

Sproule, Samuel

by Daniel Beaumont

Sproule, Samuel (c.1745–c.1826), architect, property developer, and government spy, was probably born in Dublin but had strong familial connections with Ulster; nothing else is known of his parents. He was a direct descendant of the Sproule family that settled in Co. Tyrone in the early seventeenth century. He attended the Dublin Society Drawing Schools and was awarded premiums in 1759 and 1760. In the 1760s he started an architectural practice in Dublin, and in 1768 jointly submitted (with a Mr Myers) a set of designs for the new Royal Exchange, Dublin. Though he failed to win first, second, or third prize, the judges of the competition awarded Sproule and Myers (along with two other Irish architects) a piece of plate valued at thirty guineas (£31.50) as an encouragement to architects in Ireland and in recognition of the quality of the designs. From spring 1780 he began to lease plots of lands (typically for between sixty-one and 150 years) from the Fitzwilliam estate on the south side of Dublin and build town houses on the 'east side of a new intended square to be laid out and to be called Merrion Square' (IAA, Fitzwilliam deeds). A kinsman, also called Sproule, seems to have been responsible for the plasterwork in the interiors. In addition to building houses on the south and east side of Merrion Square (numbers 35–40 can be attributed to him) he also developed plots on Holles St. and Lower Mount St. in the period 1780–91. The houses on the east side of Merrion Square, owned by Sproule and others, were later joined up with what became Upper and Lower Fitzwilliam St. and Fitzwilliam Square. Together they form one of the longest Georgian vistas in the world. Given the homogeneity of the houses on Merrion Square, it is not easy to distinguish between architects, but Sproule's houses, among the first to be built from c.1780, may well have provided a pattern for buildings that were to follow.

His plain, almost barrack-like, designs were also adopted by the wide streets commissioners in Dublin in the period 1782–5. In May 1782 his plans for the scheme to widen Dame St. between Palace St. and George Lane were accepted, and he was paid £1. 2s. 9d. a week to supervise the construction work. Surviving maps also show that he planned to make alterations to Clarendon Market and build a court behind Dame St. The commissioners examined his designs with great care and made adjustments (sometimes changing the height of windows by as little as an inch) and adding their own embellishments, such as quoins and parapets, to liven up Sproule's plain elevations.

Between 1783 and 1786 he was employed by the Bank of Ireland and made alterations to its premises near St Mary's Abbey, Dublin. He offered plans for a new bank building, but nothing came of it. In 1783 he designed and supervised the construction (for a payment of £500) of the Ulster White Linen Hall, Newry, Co. Down. Behind the 369 ft (112.5 m) frontage was a complex of 320 rooms; it is

unclear if all was executed as planned. He does not appear to have received any high-profile architectural commissions after 1786, but was probably still building and selling properties on the Fitzwilliam estate until 1790 at the earliest. In 1786 he lived on Holles St., moving to Rathfarnham (1787), Dundrum (1792), and Rochestown, Co. Cork (1795).

As an architect of domestic buildings he was very competent and made a key contribution to the regimented Georgian streetscape that still exists in parts of Dublin. But his surviving drawings for public buildings such as the proposed Bank of Ireland and White Linen Hall show that he was less able to handle the neo-classical idiom on a grand scale. Francis Johnston (qv), his pupil and kinsman whom he trained in the early 1780s when he first arrived in Dublin, was much more gifted. Sproule was a cultured man who collected books such as Robert Wood's influential *The ruins of Palmyra* (1753), and subscribed to numerous books on the history and topography of Dublin. He commissioned the artist William Sadler to paint works in chiaroscuro, presumably for wall decoration on one of his town houses in Dublin.

In 1798 Sproule was on the payroll of the government secret service. In a letter (1801) to Lord Hardwicke (qv), the lord lieutenant, he described how he was attacked (presumably sometime early in 1798) while in bed by three 'armed ruffians' and his home robbed of everything of value. Shortly after the attack he persuaded one of the assailants (whom he recognised) to reveal details of the United Irishmen's attacks in return for amnesty and a financial reward. He sold his home in Rochestown (for half its value) and came to Dublin. From early May 1798 to November 1798 he sent about eighty letters, signed 'S', to the under-secretary, Edward Cooke (qv), at Dublin Castle, outlining the intelligence he had gleaned on the rebellion. (These are now held in the NAI Rebellion papers.) For this service he was paid at least £223, most of which he shared among his agents who had infiltrated the United Irishmen in Dublin, Limerick, and Co. Wicklow. He married (1778) Ann Fay, a widow. It is not known if they had children. Sproule may have lived until the mid 1820s, as a portrait of him by Robert Lucius West (qv) was exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, in 1826.

IAA, index and file S103, Fitzwilliam estate deeds/leases; NLI, AD 3502 (drawing), 16.G.42 (16), 16.G.16 (24); Strickland; Maurice Craig, *Dublin 1660–1860* (1952), 191, 281; Edward McParland, 'The wide streets commissioners: their importance for Dublin architecture in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century', *Ir. Georgian Soc. Bull.*, xv (1972), 11–15; id., 'James Gandon and the Royal Exchange competition 1768–69', *RSAI Jn.*, cii (1972), 6; C. P. Curran, 'The architecture of the Bank of Ireland 1800–46', *Ir. Georgian Soc. Bull.*, xx (1977), 40; Adrian Le Harivel (ed.), *National Gallery of Ireland: illustrated summary catalogue of prints and drawings* (1988), 481; Alex McGuire, 'Who was Samuel Sproule?', *Dun Laoghaire Borough*

Historical Society, viii (1999), 1–15; Gitta Willemson, *The Dublin Society Drawing Schools: students and award winners 1746–1876* (2000), 90; Christine Casey, *The buildings of Ireland, Dublin* (2005), 414, 578, 585–6, 592–3

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