and the Church of Ireland Conference in 1910 spent much time debating the ‘Secularization of Sunday’. The Earl of Donoughmore lamented that modern transport facilities had ‘engendered a spirit of restlessness which has been severely, but perhaps not unfairly, described as the modern idolatry of bustle’. This concern about Sunday observance was not confined to Irish Protestants; in Britain too a growing concern led to the founding of the Imperial Sunday Alliance in 1908. But what gave the issue more piquancy in Ireland was the contrast between Protestant and Roman Catholic attitudes. The ‘desecration of the Sabbath’ had long been held to be characteristic of Catholics, and an added incentive to oppose home rule and attack the nationalists. The different life-styles and beliefs of Catholics and Protestants were evident in their attitude to Sunday. They were evident also, of course, in their church buildings.

P.T. Forsyth, the great Congregationalist preacher, declared that a Protestant church ‘must be primarily an auditorium’. C.H. Spurgeon pronounced that ‘every Baptist place should be Grecian, never Gothic’. The reasons are obvious enough. Gothic architecture recalled the Middle Ages, when Roman rituals and doctrines were believed to have overlaid