



NEVILL JOHNSON

THE DUBLIN LEGACY



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Edited by Eoin O'Brien

## INTRODUCTION

Eoin O'Brien

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Nevill Johnson is undoubtedly an artist of immense stature, but as is so often the case when genius is in our midst, we fail to recognise its presence. Apart from the accomplishments of Nevill Johnson as a painter, I have always been fascinated by his literary endeavours and it is this talent, together with his photographic achievements that have been the stimulus for this reappraisal of his artistic *persona*. But other happenings, that some might see as coincidental and others as merely part of an inevitable wholeness, have been at play.

First Nevill appointed me as his literary executor and, as a consequence, his correspondence, papers, writings, catalogues and various ephemera came into my possession. This collection constituted a sizable archive, which together with other archives emanating from my interest in the arts, have been donated to the James Joyce Library in UCD as the O'Brien/Lam Collection. The Nevill Johnson archive in this Collection has been greatly augmented by the donation of Galway Johnson's papers, many of which date back to Johnson's early years in Belfast, and which include the Wilby journal among other diaries, poems and essays. He has also donated memorabilia of interest, such as his father's manuscripts, etching paraphernalia and paint brushes.

So one of the main functions of this event in Newman House is to donate this archive to UCD. But the word archive can imply a state of passivity, an accumulation of papers in boxes to be opened perhaps in years to come, or to remain closed indefinitely. However, for me an archive only achieves its purpose when it serves to stimulate scholarship. In this regard I am pleased that the Nevill Johnson archive has already been a valuable resource for Conor Linnie to pursue his study into the artistic movement that characterised Dublin in the nineteen-forties and I anticipate that the Nevill Johnson Archive in its entirety will be the focus of much research in the future.

A fortuitous convergence of interests has also been a factor in making this event happen. Johnson was fascinated by the wonder of science and this obsession (and it is I think fair to call it such) is exemplified in many of his literary works, but most especially in the essay “Report from the wilderness –analysis and resolution of a long reappraisal” that was published in the *Dublin Magazine* in 1972:

*From Science, on the other hand, I find many stimulating concepts, though here too there is a deep dichotomy: the atomistic schools of the reductionists on the one hand, and, on the other, the open-ended hierarchic holism and structuralism of Weiss, Waddington, Piaget, etc. The qualities ‘randomness’, ‘parity’, ‘strangeness’ are to me poetic and challenging. Aleatory situations, events, are very close to my method and approach as I will relate.*

As an artist Nevill was behoven to no one, except perhaps John Luke who taught him his craft and Picasso the one artist to whom he paid homage (particularly in the drawings), and he steadfastly strove throughout his life to “walk against the wind” – to express his own individual art in his own inimitable way. There was, of course, a cost for this independence and he (and his wife Maggie) expressed to me, and Galway, in his latter days his desire to assist artists of the future to do likewise. He bequeathed, therefore, a number of paintings to be used in whatever way seemed most appropriate to further this objective. And so it is that the *Catharsis* series of paintings is being donated to University College Dublin of this purpose. That the UCD College of Science should have recently established a ten year programme, *Science: Artists in Residency*, with the objective of encouraging inter-disciplinary practice, exploration and collaborative partnerships between artists and scientists, allows the Johnson bequest to become part of an initiative, which I know Nevill would have supported wholeheartedly.

Another imperative to making this occasion happen is a neglected aspect of Johnson’s creative mind, namely the ability to express himself, not alone in painting, but also in writing. Publication of *Nevill Johnson 1911–1999. Artist, Writer, Photographer* by Lilliput Press provides the opportunity to republish Johnson’s autobiography, *The Other Side of Six*, an unpublished poem *Tractatus Pudicus*, the essay

*Report from the Wilderness: Analysis and Resolution of a Long Reappraisal*, and the effervescent foreword to *Dublin: The People’s City* provides a fitting prologue to the publication of twenty selected photographs from Johnson’s evocative photographs of Dublin in the early nineteen-fifties specially printed by David Davison and published by kind permission of RTÉ Archives.

Finally, to the paintings of Nevill Johnson. Though it might be argued that exhibiting the *Catharsis* paintings and the photographs from *Dublin: The People’s City* might suffice for the occasion *Nevill Johnson: The Dublin legacy*, the event would be lacking without showing his painting during the productive decade he spent in the city from 1948 to 1958. Perhaps of equal relevance, would be to illustrate how Dublin influenced his art and allowed his art to mature to a new plane from the Belfast period and how the Dublin period was prologue to the later London phase. Sadly, the fiscal and curatorial logistics of mounting a retrospective exhibition that would do justice to his art in this way would be beyond our ken. However, a unique opportunity to present the paintings from the Dublin period within the context of his overall development as an artist had been provided by Johnson himself. Among the papers and documents that Nevill entrusted to me in my capacity as his literary executor there were boxes of slides and many photographs of his paintings taken by him over the years. So unlike many artists, he had left a record of his artistic output. I scanned these photographs and with the advice of Dickon Hall and Galway Johnson, and the technical assistance of Neil Atkins, an audio-video presentation of some 250 paintings spanning the Belfast, Dublin and London periods has been compiled. This presentation permits us to appreciate not only the diversity of his talent but also to assess the development of his artistic expression with time. Indeed the phases are so distinct in themselves that it is difficult at times to accept that the creative processes emanate from within one artist.

# UCD NEWMAN HOUSE

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Ruth Ferguson

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UCD Newman House consists of three distinct buildings, two eighteenth century townhouses and the Aula Maxima or assembly hall dating to the late 1870s.

Newman House is privileged to have stuccowork encompassing the entire eighteenth century from the earlier baroque style to the remarkable Dublin School of plasterwork that is a unique feature of the Georgian city.

In 1854 Newman House became the home of the Catholic University of Ireland under the rectorship of the educationalist and scholar Dr. John Henry Newman (1801–1890). The Catholic University was the precursor of University College Dublin and Newman House is still a vital part of the life of the university.

No 85 Stephen's Green is a small Palladian style residence dating to 1738 and was originally constructed for Captain Hugh Montgomery. It's design is attributable to Richard Castle, the most prolific architect working in Ireland during the period 1733 to 1751. No 85 is notable for the superb stuccowork by the Lanfranchini brothers. The Lanfranchini brothers were born in Ticino, the Italian speaking canton of Switzerland and their work can also be seen in Leinster House, Dublin, Carton House, Co. Kildare and Russborough House, Co. Wicklow. Their style is very much in the Baroque tradition and this calm, classical approach is evident in No. 85 in both the Apollo Room where Apollo, the God of the Arts and the nine Muses of the Arts are depicted as well as in the six quatrefoils containing classical scenes surrounded by a playful frieze of putti or cherubs gambolling through hanging foliage on the ceiling of the Saloon.

In the early 1800s an extension was added to the rear of No 85. The Old Physics Theatre, which is in the Gothic revival style, has great association with the author James Joyce (1882–1941). Joyce studied

Modern Languages here from 1898–1902 and he gave a paper on the poet and dramatist Ibsen entitled *Drama and Life* here in 1900. An episode in *A Portrait of the Artist* first published in 1916, entitled the Tundish Episode also takes place here.

No 86 St. Stephen's Green is a very large townhouse dating to 1765 and built by Richard Chapel Whaley. The notorious rake and gambler Buck Whaley was the son of R.C. Whaley and was born in this house. The stuccowork here is epitomised in the plasterwork on the hall, stairs and landing by Robert West. West, the main exponent of the Dublin School of plasterwork is unique in his use of exuberant surreal images, such as baboon heads and fictitious birds and the resultant plasterwork has a vividness and character all its own.

No. 86 was the first college of the Catholic University of Ireland and the legacy of this still exists in the Bishop's Room where the hierarchy met to oversee the running of the original University.

Newman House is currently used for university events, private functions and cultural activities. We also host projects including the National Dictionary of Biography and the Dictionary of Art and Architecture of Ireland.



# NEVILL JOHNSON

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER

David Davison

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To those interested in the Irish art scene of the middle years of the twentieth century, Nevill Johnson will be a familiar name. He moved from the vibrant artistic coterie of Belfast to that of Dublin in 1947 where he found a convivial circle of artists and writers. His paintings of the period were often inspired by elements of the city but were gradually evolving into a more sophisticated surrealism. At various stages during his long life he changed his approach and style of painting as he evolved new modes of interpretation. Perhaps this explains his sudden diversion into the medium of photography, which occupied his enthusiasm for the best part of two years, beginning in 1952. He had used photography for some years to record his paintings and family activities and did so for most of his life, but this was different. He obtained an Arts Council grant for the purchase of a Leica camera and set about a carefully planned series of photographic excursions. He may well have recognised (possibly with the encouragement of Anne Yeats who accompanied him on many of these journeys) that the Dublin he knew so well would be subjected to change and ought to be recorded. However, to regard that as his purpose in creating this body of work would be to miss the point. Certainly the record is there, but of what? Johnson's images go well beyond the superficial; they explore life, the inner life of the place including the apparently inanimate and particularly the lives of people. Echoes of his canvases can be observed in some of his graphic photographs of buildings such as, *McCaul's Cottages*, *Richmond Row*, and *Sarah Place, off Conyngham Road*, which can be seen as abstract compositions but somehow they suggest real life, rather different to the bleakness of his painting *The Cottage*.

Poverty is depicted in so many of his images, such as the tenement hallway in Charlemont Mall, where his appreciation of lighting and the interpretive potential of the photograph are splendidly applied. As he walked about his eye regularly fell on small details sometimes offering surreal form and texture, as in sections of street furniture or the strange

steel objects in a butcher's window, or perhaps just a fascinating juxtaposition of ironwork, brick and lace curtains. He was unable to resist the absurd, such as sections of railing in the middle of nowhere that served no function. His sense of timing, vital in such work as this, can be enjoyed in the picture of a bearded man passing a sunlit opening in a wall at Smithfield, captured in exactly the right position with a rather gloomy doorway ahead of him and a poster declaring *The Foreign Press is a National Menace* just behind him; a person less inclined to be worried by that claim would be difficult to find.

Johnson's images of the people are exceptional. So often he captures real joy amongst people who are obviously poor but making the best of their lives within communities that function as small villages within the great city. Somehow Johnson brings us into the lives of these people, in so many of whom it is possible to imagine the nature of a discussion such as that of the two elderly women wearing hats chatting on the Quays, so engrossed in conversation that they seem unaware of the photographer who was very close to them. Images such as this last in memory and are as worthy of wall space as his painted work, as indeed is the case with so many of his photographs. He was not oblivious to the world of children also, and in his pictures we can appreciate the universal ability to have fun in the most deprived surroundings; we also see the love and dedication of their parents in fitting them out neatly and often standing nearby keeping an eye on their wellbeing. There is, of course, a darker side to be observed amongst the undernourished with stunted growth evident in some of the images.

When he had covered the subjects and districts as planned the project finished for good – he had made his point. The Dublin of the time has been interpreted for posterity, captured in all its moods, in the rain, in sunshine, in decay but above all with an expression of a lively citizenry displaying the hope and potential observed by this sensitive artist amidst what for so many seemed a drab lacklustre period.

# NEVILL JOHNSON

## THE PAINTER

Dickon Hall

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Nevill Johnson occupies a unique position amongst Irish artists of the twentieth century, as an Englishman who made his home in Ireland for almost twenty-five years and produced some of the most defining and incisive images of his adopted country at that time.

Johnson arrived in Belfast from England in 1934. Although he had been keen to attend art college his father had insisted on a career in business, but Belfast appears to have liberated Johnson as an artist. Working during the day and painting alongside John Luke at night he began to become known as a painter and sculptor, although none of his works from before the 1940s survive.

Johnson's earliest extant works painted in Ulster are arguably the most original and modern images of the country. 'Linenscape' was commissioned by Edwin Bryson, a successful linen manufacturer; it is a remarkable synthesis of the mechanised process used in that industry with a stylised depiction of the dramatic Antrim coastline. 'Kilkeel Shipyard' also uses a dynamic formal abstraction to integrate the shipbuilding that was another significant aspect of Ulster's industrial success with a more traditional image of the Mourne.

The surrealist-inspired imagery and the dramatically modernist vision of these works leads to the first paintings that made Johnson's reputation in Dublin. The barren, post-atomic wastelands, populated by biomorphically shaped driftwood and found objects that Johnson collected on the shores of Lough Neagh and Strangford Lough, were painted in Ulster as a response to the despair and cynicism that Johnson felt as a result of the human destructiveness of the Second World War, and they were amongst the first passionately anti-war works to be exhibited in Dublin.

Johnson's dialogue with Dublin had begun before he even moved there permanently around 1946. 'Byrne's Pub' was probably painted around

1943–44; it is reminiscent of the stage set for an expressionist drama and it is unusual in Johnson's work in containing a clear social narrative. Perhaps there is an autobiographical element in the work, although it is possible that it also contains a barbed comment at the Dublin bohemian set who frequented bars such as Davy Byrne's, which was around the corner from the Victor Waddington Gallery. Harry Kernoff's 'Davy Byrne's from the Bailey' was painted in 1941 and might well have been known to Johnson, whose own work could almost be seen as a response to it.

Another painting that appears to pre-date Johnson's move to Dublin but that provides a more considered and independent voice on the city than any of his Irish contemporaries is 'Theresa', probably exhibited in Belfast in 1946 as 'Mater Doloroso'. This image of a young shawlie, the weight of whose absent baby is still visible in her arms, sheltering at the side of St Patrick's Cathedral remains powerful today. Johnson was strongly anti-clerical all his adult life, apart from a brief period when he studied to enter the Catholic Church before abandoning it, and this painting is arguably uniquely significant in expressing the social effects caused by the closeness of state and church in Ireland and the damage this could cause the most vulnerable.

Johnson's affection for Dublin does, however, come through clearly in his painting of that name. His sympathy was always with the powerless and dispossessed, those who were firmly outside the establishment, and he appears in his paintings and photography to have seen these as the true possessors of the city. 'Dublin' shows a city of tottering, decayed elegance, fragile yet seductive. Johnson's painting 'Belfast' appears to have been painted after he had left that city and is quite different from 'Dublin', providing obvious comparisons. The painting occupies a very shallow space with no illusion of depth, and its uniform, geometric and almost



featureless rigidity clearly expresses Johnson's dislike of the buttoned-up conventions and restrictions he came to associate with the city.

There is no doubt that Johnson looked back on this long period spent in Ireland with affection and nostalgia; there are more paintings that date from his later years living in London that refer to specific Irish subjects than those that date from the years he actually spent there. These paintings have passed beyond his earlier anger at social injustice or the excitement at surrealist re-imaginings of traditional landscapes and industrial identities; they evoke the time of Johnson's discovery of a relaxed, expressive and liberated life and the places that fostered his artistic evolution. His legacy to Ireland is a collection of paintings and photographs that examine, criticise, explore and celebrate its landscape and its cities, its culture, industries and society, in a manner that no other artist of the time achieved.

## NEVILL JOHNSON

### THE WRITER

Eoin O'Brien

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I have written previously that Nevill Johnson was an enigmatic artist within whom three *personas* struggled for expression. "First, and dominant, was the painter in Johnson; then closely related but distinct, there was Johnson the photographer; and finally, Johnson the writer had to be content to let visual portrayal take precedence over literary expression." Whereas this assessment is correct in apportioning priority as judged in terms of the magnitude of work emanating from one talent as against the other, it rather ignores the fact that there can be not only immense beauty in smallness, but moreover terse and sparing utterance can be a mirror to the soul. When I came to assembling the writings of this remarkable man I was forced to acknowledge not only how good a writer he was (I scarcely expected less having known him for nearly three decades) but I also became aware of how much his writing permitted access to the whole process of creativity, from its inspiratory beginnings to the painful business of execution and onwards to the often annihilating demon of deprecation and doubt. So although Johnson will always (and rightly) be best known as a painter, it would be remiss of us if we failed to examine his literary works, if for no other reason than to learn a little of the forces that found precedence of expression on canvas.

There are many poems, short stories and scripts for plays in the Nevill Johnson Archive, all of which may be prepared for publication in the course of time. The works selected for the *Nevill Johnson 1911–1999. Artist, Writer, Photographer* have been chosen simply because I regard them as being representative of his literary oeuvre. The re-publication the autobiography *The Other Side of Six*, which he and I revised shortly before his death is a fascinating work, that was first published in 1983, but never achieved the recognition it deserved because the Academy Press went into liquidation after a small initial print run and the book, despite good reviews, effectively disappeared from circulation. The *Tractatus pudicus*, a

previously unpublished poem, treats of life and experience, in a manner of speaking that is personal and at times discursive in that the ego converses with the alter ego in existential rumination.

During the period at Wilby from 1962 to 1964, Johnson kept a journal, which unlike *The Other Side of Six*, is a very private chronicle without editing for publication, and, as such, is all the more valuable in permitting insight into the mind of the artist grappling with the artistic process, its joys and vicissitudes. The proximity of nature, the seasons however harsh betimes, the soil and animals - dominant themes - provided, it would seem, an ambience conducive to artistic expression, or at worst to contemplating how best to go about painting.

Dublin, the city to which Johnson migrated in his peregrinations from Buxton and Belfast in the early post-war period, is undoubtedly the one place in which he found peace and contentment, at least in so far as those terms can have meaning for one destined to a life of searching for the indefinable, and alas unattainable, satisfaction that is tantalisingly proffered in the illusory fulfilment of the demands of creativity. Of all the places in which Johnson propped up his easel, Dublin was to be the major beneficiary, not only in his legacy of paintings during this sojourn, but also in his photography, which found expression in *Dublin: The People's City*. The foreword to the book is a vibrant piece of writing that says much about Dublin and the art of photography.

*As Koestler says, quoting Paracelsus, 'God can make an ass with three tails but not a triangle with four sides.' So, in my photo-hat I cannot build or rub out – only select, and accept. I cannot in words translate the signals; I can only hope to match the image.*

It is fitting that it should be re-published to introduce the twenty photographs selected from the Johnson photographic collection in RTÉ Archives.

During his five years in Dublin Johnson became one of the most significant artistic figures in what may now be described as the Baggotian movement. He came to love the city and its people and he anticipated the destruction that was imminent.

*The giantism of a cathedral carries its own logic: the awe we feel is generated for a purpose and is expected. But the gross brutality of many buildings of today exhibits a fearful insensitivity, many of them bearing all the 'earmarks of an eyesore', as the man said. We humans are dwarfed, bullied and chivvied around these monstrous structures, our stature denied, our pride ignored. And there are to be found no idiosyncratic corners for our surprise.*

How prophetic would be his assessment of progress today!  
He deplored the destruction of community:

*I suppose that in the name of growth and progress we must accept impersonal supermarkets and the din of traffic. So, it's goodbye to the corner shop and goodbye to the slums of Gardiner Street; life there was certainly coarse, risky and ungracious. But surely the isolation of suburban estates breeds its own insults and despair.*

The final work in the *Nevill Johnson 1911–1999. Artist, Writer, Photographer* is an essay "Report from the wilderness – analysis and resolution of a long reappraisal". In this discourse on art and its relationship with science, which was first published in 1972, Johnson explores the relationship of art with science. The essay ends with an utterance that epitomises in many ways Johnson's relationship with life and art:

*Having, at cost, and with profit, developed an open-ended mind to assimilate today's furiously accelerating signals, it is very possible that I will presently repudiate the foregoing.*



*Catharsis I*



*Catharsis II*





*Catharsis III*



*Catharsis IV*





*Catharsis V*



*Catharsis VI*





*Catharsis VII*



*Catharsis VIII*





*Catharsis IX*



*Catharsis X*





*Catharsis XI*



*Catharsis XII*

## Acknowledgements, Eoin O'Brien

This event would not have been possible without the assistance of many people. Galway Johnson not only gave his time and advice in on the different facets of the event but he also subsidised the publication of *Nevill Johnson 1911–1999. Artist, Writer, Photographer*.

Eamonn Ceannt and Ruth Ferguson offered the hospitality of Newman House for meetings and provided guidance, advice and support for the event. Dickon Hall, was available, as always, to advise on the artistic aspect of Johnson's life, and David Davison provided the expertise for the many photographic needs of the exhibition.

Gerald Dawe has been an advocate of Nevill Johnson's artistic legacy in more ways than I can list here and he has guided and supervised Conor Linnie in his exploration of the influence of Johnson on the artistic movement that characterised Dublin of the nineteen-fifties.

Hugh Brady, the former President of UCD, and Desmond Fitzgerald and Aine Gibbons, in their respective roles as vice-presidents for research and development at UCD supported the establishment of the O'Brien/Lam Collection, and my colleague Dato Dr. Leslie Lam made it possible to bring the collection together.

Antony Farrell and his team showed courage (and patience) in allowing *Nevill Johnson 1911–1999. Artist, Writer, Photographer* to be among the many prestigious titles of Lilliput.

I am grateful to Bríd Dooley, Head of RTÉ Archives, who has supported this initiative and has kindly granted permission to show and publish the selection of prints from the Nevill Johnson archive in RTÉ.

Bobby Ballagh, who, like Nevill Johnson, has not been found wanting as a photographer as well as being a renowned painter, did not hesitate when I asked him to open the exhibition.

I am indebted to Neil Atkins for his expert assistance in compiling the audio-visual presentation *Nevill Johnson (1911–1999): Three epochs of an artistic legacy – Belfast, Dublin, London*.



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