



Fig. 01.01.
Francis Wheatley, *The Irish House of Commons*, 1780, oil on canvas, 172.5 x 215.9 cm.
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Parliament as Theatre: Francis Wheatley's *The Irish House of Commons* Revisited

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In 'The Legion Club', a poem of 1736, described as 'the most significant political poem of the century', Jonathan Swift satirised the Irish parliament and asked William Hogarth to paint a scene representing the goings on in Dublin's assembly:

How I want thee, humorous Hogart!
Thou I hear, a pleasant Rogue art;
Were but you and I acquainted,
Every Monster should be painted;
You should try your graving Tools,
On this odious Group of Fools;
Draw the Beasts as I describe 'em,
Form their Features, while I gibe 'em;
Draw them like, for I assure you,
You will need no Car'catura;
Draw them so that we may trace
All the Soul in every Face.¹

While Hogarth never depicted such a scene, or any pointedly Irish subject matter, forty years later the English artist Francis Wheatley (1747–1801), who visited Ireland between 1779 and 1783, did paint a group portrait of the Irish parliament

and it is that image, *The Irish House of Commons* (Fig. 01.01), which is the subject of this essay.

Wheatley's canvas is by no means a Hogarthian satire nor is it a representation of an 'odious Group of Fools'. Instead, Wheatley's painting – which has been much discussed and reproduced, and has been used by a number of historians as the cover illustration for scholarly studies of Irish history² – is seen as a positive representation of the role played by constitutional politics in Anglo-Irish matters. The painting shows Henry Grattan (1746–1820) speaking to the Irish parliament in April 1780 on the motion 'that the King's most excellent majesty, and the Lords and Commons of Ireland, are the only power competent to make laws to bind Ireland'.³ Yet this particular speech predates Grattan's more famous contribution to the Dublin parliament in 1782 when he spoke on legislative independence. In discussing Wheatley's group portrait of the interior of the chamber on Dublin's College Green of two years earlier, it is important to remember which of Grattan's many great speeches is being commemorated. While ostensibly a large, if rather crowded, group portrait, the creation and early history of Wheatley's painting is a story of the artist miscalculating the Dublin art market and failing to benefit financially from a novel intervention in the visual representation of legislators.

History offers us two Henry Grattans: the eighteenth-century Dublin parliamentarian and the posthumous nineteenth-century hero formulated by his sons and others into a mythical proto-Irish nationalist.⁴ This paper will focus on the former. While he may not have attained the popular or romantic status of other celebrated Irish political figures of the late eighteenth century such as Wolfe Tone and Lord Edward FitzGerald,⁵ this essay will discuss how the painting works as an attempt to popularise Grattan and what it says about Irish political life in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Equally, the painting needs to be examined in the context of pre-1780 group portraiture, a form of public display in which Wheatley was well versed. By focusing on a painting that predates the creation of the historical mystique of Grattan, we should not be distracted by the extensive visual iconography of the man which only really gets going from 1782 and thus cannot be considered when discussing the Wheatley oil painting of two years earlier.⁵

Furthermore, some caution must be applied when viewing Wheatley's *The Irish House of Commons*: the parliament that Grattan is addressing in this 1780 painting was a Protestant creation and thus by no means a fully representational

body. While a public space, Catholic Ireland was not represented within the Irish parliament in Dublin's College Green and the larger population of Ireland was not represented in Wheatley's painting. As Joep Leerssen has reminded us, '[Catholic Ireland] was a culture without a public sphere. Whatever public sphere there was, existed in Ascendancy Ireland. Parliament, the playhouses, societies learned or benevolent, and most importantly the pamphlets, papers and debates, were by and for Protestants.'⁶ More recently, an architectural historian has referred to Edward Lovett Pearce's 1730s Parliament House in Dublin as 'a forum for the choreography of Protestant Ireland, both official and dissident'.⁷ With this in mind, Wheatley's painting represents a political performance while the artist's failure to profit from Grattan's popularity through increased sales and other indicators of artistic success is a case of unfulfilled ambitions.

The formal failures of the painting can be easily identified. There are too many people depicted, some 170 both on the floor of the House and in the balcony, while the key event being celebrated, Grattan making his speech on behalf of reform, is not immediately discernible. The parliamentarian stands on the right, wearing the red-jacketed uniform of the newly formed Irish Volunteers but the eye is not instantly drawn to him. The emphatic gesturing of his right hand is visually lost against the white of his waistcoat and we search the canvas in vain for something to focus on. The problem seems to have been that, as his friend the architect James Gandon informs us in a memoir published in 1846, a host of MPs and Lords asked to be depicted in the scene and Wheatley was inundated with demands for inclusion.⁸ It is thus possible to say that, from the time of Grattan's speech on 19 April 1780 to Wheatley's signing of the canvas on 8 June 1780, the format of the painting and the need to include so many, allowed things to get out of hand. Gandon further informs us that the artist planned to produce the painting on a subscription basis, such that those who paid in advance would get included; in the end, however, he failed to sell the picture and had to dispose of it by raffle.⁹ While it is not exactly known why he failed to sell the picture in Dublin, it may be fair to speculate that Wheatley miscalculated the late eighteenth-century Irish art market's interest in such a novelty as the representation of a contemporary parliamentary group. As a result, his artistic venture turned into an economic liability. In time, the painting ended up in a variety of English collections and was eventually purchased by Sir Thomas Gascoigne whose descendants presented it to Leeds City Art Galleries in 1969. Today it hangs on the walls of the former

Gascoigne residence at Lotherton Hall. Even a promised engraving after the painting failed to materialise and all that was produced was a key to the identity of the sitters which was published in 1801, twenty years after the events depicted and after the Act of Union had already got rid of the chamber and the members shown.¹⁰

Wheatley's painting is the only extant painted record of the interior of the Irish House of Commons executed while it functioned but, at the same time, the artist has distorted the appearance of the chamber. Pearce's octagonal Irish House of Commons is seriously compressed with its occupants crammed into about two thirds of its true space. And yet it does give us a flavour of the octagonal room with its high dome, which was the centre of Pearce's great building. Wheatley's interior is additionally important due to the fact that the Commons was destroyed by fire in 1792, while the whole building was converted into a bank following the passing of the Act of Union of Parliaments in 1801.¹¹

Although dissolved in 1800, the Irish parliament had been in existence since 1295 even if its legislative powers were severely limited by London, chiefly through the passing of Poyning's law in 1495. From 1720, just a few years before Pearce's building was commissioned, the Declaratory Act had stated that the British parliament had the right to make laws for Ireland, and 'the British, rather than the Irish, House of Lords had ultimate appellate jurisdiction'.¹² Yet, as with the parliament in London, it was not a totally representative assembly. Composed of 300 members, the Irish House of Commons was made up of sixty-four MPs from the thirty-two county constituencies who were elected by the Protestant forty-shilling freeholders and could be said to represent a substantial number of voters. By contrast, 234 MPs represented boroughs where the franchise was restricted to small cliques of electors (some with only thirteen voters or less), who invariably voted for the nominee of controlling patrons, and there were two MPs for Trinity College Dublin.¹³ Throughout the eighteenth century, Roman Catholics were excluded from parliament and had no vote until 1793. Thus, with the obvious similarities of rampant corruption and the unrepresentative nature of the legislature, the Irish parliament was little different from the British parliament in London.

By 1780, a number of Irish MPs wanted more from their legislative assembly than the opportunity to pass laws of an improving kind, such as the creation of the Dublin Society back in 1731. In the 1770s, due to the scarcity of British

troops in Ireland, caused by the need for men to fight in the American wars, the Irish Volunteers had been organised, independent of government, as a national defence force. Enrolment was initially limited to Protestants but, in time, some 30,000 to 40,000 Catholics were enrolled. Middle-class Protestants, small farmers and urban artisans, as well as junior members of the legal profession and trade people, made up the rank and file of the Volunteers. In time, manoeuvres were held, uniforms and flags designed, and an air of pride in the cause took hold of the organisation.¹⁴ It is on the crest of this popular movement that Wheatley's painting needs to be examined.

With the formation of the Volunteers, Irish political life underwent a major transformation. Almost exclusively composed of landowners, the Irish Houses of Lords and Commons divided themselves between those who supported the administration in London – and, by extension, the resident Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Crown's representative in Dublin Castle – and those who favoured a more independent executive and legislature for Ireland. Labelled the British and the Irish parties respectively, the latter were, in the main, of a Whig persuasion and it is on that side of the House that Grattan stands.

Despite the existence of its own parliament, throughout the eighteenth century, Ireland was subject to a series of harsh laws emanating from London, one of the most economically crippling being the Trade Laws. Irish trade was controlled to the advantage of English merchants: all Irish goods had to pass through English ports and Ireland was not allowed to sell directly to the colonies. Such a situation was no longer acceptable by the 1770s to the majority of Irish landowners, who resented their loss of profits and questioned the control exercised by the Westminster parliament on their lives. A campaign for the repeal of the Trade Laws was mounted, and repeal was eventually achieved in February 1780. The move towards Free Trade has been seen as 'one of the most sustained crises [the] British government in Ireland faced in the eighteenth century'¹⁵ and its supporters were those who sat on the opposition benches in the College Green parliament. Many of them were active members of the Volunteers, including the leader of that opposition or Irish Party, Grattan, Colonel of the Dublin Independent Volunteers.

Despite criticisms of the composition of Wheatley's painting there are some convincing moments, such as the arrangement of figures which includes Grattan on the right hand, complemented by the equally elegant arrangement of the front bench on the left. It can thus be said that the front benches were painted with

care and compositional discernment while the remaining members and audience were crammed into the back benches and the balcony. In Wheatley's painting of 1780, we see Grattan making his speech surrounded by the Irish Party, many of whom sport the red Volunteer uniforms with green facing. Other uniformed Volunteer supporters, both male and female, stand or sit directly above Grattan in the balcony. The Volunteers and their popularity within Ascendancy Ireland was a vital ingredient in the production of the *Irish House of Commons*. While completing the *Commons* picture, it is important to point out that Wheatley had already produced an even bigger canvas of Irish Volunteers gathering outside parliament on College Green which was exhibited in Dublin in the summer of 1780 (Fig. 01.02).¹⁶

Fig. 01.02.

Francis Wheatley, *A View of College Green, with a meeting of the Volunteers on 4th November 1779, to commemorate the birthday of King William, 1780*, oil on canvas, 175 x 323 cm. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland



Wheatley's interior of the Irish House of Commons focuses on political opposition in the Dublin parliament. We are offered a potentially exciting clash between two opposing political parties. Supporters look on in the receding rows and, from the balcony above, we see ladies in large hats. In attempting to create compositional dynamism in the painting, Wheatley balances the two sides of the House, showing Grattan speaking and the executive listening.¹⁷ Wheatley's focus is on the political divide. Grattan declares his support for a freer legislature while all around him sit known supporters of the Irish Party: Barry Yelverton and Walter Hussey Burgh are immediately behind Grattan while Denis Daly and Isaac Corry sit to his left on the front bench.¹⁸ Across the floor, sitting in the executive front bench are, from the left, Luke Gardiner and, next to him, John Beresford, First Commissioner for Revenue. In the centre, with his hand in his waistcoat, is Richard Heron, Chief Secretary for Ireland. Further along the bench, in legal dress, is John Scott, the Attorney General, a key opposer of Grattan's motion, and Hugh Carleton, the Solicitor General. In his speech, Grattan had argued that only Ireland could make laws that affected Ireland and that free trade was vulnerable and incomplete without political liberty:

I never will be satisfied so long as the meanest cottager in Ireland has a link of the British chain clanking to his rags: he may be naked, he shall not be in iron; and I do see the time is at hand, the spirit is gone forth, the declaration is planted; and though great men should apostatize, yet the cause will live; and though the public speaker should die, yet the immortal fire shall outlast the organ which conveyed it, and the breath of liberty, like the word of the holy man, will not die with the prophet but survive him.¹⁹

In the end, Grattan was out-manoeuvred by the executive to our left in Wheatley's painting. They proposed and carried an adjournment motion by 136 votes to 97.²⁰ Despite his declamatory style of speaking and his eloquent turns of phrase and extravagant gesture, Grattan lost the debate but his contribution on this and subsequent debates placed the question of legislative independence firmly at the top of the domestic political agenda.

Wheatley was only in Ireland for four years from 1779 and, in time, he would return to London and become a Royal Academician. Yet, despite spending only a few years in Ireland, his Irish output was quite considerable. While here, Wheatley



Fig. 01.03.
Francis Wheatley, *The Entry of the Speaker (Edmund Sexton, later 1st Viscount Pery, 1717–1806) into the Irish House of Commons (now Bank of Ireland), 1782*, watercolour over ink on paper, 49.7 x 63.8 cm. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

produced a host of group portraits of Volunteers, members of the executive and military figures as well as views of country estates, picturesque scenes on the river Liffey, watercolours of fairs and gypsy encampments and, in 1782, a watercolour of Speaker Edmund Sexton entering the Irish Houses of Parliament through Pearce's great colonnade (Fig. 01.03).²¹ Sexton also appears in the oil painting of the interior of the Commons, and one can only speculate that, in producing this large watercolour, Wheatley was hoping to receive a commission relating to Ireland's parliament in the early 1780s. But such a commission or anything resembling a series never materialised, nor did any lucrative exploitation of Grattan's image. Only one small head and shoulders in oils survives (National Portrait Gallery, London) which shows the same turn of the head as in the large

painting and the sitter, again, wearing his Volunteer uniform. This small canvas may have been produced to assist Valentine Green in the production of mezzotint prints of Grattan, the only commercially successful spin-off from Wheatley's time in Dublin.²² Instead, when it comes to a series, Wheatley's name is now firmly associated not with Dublin but with his *Cries of London* which appeared a decade later in the 1790s.²³

Wheatley fled to Dublin from London for personal reasons in 1778.²⁴ One imagines that, shortly after his arrival, he assessed the situation in the Irish capital with regard to opportunities for painters and decided to extend his own talents. While Dublin's Society of Artists had held relatively regular art exhibitions in Dublin between 1765 and 1780, the city cannot be described as having fostered a flourishing art market. The visual recording of contemporary events of the sort that Wheatley would depict was unheard of while portraiture of a solid and unadventurous sort dominated.²⁵ During the first year of Wheatley's time in Ireland his only serious Irish competitor in figure painting, albeit in pastels, was Hugh Douglas Hamilton who, c.1780, produced a portrait of the 2nd Duke of Leinster in a Volunteer uniform, but then left Dublin for Italy in 1781 or early 1782.²⁶ Thus, while Wheatley was no doubt becoming aware of the increasingly extensive visual culture surrounding the Volunteers then



Fig. 01.04.
William Hincks, *Hibernia attended by her Brave Volunteers exhibiting her Commercial Freedom*, 1780, stipple engraving.
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developing across the country (glassware, sculptured bust portraiture, flags, banners, etc.),²⁷ the artist offered himself to the well-heeled members of the Volunteers as a painter with a good Royal Academy of Arts (RA) reputation, whose talent was for single or group portraiture.

One visual example of the Volunteer-inspired material circulating in Dublin in the spring of 1780 – immediately prior to Wheatley’s realisation of the *Irish House of Commons* – is William Hincks’ print of *Hibernia attended by her Brave Volunteers exhibiting her Commercial Freedom* (Fig. 01.04), which was published in Dublin in early May 1780. The print was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a visual influence on Wheatley but its purpose indicates the euphoria then existing in Dublin for free trade. In the engraving, as described by the *Dublin Evening Post*, Hibernia is ‘exhibiting to the world her commercial freedom, attended by the Volunteers. Europe, Africa and America are offering their treasures. At her feet the Harp is laid out with a Cornucopia pouring its riches on it, and in the background vessels sailing in and out of port etc. emblematic of extensive commerce.’²⁸

Although he did not produce a series of images of the Irish parliament, Wheatley’s interior of the House of Commons is one of a number of group paintings of contemporary events in the late 1770s and early 1780s that depict members of the Volunteers, all of whom saw themselves as Irish patriots. While advocating greater legislative freedom for Ireland, Grattan and his companions were not advocating separation or independence from Britain. A patriot supported Ireland but would never have contemplated breaking the link with the Crown.²⁹ As such, Wheatley’s patriots were a non-aggressive group of men who, with women looking on, highlighted the need for legislative reform but in a non-confrontational fashion. Women feature prominently in the three major group portraits that Wheatley produced in Ireland between 1779 and 1782.³⁰ *A View of College Green with a meeting of the Volunteers* (Fig. 01.02) of 1779–80 features over thirty women in the windows of neighbouring houses watching the spectacle below. In the 1780 House of Commons painting, a similar number of women can be counted on the balcony, while a few years later, in *The Earl of Aldborough reviewing the Volunteers at Belan, County Kildare* (Fig. 01.05), we can see a large number of women and girls who include the earl’s first wife, his mother and nine sisters.³¹ In all of these canvases, a number of women wear Volunteer uniforms or sport Volunteer colours.



Fig. 01.05.

Francis Wheatley, *The Earl of Aldborough Reviewing Volunteers at Belan House, County Kildare*, 1782 {later changes c.1787}, c.1810 {later extensions}; oil on canvas: 154.9 x 265.3 cm (sight size); Waddesdon, The Rothschild Collection (The National Trust) Bequest of James de Rothschild, 1957; acc. No. 668.

Photo: A.C. Cooper © The National Trust, Waddesdon Manor

The Irish House of Commons together with the College Green and Belan pictures are some of the few known images produced in Ireland in the late eighteenth century that include representations of female participation in public life. From before Wheatley visited Ireland and well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ireland had been and would continue to be represented allegorically as a woman. Yet here, in the late 1770s and early 1780s, real, often identifiable women appear in Wheatley's three paintings as spectators in political

or semi-militaristic events. The Countess of Aldborough, for example, appears in Volunteer uniform in two of the three paintings just mentioned. In the *Irish House of Commons* (Fig. 01.01), as a recent account of her husband informs us, she sits next to the 2nd Earl, directly above Grattan ‘in the third opening from the right in the upper row of columns ... in the uniform of the Aldborough Legion’. A few years later, in the *Belan Review* (Fig. 01.05) the countess is ‘mounted on a fine bay, and wearing a habit made up as a lady’s version of the Aldborough Legion’s uniform, even to the epaulettes, and with a hat surmounted by its black plumes’.³²

In the previous decade in England, Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) had produced a full-length portrait of Lady Worsley (Harewood House, Yorkshire) which was exhibited at the RA in 1780 in which she wears a riding habit adapted from the uniform of her husband’s regiment of the Hampshire Militia.³³ Such a very open visual example of a woman declaring a public awareness is unusual in the art of Britain and Ireland at this time. Prior to the 1780s, women and girls were confined to family portraits or genre scenes such as one that Wheatley himself produced in 1783 of young women as nymphs, as he called them, bathing in the Liffey (Fig. 01.06). As indicated by Hincks’ print of 1780 (Fig. 01.04) with its maenad-like presentation of Hibernia, the allegorised representation of women in an Irish context would continue for many decades. While it was little different in Britain, in subsequent years, all through the rise of Irish nationalism of the 1790s to the Young Irelanders of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, women just do not feature as real beings in Irish visual productions.³⁴ While they appear in large numbers in the three Wheatley paintings, all of the women in these pictures are passive spectators, not the main actors. In the *Memoirs* of his father published some sixty years later, James Grattan commented on the presence of women at Volunteer events:

Even the female sex lent their aid upon the occasion; and wove and ornamented colours which they presented (accompanied with much pomp and circumstance,) to their favourite corps; they also took a pride in attending the various reviews in their gayest attire and handsomest equipages. These associations not only became fashionable, but were almost the only object which attracted public attention.



Fig. 01.06.

Francis Wheatley, *The Salmon Leap, Leixlip*, 1783, oil on canvas, 67.6 x 64.8 cm.

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Contemporaries such as Sir Jonah Barrington said much the same: ‘The front rows [parliamentary] gallery were generally occupied by females of the highest rank and fashion, whose presence gave an animating and brilliant splendor to the entire scene.’³⁵ As such, while women did play important roles in Irish political life due to the intimate nature of elite politics and the incestuous culture of Ireland’s elected world, their appearance in Wheatley’s work needs to be seen as offering more a case of spectacle than political participation. And yet, the inclusion of thirty-odd women in the House of Commons picture is indeed noteworthy and gives credence to the claims that parliamentarians, when speaking to the House, were also playing to the gallery where all those women sat.³⁶ Elite women in Irish public life had been a feature of Dublin politics for some fifty years prior to Wheatley’s depiction of the interior of the House of Commons.³⁷ Equally, the rise of the Volunteers offered many women an opportunity to participate in patriotic endeavours either through wearing Irish-manufactured clothing or very public participation in civic patriotism.³⁸ While the prominent visibility of uniformed female spectators in Wheatley’s three Volunteer group portraits offers a degree of sexual frisson, in reality, Wheatley’s Volunteer paintings emphasise a masculine solidarity.³⁹ To quote once again from James Grattan’s *Memoirs* of his father:

Not to be in uniform, was not only considered as a proof of luke warmth, but a mark of disgrace, and was used as a term of reproach in the House of Commons — where, on one occasion, it was imputed to a particular Member that he was the last who had appeared in uniform.

Padhraig Higgins sees such awareness as representing an ‘assertive masculinity’ on Grattan’s part where the uniform became ‘a public marker of patriot affiliation’.⁴⁰ Higgins comments further on how such masculinity which ‘was expressed through sartorial display, military discipline, the bearing of arms, and a language of virtue permeat[ed] all aspects of public life’.⁴¹ Indeed fashionable appearance and purposely designed uniforms are a dominant feature of all of the Volunteer paintings being discussed (Figs 01.01, 01.02 and 01.05). In the College Green painting (Fig. 01.02), the first of these three Volunteer works, we see a range of bright red military coats, silver helmets with fur decoration and a preponderance of flags, while the central figure of the Duke of Leinster, sword in hand, stands just below the statue of a classically armoured William III. In *The Irish House of*

Commons (Fig. 01.01), as has been stated, Grattan and some dozen or so other men wear bright red Volunteers' jackets, while in the Belan assembly (Fig. 01.05), on the left, the Earl of Aldborough, sporting a black plumed hat 'to indicate his rank as the [Aldborough] Legion's Colonel', sits astride his horse Pomposo and advances towards his attendant family and their carriages, the central one of which carries the earl's coronet and the family motto: 'Nothing can oppose courage and arms.'⁴² The inclusion in both the Commons and Belan pictures of richly dressed black servant boys adds to the intensely fashionable aura of these works. These paintings aim to impress on social as well as political levels, while also indulging in public performance and display.

The various Wheatley paintings of Volunteer groups – be they on parade on the streets of Dublin (Fig. 01.02), before a noble seat (Fig. 01.05) or as members or visitors in the House of Commons itself (Fig. 01.01) – all have a markedly rhetorical air about them. As a great admirer of the theatre and of opera, it is not surprising to see Grattan in Wheatley's painting commanding the front of stage, delivering his great speech.⁴³ In the other Volunteer paintings, the main protagonists gesture (Leinster in College Green) or turn their heads with assurance (Aldborough at Belan, while his horse 'curvets with one leg raised').⁴⁴ In the background of all three paintings, a large cast of fellow performers decorates a variety of wide public spaces. Only a few months before Grattan stood in parliament in April 1780 and at the height of the Free Trade crisis, the Duke of Leinster, who plays such a prominent role in Wheatley's *A View of College Green* (Fig. 01.02) made a 'triumphant appearance' at the Crow Street Theatre in Dublin flanked by Volunteers. Such a display of local strength has been interpreted as a deliberate attempt to upstage the Lord Lieutenant, especially given that, only the day before, Leinster had spoken in the House of Lords denouncing the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Buckinghamshire.⁴⁵

Wheatley's Volunteer paintings are colourful, exotic and theatrical, yet the predominant authority is decidedly masculine.⁴⁶ In the display of such masculine activity, spectacle and demonstrative gesture were the norm. As a productive portraitist, prior to fleeing to Dublin Wheatley would have been aware of trends in recent British visual productions. The genre for male scenes of conviviality, drinking clubs and the like had been in existence in both Britain (and indeed Ireland) from much earlier in the eighteenth century and had been very common in the large group portraits by Frans Hals, Rembrandt and others in the United



Fig. 01.07.
Peter Tillemans, *The House of Common in Session*, c.1709, oil on canvas,
137.3 x 123.3 cm. © Palace of Westminster Collection

Netherlands Republic during the previous century. Reynolds, the most illustrious portrait painter in London by the date of Wheatley's Irish paintings, had produced just such a variation on the homosocial portrait a few years earlier in his two companion portraits of members of the Society of Dilettanti (1777–9, on loan to Brooks's Club, St James's, London).⁴⁷ While the Reynolds paintings show men raising glasses and enjoying wine, such scenes of merry making are omitted by Wheatley in his Irish pictures. Instead, drinking and antiquarian amateurism are replaced by oratory and military enthusiasm as pursued by professional politicians and aristocratic patriots.

Placing Wheatley's *Irish House of Commons* within what one might call the sub-genre of group portraiture of legislators, the visual precedents from the larger parliament in Westminster are not extensive. A range of prints and a few paintings from the mid-seventeenth century through to the mid-eighteenth century provide static compositional formats of rigid parallel rows of members leading directly to the monarch or speaker. In the case of Peter Tillemans' London *House of Commons* dating from c.1709 (Fig. 01.07), as with Wheatley's later depiction of the Dublin chamber, we see a cramming of the benches and gallery with individual portraits. A few decades later, Hogarth produced a couple of paintings c.1730 of Speaker Arthur Onslow, a kinsman of the Speaker Onslow in Tillemans' earlier painting; these suggest a more varied approach to parliamentary group representation, where conversations occur and rigidity is reduced.⁴⁸ Returning to Wheatley's *Irish House of Commons*, it can be said that the Dublin painting represents an animated chamber with legislators performing and an attentive audience. The painting is thus more than just a view, as in the earlier case of the Tillemans, but an attempt to depict parliament in action. Wheatley's innovation would be repeated a decade later by Karl Anton Hickel in his painting of Pitt the Younger at the Westminster despatch box but, unlike the Dublin chamber, Hickel does not seem to represent a particular moment.⁴⁹ Despite such attempts at novelty and due to circumstances not helped by the financial failures of his efforts to dispose of the *Irish House of Commons* picture, Wheatley had little or no effect on Irish art in the 1780s or beyond. The painting itself left Ireland soon after it was painted in June 1780 and only returned to Dublin for a few months in 1853 when it was exhibited at The Irish Industrial Exhibition.⁵⁰ After the closure of the Irish parliament in 1800, a number of variations on Wheatley's canvas were painted and exhibited but their purpose seems to have been to encourage a



Fig. 01.08.

Francis Wheatley, *Mr and Mrs Richardson*, 1776, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm.

Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

romantic nostalgia for a lost moment in Irish legislative endeavours.⁵¹

Wheatley's group portraiture produced prior to visiting Ireland is refined and elegant. His portrait of *Mr and Mrs Richardson* which was shown at the RA in 1778, just before the artist moved to Ireland (Fig. 01.08), with its protagonists looking away from the viewer in a detached yet confident fashion, indicates the panache that Wheatley would bring to society portraiture in Dublin.⁵² The



Fig. 01.09.

Johann Zoffany, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy*, 1772, oil on canvas, 100.7 x 147.3 cm. © Royal Collection Trust/Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015

grace and calm of this couple is echoed in any number of the portraits in the *Irish House of Commons*, most especially if one compares Richardson with the standing figure of O'Neill in the centre of the Dublin parliament. In creating the *Irish House of Commons*, the artist was attempting a grander style of group portraiture and, as such, he looked back only a few years to the sophisticated new trends in institutional group portraiture that Johann Zoffany (1733–1810)

was experimenting with. It is not at all inconceivable that Wheatley may have seen Zoffany's *Academicians of the Royal Academy* (Fig. 01.09), which was exhibited at Pall Mall in London in 1772.⁵³ As with Wheatley's later composition, Zoffany's group is a fan-shaped arrangement of many figures. Both paintings are set within an interior and have empty foregrounds and both works focus on male institutions, an Academy and a legislature. The tightly organised groups display the elegantly dressed and the plainly dressed. For the former see, for example, the artist Richard Cosway in the far right of the Zoffany and Isaac Corry seated to the far right of the front bench in the Wheatley. What Wheatley may have taken from seeing Zoffany's painting in London before travelling to Dublin was a way of depicting a comparable group of institutionalised men with a sense of their collective character. While both paintings are fictionalised versions of the goings on in both London and Dublin, the Zoffany is a success due to the artist's complete compositional control of the group dynamics depicted. Wheatley was the victim of a mass of sitters who all wanted to be included, thus reducing his image to an overcrowded *melée*. Zoffany painted a secure world of learning and fraternal companionship, while Wheatley depicted an insecure elite, which used masculine solidarity and female spectatorship to imply a unified national situation and a corporate identity which was, in fact, illusory. Within the Zoffany painting we see the artists arranging the nude model to aid their skills in drawing, while on the walls are plaster models of antique objects that imply the traditions that they wish to preserve. The Wheatley, as one recent commentator has it, does not rise above 'historical reportage'.⁵⁴ In painting such an ambitious group portrait of the interior of the Irish House of Commons one can only conclude that Wheatley was stretching himself beyond his artistic capabilities, which really lay in modest group pieces and scenes of picturesque daily life.

The comment on Wheatley's painting as being 'best viewed as historical reportage' pointedly compares the interior of the *Irish House of Commons* to John Singleton Copley's *Collapse of Chatham*, a virtually contemporaneous canvas depicting the fatal collapse of the elderly 1st Earl of Chatham in the London House of Lords in 1778 (Fig. 01.10). The Copley has been seen as attaining the heights of 'high art in the truly grand manner'. Copley's use of a confined space, superbly crafted lighting and the rich red robes of the peers all work towards achieving a heady mixture of drama (the collapse of a great man) and up-to-date history. The vivid portraits of the members of Copley's Lords do indeed have



Fig. 01.10.
John Singleton Copley, *The Collapse of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords, 7 July 1778, 1779–81*, oil on canvas, 228.5 x 307.5 cm.
On loan to the National Portrait Gallery, London, © Tate Gallery, London

none of the ‘serried ranks’ of Wheatley’s Dublin painting.⁵⁵

However, Wheatley in Dublin in 1780, like Zoffany in his earlier canvas of the Academicians in London, was painting an institution that wished to be taken seriously. While doubtless aware of the constitutional inferiority of the Dublin parliament compared with the London one, in participating in Wheatley’s

extravagant enterprise to depict its proceedings, the Irish MPs of 1780 were stressing a sense of their own importance. That importance was, in reality, a political illusion just as Wheatley's attempt to make any profit out of his labours was a miscalculation of the decidedly unimaginative Dublin art market. At the same time, he updated and animated a sub-genre of group portraiture – legislators at work – that, as has been discussed, had only had a rather fitful presence in British visual representation from the seventeenth century. In London and in America and post-Wheatley, the genre would continue with Hikel's painting and John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*. This latter began as a sketch produced under the influence of Thomas Jefferson in Paris and London in the mid-1780s but was later hugely enlarged and has graced the walls of the United States Capitol since the 1820s.⁵⁶

Endnotes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented to The History of Parliament, The Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 2010, and the University of Nottingham's Interdisciplinary Eighteenth-Century Research Seminar, 2011. I am grateful to those who offered comments at both these events.

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Swift, 'A Character, Panegyric, and Description of the LEGION CLUB' in A. Carpenter (ed.), *Verses in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), pp. 25, 229–30. For the kind of boisterous image that Swift may have had in mind, see Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern Conversation* from c.1730, engraved in 1732–3, see R. Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works*, 3rd rev. ed. (London: The Print Room, 1989), pp. 84–5.
- 2 The painting was used as a cover illustration by O. MacDonagh, *States of Mind. A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983) and J. Kelly, *Prelude to Union* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992). Neither author discusses the Wheatley. The painting has been discussed by, among others, R. Watson, 'Francis Wheatley in Ireland', *Irish Georgian Society*, 9 (1966), p. 41; M. Webster, *Francis Wheatley* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); A. Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters 1600–1940* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 165; J. Kelly, 'Francis Wheatley: His Irish Paintings, 1779–1783' in A.M. Dalsimer (ed.), *Visualizing Ireland. National Identity and the Pictorial Tradition* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 154–6; F. Cullen, *Visual Politics. The Representation of Ireland 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 62–3; F. Cullen, *The Irish Face. Redefining the Irish Portrait* (London, National Portrait Gallery, 2004), pp. 150, 152; N. Figgis (ed.), *Art and Architecture of Ireland, II, Painting 1600–1900* (Dublin, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 113–14, 504.
- 3 H. Grattan, *The Speeches of the Rt Hon Henry Grattan in the Irish and in the Imperial Parliament*, 4 vols (London: Longman, Hirst, Rees, Orme and Brown and Dublin: R. Milliken, 1822), I, pp. 38–56.
- 4 See G. O'Brien, 'The Grattan Mystique', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 1 (1986), pp. 177–94 and J. Kelly, *Henry Grattan* (Dundalk: Historical Association of Ireland), 1993.
- 5 For the visual iconography see Cullen, *The Irish Face*, passim and R. Walker, *National Portrait Gallery: Regency Portraits*, 2 vols (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1985), I, pp. 222–43.
- 6 J. Leerssen, *Hidden Ireland, Public Sphere* (Galway: Arlen House, 2002), p. 36.
- 7 R. Usher, *Protestant Dublin, 1660–1760. Architecture and Iconography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 152.
- 8 J. Gandon and T.J. Mulvany, *The Life of James Gandon, Esq* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1846), pp. 207–8. See also Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, p. 504.
- 9 Gandon, *Life of James Gandon*, p. 208; the earliest known reference to Wheatley's sale by raffle appears in Anthony Pasquin, *Memoirs of*

- the Royal Academicians, being an attempt to improve the national taste ...* (London: H.D. Symonds, 1796), p. 135; see also Webster, *Wheatley*, p. 128 and Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, p. 504.
- 10 See Webster, *Wheatley*, p. 128, pp. 186–7.
 - 11 E. McParland, *Public Architecture in Ireland 1680–1760* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), Chapter 7; see also R. Loeber et al., *Art and Architecture of Ireland, IV, Architecture 1600–2000* (Dublin, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 172–4.
 - 12 See McParland, p. 185.
 - 13 J.L. McCracken, *The Irish Parliament in the Eighteenth Century* (Dundalgan Press, Dundalk, 1971), pp. 7–9.
 - 14 For the Volunteers, see Thomas MacNevin, *The History of the Volunteers of 1782* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845) and R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760–1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 255–62.
 - 15 J. Kelly, *Prelude to Union. Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992), p. 25.
 - 16 See Webster, *Wheatley*, pp. 30–5; Cullen, *Visual Politics*, Chapter 2 and Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, II, p. 504.
 - 17 For more on the visual representation of confrontational politics, see F. Cullen, ‘Radicals and reactionaries: portraits of the 1790s in Ireland’ in Jim Smyth (ed.), *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union. Ireland in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161–94 and Cullen, *The Irish Face*, Chapters 4 and 5.
 - 18 The published key by W. Skelton does not identify the visitors on the balcony but it does refer to some visiting members from the Irish House of Lords; see Webster, *Wheatley*, p. 186.
 - 19 See Grattan, *Speeches of ... Grattan*, I, p. 53.
 - 20 H. Grattan, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Rt Hon Henry Grattan*, 5 vols (London: Henry Colburn Publisher, 1839), II, pp. 48–50; Grattan’s speech lasted two hours while the debate went on for fifteen hours.
 - 21 Wheatley’s watercolour of Pery was included in the exhibition, *La Révolution Française et l’Europe 1789–1799*, 3 vols (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1989), I, p. 21.
 - 22 See Webster, *Wheatley*, p. 127, and Walker, *National Portrait Gallery: Regency Portraits*, I, pp. 223–4. The print dates from 1782. For the oil, see Cullen, *Irish Face*, pp. 150, 152 and for the print see Cullen in Smyth, *Revolution*, p. 173.
 - 23 See Webster, *Wheatley*, pp. 81–5. See also Sean Shesgreen, *Images of Outcast. The Urban Poor in the Cries of London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 132–3.
 - 24 See Webster, *Wheatley*, pp. 29–30.
 - 25 See Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, vol. II, pp. 17–22.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, for Hamilton, p. 281 and W. Laffan (ed.), *The Art of a Nation: Three Centuries of Irish Painting* (London: Pym’s Gallery, 2002), pp. 17–20. The other artists who did portraits of Volunteers include Strickland Lowry, John Trotter and Joseph Wilson; see Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, II, pp. 352, 478 and 512.
 - 27 See Cullen, *Visual Politics*, p. 56.
 - 28 Quoted in P. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism, and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), p. 190; *Dublin Evening Post*, 11 May 1780; for Hincks see Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, II, pp. 303–4.
 - 29 J. Leerssen, ‘Anglo-Irish Patriotism and Its European Context: Notes towards a

- Reassessment', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 3 (1988), pp. 7–24 and his *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael. Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), especially pp. 350–57; see also, J. Kelly, 'Patriot Politics, 1750–91' in A. Jackson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 479–96.
- 30 See M. O'Dowd, 'The women in the gallery: women and politics in late eighteenth-century Ireland' in S. Wichert (ed.), *From the United Irishmen to Twentieth-Century Unionism. Essays in Honour of A.T.Q. Stewart* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), pp. 35–47 and Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, Chapter 7.
- 31 The further inclusion of the earl's second wife and others occasioned alterations to the painting (c.1787 and c.1810), which are not by Wheatley; see M. Webster, 'Francis Wheatley's Review in Belan Park', *Apollo*, 122 (1985), pp. 275–9. For another Irish Volunteer portrait group see M. Webster, 'Wheatley's Lord and Lady Antrim', *Irish Arts Review*, 1, 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 42–5.
- 32 R.L. Lightbown, *An Architect Earl. Edward Augustus Stratford (1736–1801) 2nd Earl of Aldborough* (Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny: OLL Editions, 2008), pp. 203, 215.
- 33 Hallett, *Reynolds. Portraiture in Action* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 384–8. Although a regular exhibitor at the RA, in 1780 Wheatley was in Dublin and would not necessarily have seen the Reynolds in person. See also M. Pointon, *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture 1665–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 202–5.
- 34 See B. Loftus, *Mirrors. William III and Mother Ireland* (Dundrum, Co. Down: Picture Press, 1990) and Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, Chapter 7; also M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985).
- 35 See Grattan, *Memoirs ... Grattan*, II, p. 124; Jonah Barrington, *Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1853), I, p. 139.
- 36 See O'Dowd in Wichert, p. 40; see also M.J. Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 142–3 and D.J.T. Englefield, 'The Irish Houses of Parliament in the Eighteenth Century', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 9 (1955), p. 60.
- 37 See O'Dowd in Wichert, pp. 36–7.
- 38 Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, p. 195; see also S. Foster, 'Consumer nationalism in 18th Century Dublin', *History Today*, 47, 6 (June 1997), pp. 44–51. The reference to 'contemporary paintings' containing female spectators to Volunteer events in I. McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), p. 390 is misleading as the images cited are late nineteenth-century inventions by John Carey.
- 39 For the link between the Volunteers and theatricality, see Higgins, *passim*, especially Chapters 5 to 7.
- 40 See Grattan, *Memoirs ... Grattan*, II, p. 214; Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, p. 167. In the Appendix to his book, MacNevin (*History of the Volunteers*, 1845) lists Volunteer corps with details of their uniforms.
- 41 See Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, p. 161. See also Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding. Reforming masculinities in British art 1750–1810* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), especially Chapter 8.
- 42 See Lightbown, *An Architect Earl*, pp. 211–14 and Chapter 8 in general.
- 43 See Grattan, *Memoirs ... Grattan*, I, pp. 144–7 and R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), p. 239.

- 44 See Lightbown, *An Architect Earl*, p. 211.
- 45 See Powell, *The Politics of Consumption*, pp. 106–109, and H. Burke, *Riotous Performances. The Struggle for Hegemony in the Irish Theatre, 1712–1784* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 269. Event took place on 10 December 1779.
- 46 Dapper and elegant figures also appear in another military image from Wheatley's Dublin years, a group portrait of John Irwin, the commander-in-chief in Ireland with colleagues in what is thought to be Phoenix Park, *Sir John Irwin reviewing the troops in Dublin in 1781*; see J. Ingamells, *National Portrait Gallery. Mid-Georgian Portraits 1760–1790* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004), pp. 282–3.
- 47 See Hallett, *Reynolds*, pp. 319–20.
- 48 For Tillemans' view of the House of Commons, see R.J.B. Walker, 'A Catalogue of paintings, drawings, engravings and sculpture in the Palace of Westminster', 2 vols (unpublished typescript, Croydon: Property Services Agency, 1988), II, pp. 24–5. For Hogarth's *A Committee of the House of Commons* (1728–9, London, National Portrait Gallery) and his portrait of Onslow, co-painted with his father-in-law, Thornhill (1730, The National Trust, Onslow Collection, Clandon Park), see R. Paulson, *Hogarth*, 3 vols (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991–3), I, pp. 191–4. My thanks to James Ford for this information.
- 49 See Walker, *National Portrait Gallery: Regency Portraits*, I, pp. 598–604; II, plate 1501, and <https://historyofparliamentblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/karl-anton-hickel-and-parliament/> (accessed 22 May 2016), by Paul Seaward of the History of Parliament Trust, 2012. My thanks to James Ford for this information. The Irish artist James Barry did include a group of historical legislators (led by King Alfred and William Penn) in his great mural 'Elysium and Tartarus', 1777–84, in the Royal Society of Arts, London, see W. L. Pressly, *James Barry's Murals at the Royal Society of Arts: Envisioning a New Public Art* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), pp. 155–8.
- 50 A. Stewart, *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765–1927*, 3 vols (St Ouen's, Jersey: JAB Publishing, 1995), II, p. 769.
- 51 Subsequent paintings include Nicholas Kenny's *Irish House of Commons, Henry Grattan moving Declaration of Independence on 16 April 1782*, 1839–43, just as the Wheatley, exhibited in Dublin in 1853 and Nicholas Kenny, *Henry Grattan, c.1838–9*; see Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, II, pp. 333–4. Henry Barraud and John Hayter, *The Irish House of Commons 1790, 1869*, Campbell College, Belfast was also exhibited in Dublin in 1882 and 1888; for the exhibition of the Kenny and the Barraud and Hayter see Stewart, *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions*, I (Dublin: Manton Publishing, 1990), pp. 32 and 380; key to this image, *Lady of the House*, Christmas 1906; reproduced front endpapers, Edith Mary Johnson-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament 1692–1800*, 6 vols (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2002), VI; my thanks to Keith Haines for this information.
- 52 See Webster, *Wheatley*, pp. 122–3, and *La Révolution Française et l'Europe*, I, p. 41; for the development of the refined group portrait and the conversation piece in the eighteenth century see D.H. Solkin, *Painting for Money. The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), Chapters 2 and 3; also D. Shawe-Taylor, *The Conversation Piece. Scenes of fashionable life* (London: Royal Collection Publications, 2009).
- 53 For Zoffany see M. Postle (ed.), *Johann Zoffany RA. Society Observed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp.

- 218–9; for some of the ideas expressed here I am grateful to Hallett, *Reynolds*, p. 250. See also M. Webster, *Zoffany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 252–61. In 1966, Watson, *Irish Georgian Society*, compared Zoffany and the Wheatley, p. 41. For Zoffany's conversation pieces see K. Retford, "'Peculiarly happy at taking Likenesses": Zoffany and British Portraiture' in Postle, *Zoffany*, pp. 101–23; also K. Retford, "'The small Domestic and Conversation style": David Allan and Scottish Portraiture in the late Eighteenth Century', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 15:1, 2014, pp. 1–27.
- 54 See Figgis, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, II, p. 504.
- 55 Ibid. Ironically, Horace Walpole, on viewing the Copley in 1781, commented that the artist had included nearly the whole peerage (56 as opposed to Wheatley's 148 on the floor of the House and as many again on the balcony); see J. Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966), II, p. 280. Benjamin West produced an oil sketch in 1778 of the death of Chatham which predates the Copley; see J. Prown, 'John Trumbull as a History Painter' in H. Cooper, *John Trumbull. The Hand and Spirit of a Painter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 28–9 and H. von Erffa and A. Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 218.
- 56 See T. Sizer, *The Works of Colonel John Trumbull. Artist of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 96 and figs 157–63; see also Cooper, *Trumbull*, pp. 76–81.