

Gandon, James

by Edward McParland

Gandon, James (1742–1823), architect, was born 20 February 1742 in London and baptised one week later at St George's, Hanover Square, London. His father, Peter Gandon (b. 1713), was a gunsmith of huguenot family, who was declared a bankrupt in 1754. Gandon's mother (née Wynne) was a widow when she married his father, with whom she had two children, Mary and James. Gandon's biography, written by his son and Thomas Mulvany (qv) and published in 1846, gives a good account of his English background, career, and experience, but its details are often inaccurate, and it casts its subject in an unrealistically favourable light. Gandon's career is divided in two. The early period, spent in England, was largely unsuccessful; he engraved and published, and cultivated the friendship of the painter and engraver Paul Sandby and his circle. Then, from 1781 on, he was active – and spectacularly successful – in Dublin, where he monopolised the important public commissions in the city till his retirement in the first years of the 19th century.

In the late 1750s, while attending classes at William Shipley's Academy in London, Gandon won Society of Arts premiums for some of his drawings. At Shipley's he first met his lifelong friend the antiquarian Francis Grose. His period there overlapped with his time in the office of William Chambers: in 1764 Chambers noted that Gandon had served a regular seven-year 'clerkship' with him. In 1767 he published in London *Six designs of frizes*, and in 1778 appeared both *A collection of antique and modern ornaments* and *A collection of frizes, capitals and grotesque ornaments*. With the two-volume continuation of Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, which he and John Woolfe produced in 1767 and 1771, he engaged in an enterprise of much greater prestige and expense, and addressed a vastly wider audience. The only building of his own which appeared in *Vitruvius Britannicus* was his County Hall at Nottingham (plans approved 1769, building opened 1772); this was by far his most important executed building in England and it announced a number of themes which were to remain rich sources of formal inspiration throughout his career. Later he planned a publication of his Irish works, but this never appeared.

In 1780, while still in London, Gandon was selected by John Beresford (qv), apparently on the advice of John, 2nd Viscount Carlow, later 1st earl of Portarlington, as architect for the new Custom House in Dublin. So great was the secrecy surrounding the erection of this contentious building that it was no wonder Beresford sought an architect in London rather than at home. The quality of the building amply justifies his choice, though it was a far from obvious one in 1780. Gandon had achieved some professional notice with *Vitruvius Britannicus*; he had emerged from a distinguished architect's office, though he had not maintained close contact with his former teacher; but he had not yet shown, in executed building, any reliable promise of his later achievements. He was, however, not wholly unknown

in Ireland. He had shown his paces at the Dublin Royal Exchange competition in 1768–9, when his entry was placed second to that of Thomas Cooley (qv). And, if we are to believe his son's biography, through his friend Paul Sandby he had become acquainted in London with some Irishmen who were later prominent in architectural affairs in Dublin: Lord Carlow, Sackville Hamilton (qv), Frederick Trench, and possibly Andrew Caldwell (qv).

In the year in which he received the invitation to Dublin, Gandon was involved in a collaboration with the architect James Stuart. The details are unclear but they were working together on a house for Elizabeth Montagu in Portman Square, London (demolished). Gandon did not sympathise with Stuart's more extreme Greek researches, but a vestige of his respect for Stuart may survive in the Dining Hall of the King's Inns in Dublin, which is a version (more austere and less explicitly Greek) of Stuart's Chapel at Greenwich Hospital.

Gandon enjoyed designing villas, and he built a few during his Irish career: Emsworth, Co. Dublin, for James Woodmason (erected by 1794); a villa at Sandymount, Co. Dublin, later called Roslyn Park, for the painter William Ashford (before 1792); additions to Abbeville, Co. Dublin, for John Beresford (c.1790); and possibly Heywood, Queen's County, for Frederick Trench. His only great country house was Emo Court, Queen's County, for Lord Carlow (described as new in 1790 but completed, with alterations to the original design, only c.1860). In Dublin in 1790 he designed a terrace of five houses in Beresford Place.

He is more celebrated, however, for his works of great public architecture for Dublin, which was being radically replanned by the wide streets commissioners and the revenue commissioners: the Custom House (1781–91), extensions to the House of Lords (1784– c.1789), Carlisle (latterly O'Connell) Bridge (1791–5), and the King's Inns (1800 onwards – Gandon retiring from the work in 1804 or soon after, and handed over to his assistant Henry Aaron Baker (qv)). All of these, except the King's Inns, were part of a concerted and successful bid to develop the city away from its medieval site and eastwards towards the land owned by the Gardiner family. For this to succeed, a new bridge had to be built eastwards of the last bridge before the sea (Essex Bridge, latterly Grattan Bridge). And before this could happen the old Custom House had to be replaced by a new one downstream of the new bridge. To placate powerful opposition to the eastward move of the Custom House, the Four Courts had to be relocated to the west. And finally, the new bridge demanded a new avenue connecting it with College Green, an avenue to which Gandon gave a monumental termination in the shape of his portico for the House of Lords.

Architecturally these buildings reflect Gandon's response to his own circumstances and to contemporary neo-classicism. At a time when the most important part of most architects' education was first-hand study of the archaeological remains of Greece and Rome, Gandon never travelled beyond Britain and Ireland. He was forced to study the architecture of classical antiquity through publications, and it is possible

that his interest in painting antique capriccios and engraving faux-antique decorative fragments originated in a defensiveness about his own insular experience. It was natural, too, that to a greater extent than his travelled contemporaries he was thrown back on a study of earlier British classicism, particularly that of Christopher Wren, whose work had a powerful influence on him. Among his contemporaries he admired Robert Adam for his planning (more than his decoration) and shared with him an appreciation of John Vanbrugh's 'movement'; and he was a devoted disciple of William Chambers. During Gandon's apprenticeship Chambers was working for the 1st earl of Charlemont (qv) on the Casino at Marino, Co. Dublin, which exemplified radical Franco-Italian neo-classical ideas that Chambers had picked up in Rome in the 1750s. Chambers's radicalism had its limits: he deplored the late eighteenth-century return to Greek Doric and primitivist forms, and in this conservative attachment to antique Roman architecture Gandon followed his lead. He resembled Chambers, too, in his appreciation of French architecture with its attention to masonry detail, and in his anxiety to preserve professional status.

Gandon had no rivals among resident architects in Ireland and his monopoly of public commissions between 1780 and 1800, though oppressively secured and maintained, was justified. In Dublin, Thomas Ivory (qv) and Richard Johnston were architects of the second rank; only Thomas Cooley showed himself, in his Royal Exchange, capable of monumental public building of international significance, and he died in 1784. Predictably Gandon's monopoly was resented, and the resentment was expressed most virulently in the *Letters addressed to parliament, and to the public in general, on various improvements of the metropolis*, published in Dublin in 1786 (sometimes, but implausibly, attributed to James Malton (qv)).

During his early years in London, Gandon lived at his parents' house in New Bond Street, in Oxford Street, and (c.1771) in Broad (later Broadwick) Street. In Dublin he lived in Mecklenburgh (later Railway) Street. He fled back to London during the rebellion of 1798, but afterwards returned to Ireland and in his retirement lived at Lucan, Co. Dublin. In 1802 Joseph Farington estimated his wealth at £40,000 (McParland, *Gandon*, 97).

Gandon was a member of the Dublin Library Society and of the (Royal) Dublin Society. In 1791 he was invited to become an original honorary member of the Architects' Club in London, a distinguished society whose members included Adam, Chambers, and John Soane. He was elected to the RIA in 1785, the year of its foundation. Proposed by Lord Charlemont, he was elected FSA in 1797. He declined, on the grounds of age and infirmity, membership of the RHA in 1823, the year of his death.

Gandon married Eleanor Smullen on 26 July 1770 and with her had four daughters and one son, James. There is evidence that she survived longer than is implied in her son's life of the architect. Gandon died 24 December 1823 and was buried in Drumcondra churchyard in a grave which already held his old friend Francis

Grose. There is a fine portrait of him by Tilly Kettle and William Cuming (qv) in the NGI. This and other portraits are listed in Craig's 1969 edition of the younger James Gandon's *Life of James Gandon* (1846). The *Journal of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland* (1909, p. 24) refers to a bust of Gandon presented to the institute c.1851. There is no collection of Gandon family papers, but his drawings are listed in McParland's *James Gandon* (appendix 11).

James Gandon, *The life of James Gandon . . . from materials collected . . . by his son, James Gandon . . . prepared for publication by . . . Thomas J Mulvany*, ed. Maurice Craig (1969); Edward McParland, *James Gandon: Vitruvius Hibernicus* (1985); Hugo Duffy, *James Gandon and his times* (1999)

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