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# ALFRED ELMORE'S RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS

Caoimhín de Bhailís

Alfred Elmore was born in Clonakilty, and up until now his accepted date of birth has been 18 June 1815.[1] Elmore's father, Richard, married a local woman, Marianne Callanan, in Christ Church, Cork, in October 1808.[2] She was the daughter of Dr William Callanan of Clonakilty. Dr Callanan was a local Catholic involved in the United Irishmen and was arrested in the aftermath of Robert Emmet's rising of 1803, along with William Todd Jones who had been staying with the doctor for the previous eight months.[3] Richard had recently retired from the British Army having served as a surgeon, with the 5th Dragoon Guards, during the Peninsular Wars.[4] During his time in Clonakilty, he established a linen business which flourished for a period; he also made representations to Government to help improve the economic prospects for Clonakilty.[5] The linen business was ultimately unsuccessful and Richard returned to London in 1827. We learn from his war office records that Marianne died sometime prior to his return to London, along with a child around the same time and so perhaps she died giving birth; this was followed by the loss of a son, the eldest of their remaining children.[6] By the end of 1827, Richard was a widowed father of three sons: Alfred, Thomas and Charles.[7]

Once in London we know that Alfred Elmore began drawing from sculptures on display at the British Museum, and in 1833 he became a student at the Royal Academy (RA).[8] In 1834, Elmore sent his first painting, *Subject from an Old Play*, to the Academy Summer Exhibition. He did not send another work to the RA until 1840. He was made an Associate of the RA in 1845

and elected to full membership in 1857; he was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) in 1878.[9] According to the *Art-Journal* he travelled throughout Europe at various times between 1833 and 1839, and again from the summer of 1840 for a period of about two years.[10] While engaged in his travels he continued to send work to the British Institution (BI). *A Subject from the Heiress of Bruges*, shown in 1835, was inspired by the novel *The Heiress of Bruges: A Tale of the Year Sixteen Hundred*, written by the Irish-born author, Thomas Colley Grattan. In 1837, he exhibited a scene from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, a play he would revisit in 1851 at the RA.



Fig. 1: Alfred Elmore c.1860s. Photo copyright: Royal Academy of Arts, London; Prudence Cuming Associates Limited. Photo: David Wilkie Wynfield.



Fig. 2: *The Martyrdom of Thomas á Becket* (1840) oil on canvas, St Andrew's Church, Dublin. Photo copyright: *Irish Arts Review*. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.

In 1838, Elmore sent to the BI the first of his religious works. It is tempting to class a large portion of his oeuvre as thematically religious, this is due to his tendency to attach labels to his exhibited works which contain phrasing or themes inspired by the Bible, such as *Two Women Shall be Grinding at the Mill* (1868) from *Matthew 24*, *A Hewer of Wood and a Drawer of Water* (1876) from *Joshua 9*, *That Which Ye Have Spoken in the Ear in Closets Shall be Proclaimed upon the Housetops* (1867) from *Luke 12* and, of course, his Judith paintings were based on the canonical *Book of Judith*. It can be said that many of his historically themed paintings also have religious significance:

*The Emperor Charles V at Yuste* (1856) and *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* (1873), to name just two. *Christ Crowned with Thorns* was exhibited in 1838 and was followed by *Christ Crucified* in 1839, both at the BI; these are without doubt religious paintings, as is his celebrated *The Martyrdom of Thomas á Becket* (Fig. 2) which went on display in the RA in 1840.[11] *Martyrdom* received very positive contemporary reviews. The *Art-Journal* stated that 'Mr. Elmore has produced a noble work … We cannot doubt that a career, so propitiously commenced will be honoured and distinguished … we anticipate for him ere long a proud position among the artists of his country'.[12]

Of the 1839 *Christ Crucified*, the *Art-Journal* remarked that 'This artist has essayed a lofty flight and has not fallen … if he progresses as he has commenced we shall ere long add another name to our limited list of great English masters'.[13] We have no images of the two BI paintings (*Christ Crucified* and *Christ Crowned with Thorns*) but they do present us with some questions. In the Manchester Exhibition of 1878, there was a painting by Elmore on loan from F. W. Hooper who sold a large collection of work in 1880, including Elmore's *Rienzi in the Forum*, called *The Crucifixion (Early).*[14] As this is identified as 'Early' we must assume that it is *Christ Crowned with Thorns* exhibited in 1838, according to the *Art-Journal*,[15] which distinguishes it from the *Christ Crucified* of 1839. The *Art-Journal* also stated that the later painting went to a Roman Catholic church in Dublin, along with *The Martyrdom of Thomas á Becket*.[16] The later crucifixion painting, *Christ Crucified*, was said to have been influenced by Van Dyck's *The Dead Christ* – whether a copy or an original – owned by Elmore's father.[17] *Martyrdom* is in St Andrew's Church on Westland Row in Dublin. It was commissioned by Daniel

O'Connell for St Andrew's, a church with which he was closely connected. O'Connell contributed to the fund to build the church, provided the baptismal font and attended the church for mass when at his house in Merrion Square, Dublin. The current altar painting in St Andrew's depicts Christ's descent from the cross. However, it is unlikely that this painting is Elmore's *The Crucifixion* (*Christ Crucified*). The *Freeman's Journal* tells us that in Elmore's *The Crucifixion* both Mary and Mary Magdalene have their faces obscured from view;[18] this is not the case in the altar painting in St Andrew's. Furthermore, in recent times the altar painting has been attributed to J. S. Beschey.[19] *The Crucifixion*, as *Christ Crucified*, was shown at the RHA in June of 1840 and reviewed in the *Freeman's Journal* where it was described as 'one of the principal pictures in the room both in point of size, execution and design'.[20] The painting, along with *Martyrdom* toured Ireland after the RHA exhibition, visiting Limerick and Cork before returning to Dublin where it was shown at the Royal Irish Institution.[21] A fee of one shilling was charged per visit but it seems that there was generosity shown on the part of the exhibition organisers, or indeed Elmore himself, as re-entry was permitted subsequent to signing a book of registration.[22] In correspondence with this author, the Dublin Diocesan Archive could find no record of Elmore's *Christ Crucified* (*The Crucifixion*). The question as to its current location, and that of *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, remains unanswered.

Elmore painted numerous small works which depicted Catholic rituals in a sympathetic and romantic manner. One painting, *Supplication* (1850), was shown at the Cork International Exhibition in 1902.[23] It shows a young woman deep in contemplation as she prays kneeling at her bedside, pallid faced

and dressed in virginal white, her eyes cast imploringly towards heaven. A similar, but more overtly Catholic, painting is *Portrait of a Girl Saying the Rosary* (1877). The face of the subject is pale, as in *Supplication*, and the pallete of the dress differs only in the use of a light blue hem: a mixture of colour associated with the Virgin.[24] The thurible hanging nearby is closely linked with Catholic ritual and suggests the setting is an ecclesiastical one (*Martyrdom* also features a thurible prominently). Finally, the title and the presence of the rosary beads themselves are clear indicators of the sympathies of the artist in his attempt to depict a Catholic in a non-threatening light. Another painting in the same manner – featuring a young female in contemplation with a rosary prominently displayed – was sold at Sotheby's in 1974. *Allegorical* (n.d.), a watercolour by Elmore, auctioned in 2004 in Ireland, shows a mother and daughter offering up a young child at a wayside cross. This painting reminds us of the devotion by Catholics at secreted sites of worship, and this was especially true in Ireland during the Penal Law period when mass rocks, outdoor altars and crosses in rural locations became imbued with liturgical and sacred significance.

These sympathetic views of Catholic practices and rituals are at odds with a position taken by some scholars regarding Elmore's work. Two of his paintings, *Religious Controversy in the Time of Louis XIV* (1849) and *The Novice Nun* (1852) have attracted particular attention in light of the theological and political debates around Catholicism in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland (Figs 3 and 4). It has been argued, based on these two paintings, that Elmore demonstrated an anti-Catholic approach to his art.[25] Of course, in the context of the religious debates taking place around Emancipation and the period of the Papal

Aggression, paintings referring to religious incidents or rituals were open to interpretations unintended by the artist. In discussing *Controversy*, the *Tablet*, a Catholic organ, said 'of Elmore's we saw little more, for the crowd it attracted' but when its correspondent did get to see the painting it could only add that *Controversy* 'is a striking picture, the Monk in which has the best of it in a dispute with one of the "Reformed"'.[26] Meanwhile, the *Art-Journal* interpreted the 'Reformed' as the victor with the Capuchin exhibiting 'zeal which is scarcely tempered by discretion' while the Protestant is self-possessed and determined and the 'countenance' of the cardinal shows that his fellow Romanist is losing the debate.[27]




Fig. 3: *Religious Controversy in the Time of Louis XIV* (1849) oil on canvas, engraving, *Illustrated London News*, 1849. Copyright: Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 4: *The Novice Nun* (1852) oil on canvas, engraving, *Art-Journal*, 1857. Copyright: Trustees of the British Museum.

*The Novice Nun* gains its anti-Catholic label from the condemnations of cloistered living in the nineteenth century and from the depictions of nuns and convent life by other artists who did exhibit Romanist tendencies, including some members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). However, in terms of style, Elmore's *Nun* does not sit easily with the PRB output. In addition, he had not been associated with Romanist views in reviews of his work to the same extent as some members of the PRB. His *Nun* may have had a certain hold in the minds of the

viewing public who were aware of the contemporary debates concerning nuns and convents: debates which were ongoing and at times extremely heated. A select committee was established in 1870 to investigate convents and monasteries and the inquiry, in its report of 1871, outlined the historical position of these Roman Catholic institutions and the laws which applied to them. The Emancipation Act of 1829, under King George IV, prohibited religious orders and communities of the Roman Catholic religion binding people by monastic or religious vows. According to the 1871 *Report of the Convent Inquiry*, it was 'a misdemeanour, punishable by banishment for life for any man to be admitted into any such religious order of community'.[28] According to the report, up until 1832 the idea of convents and monasteries operating as charitable foundations and Roman Catholic charities in general 'were treated by our law as superstitious and void'.[29] It is easy to see then how a depiction of a novice nun contemplating a life in a convent – and one which clearly illustrates the conflict between the exterior world where life continues in merriment and the life which ends in old age and death within the convent walls – could be interpreted as highlighting all that was negative in the pursuit of an enclosed, religious life by a young woman. However, the opposite view might also be argued. This nun may be seen as rejecting the secular world in favour of the contemplative and fulfilling spiritual world of the sacred space. It is most likely that, whatever the viewer's interpretation, Elmore was suggesting a tolerance of the convent life. His uncle, Dr Albert Callanan, left Elmore the greatest portion of his estate and to judge from his uncle's belongings that were auctioned after his death (which included engravings from the *Art-Journal*), the Catholic doctor was acutely aware of the artist's output in London.[30] Judging from Albert's financial contributions to the Mercy Order, he was

evidently a supporter of convent life.[31] It would, therefore, be a surprising move to bequeath his estate to any artist, even a relative, who sought to denigrate the Catholic institution. In addition, when we consider that Daniel O'Connell was the patron of *The Martyrdom of Thomas á Becket*, it also seems unlikely that this renowned Catholic emancipator would champion an artist that displayed an anti-Catholic bias in his work. It might be suggested that because *The Novice Nun* was exhibited twelve years after *Martyrdom*, the artist might have altered his views, but Elmore had exhibited, in 1843, a similar painting featuring a novice monk only three years after *Martyrdom*. He returned to the same theme with two more nun paintings *A Nun* (RA 1863) and *Within the Convent Walls* (RA 1864), just a couple of years after becoming the beneficiary of his convent-supporting uncle's will.

As with many of Elmore's works, we have no image of *Within the Convent Walls* to rely on but a description carried in a review does not seem to interpret it as anti-Catholic:

> A sister habited in mournful black, has come in her walk along the smooth gravel path – monotonous and even as her path of life now – to the grave of a friend grown over with flowers and bearing the wreaths of *immortelles*. She may be half envious of the perfect peace thus promised her, or the sweet expression of her face may simply betoken perfect content with the garden and the quiet walk under the melancholy bows of the dark yew trees. This is well suggested by the general quiet harmony of tone of the picture and by the group of nuns who, at least, are not insensible to the pleasures of good company and converse.[32]

In this exegesis, the nun is saddened by the memory of her deceased friend but also contemplating the tranquillity of an eternity of peace while content in her own, earthly garden of harmony and quietude provided by the sanctuary of the cloister. Other reports reacted by simply describing it as 'a pretty subject' in order to highlight the beauty and youth of the main protagonist in a state of contemplative melancholy.[33] Elmore might well have used the popularity of nun paintings around this time to inject a pro-Catholic, or at least sympathetic, impulse into his paintings which deal with that particular theme. Elmore's nun paintings aroused curiosity and debate in the past; his engagement with the figures depicted continues to demonstrate a nuanced, non-confrontational and deep psychological connection.

Full engagement with the artist's work is hampered by the lack of paintings by Elmore in public galleries; this is surprising when we consider his profuse output. A number of his works are to be found in galleries in Britain but in Ireland only two paintings are exhibited publically: *Martyrdom* in St Andrew's Church, Dublin and *Classical Beauty* in the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork City. Elmore's range of subject matter and the response to his work in his own lifetime points towards a need for comprehensive review and analysis of his work. It can be seen that even when adopting a specific thematic focus, such as his religious paintings, and when writing with limited space, there is much that can be extracted from an overdue, detailed examination of his oeuvre. The speed with which he fell from the art-historical arena of study after his death contributed to this neglect but this was also the case with many Victorian artists that have since been brought back into the public eye through monographs and exhibitions; this has not yet happened with

Elmore. In this, the 200th (or 201st) anniversary year of his birth, it is hoped that this exposure to his work, and the response to it, may increase public and scholarly interest in an artist so celebrated in his day.

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[1] This date has most likely entered into Elmore's biographical record from an article in the 1857 *Art-Journal*, pp. 113-15. Elmore's father records Alfred's birth as 1814, WO 25/757, *War Office Records*, National Archive, Kew, United Kingdom, but the artist was born in 1815 according to his own return for the 1851 census. According to John Gilbert, Alfred Elmore was born 'In a cottage which stood on the grounds where the Clonakilty Convent is now built', see Gilbert, J. 1913. 'A record of authors, artists and musical composers born in the County Cork'. *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* vol. 19, no. 100, pp. 168-81, at p. 176; probably on this basis, Coombes stated that Alfred Elmore was born in Scartagh Cottage, see Coombes, J. 1959. *Clonakilty and District*.

[2] WO 25/757.

[3] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 15 Aug. 1803, p. 4. Coombes stated that Dr Callanan was living in Ballymacowen in Clonakilty at this time, see Coombes, *Clonakilty and District*, pp. 63, 77-9. In the eighteenth century, Dr Callanan lived in Mount-Shannon (within half a mile of Cloghnikilty), see Wilson, W. 1786. *The Post-Chaise Champion: or Travellers Direction through Ireland*. Dublin, p. 228. The Townsend family records note that Scartagh Cottage (later the grounds of the Convent of Mercy, Clonakilty) was leased to Callanan in 1783, see http://www.astro.wisc.edu/~townsend/tree/houses.php#skirtagh [01/10/2015].

[4] Author unknown. 1822. *A List of the Officers of the Army and of the Corps of Royal Marines*. War Office, London, p. 503; Author unknown. 1813. *Royal Military Panorama, OR, An Officer's Companion*. London, p. 296.

[5] Beare, J. 1827. *Improvement of Ireland: A Letter to the King on the Practical Improvement of Ireland*. London, p. 62; Author unknown. 1827. *Selection of Reports and Papers of the House of Commons, Vol. 50, Emigration*. London, pp. 464-9; CSO/RP/1822/3334. 1822. *Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers*. Irish National Archive.

[6] Marianne's death occurred on 3 February 1827 and was notified in the press, *Southern and Commercial Reporter*, 10 Feb. 1827. Allowing for the delay that Richard stated had occurred in making his document return to the War Office, Richard could have left Clonakilty at any point after the death of his wife. He stated in the document that he was in London a few months prior to returning the document, see WO 25/757.

[7] WO 25/757. The same records help us to trace Richard Elmore's military career and his injuries in the retreat from Burgos during the Peninsular War.

[8] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-15.

[9] Campbell, J. 2014. 'Alfred Elmore'. In N. Figgis (ed.) *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Vol. II, Painting: 1600–1900*. London, pp. 243-5.

[10] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-15.

[11] There were no published images of this painting, to my knowledge until the *Irish Arts Review* (*IAR*) discussed Elmore's work in 2013, and it is fortunate that the *IAR* took a high-quality photograph of the painting for their article; they have, kindly, given permission for it to be reproduced here (Fig. 2).

[12] *Art-Journal*, 1840, p. 75.

[13] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-15.

[14] Author unknown. 1878. *Catalogue of the Fine Art Collection at the Assembly Room, Free Trade Hall, in Connection with the Bazaar for Church Improvements*. St John's Church, Manchester; Roberts, W. 1897. *Memorials of Christie's: A Record of Sales from 1766 to 1896*. London, pp. 313-5.

[15] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-4.

[16] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-4; *Magazine of Art*, 1881, vol. 4, xvii, also lists the Dublin church as the destination and describes *The Crucifixion* as 'among the best known of his works'. *Sunday Times*, 30 Jan. 1881 and *New York Times*, 27 Jan. 1881 state that both paintings are 'in a church in Dublin'.

[17] *Art-Journal*, 1857, pp. 113-4. In 1843, 'A fine picture of a Dead Christ' was exhibited at the Institute of Fine Arts according to the *Art-Journal*, 1843, pp. 241-2; it was contributed by Dr Elmore, Alfred's father. Alfred Elmore was one of many living artists who showed work at this inaugural meeting. The idea that Alfred Elmore's work was influenced by the Van Dyck arose from it being referred to in *Art-Journal*, 1857, p. 113.

[18] *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Nov. 1840. In this article, we also learn that Elmore is in Rome at the time.

[19] Glin, the knight and Peill, J. 2007. *Irish Furniture: Woodwork and Carving in Ireland from the Earliest Times to the Act of Union*. London, pp. 138-9.

[20] *Freeman's Journal*, 10 Jun. 1840.
[21] *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Nov. 1840; *Limerick Reporter*, 13 Oct. 1840; *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 5 and 22 Sept. 1840; *Dublin Evening Post*, 26 Nov. 1840.
[22] *Dublin Evening Post*, 26 Nov. 1840. Although I credit the organisers also, the newspapers credited only Elmore with free re-entry.
[23] *Lancashire Evening Post*, 4 Apr. 1902.
[24] Ferguson, G. 1961. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. Oxford, p. 151.
[25] Errington, L. 1985. *Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840–1860*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute, London; Barlow, J. P. 1989. *'The Backside of Nature': The Clique, Hogarthiainism and the Problem of Style in Victorian Painting*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sussex. The two authors approach Elmore's two paintings from different theoretical standpoints but both suggest that *The Novice Nun* and *Religious Controversy in the Time of Louis XIV* exhibit anti-Catholic impulses.
[26] *Tablet*, 5 May 1849.
[27] *Art-Journal*, 1868, p. 156. Barlow accepts this interpretation.
[28] Cited in Norman, E. R. 1968. *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*. London, p. 203. For a debate which was taking place contemporaneously with the exhibition of *The Novice Nun* see *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 10 June 1852.
[29] Norman, *Anti-Catholicism*, p. 205.
[30] *Cork Examiner*, 7 and 12 Apr. 1862.
[31] *Cork Examiner*, 2 Oct. 1861.
[32] *Teesdale Mercury*, 26 May 1864.
[33] *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury*, 7 May 1864; *Morning Post*, 30 Apr. 1864.