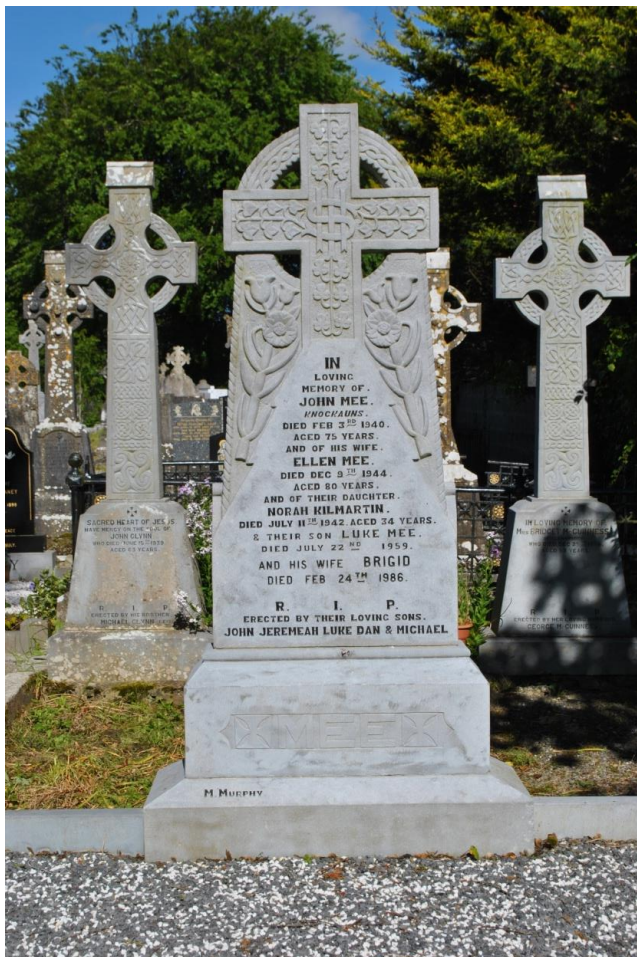


# A Rich Cultural Legacy: The work of the Murphy Monumental Sculptors of Glenamaddy

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## Introduction

The purpose of this survey is to create greater public awareness about the funerary monuments created by the Murphy family of monumental sculptors from Glenamaddy, Co. Galway. Their work is significant, for both the variety and quality of the carving, and because of the richness of the religious iconography used. While there appears to have been no previous material published on their work, it is evident that it is worthy of discussion. It is to be found in quite a number of graveyards in North Galway. Of all the particular styles encountered in the graveyards of Co. Galway, it is one of the most unique, but yet is the easiest to identify. It requires far greater study than this short essay allows and may perhaps be considered by someone as the topic for a future research project.

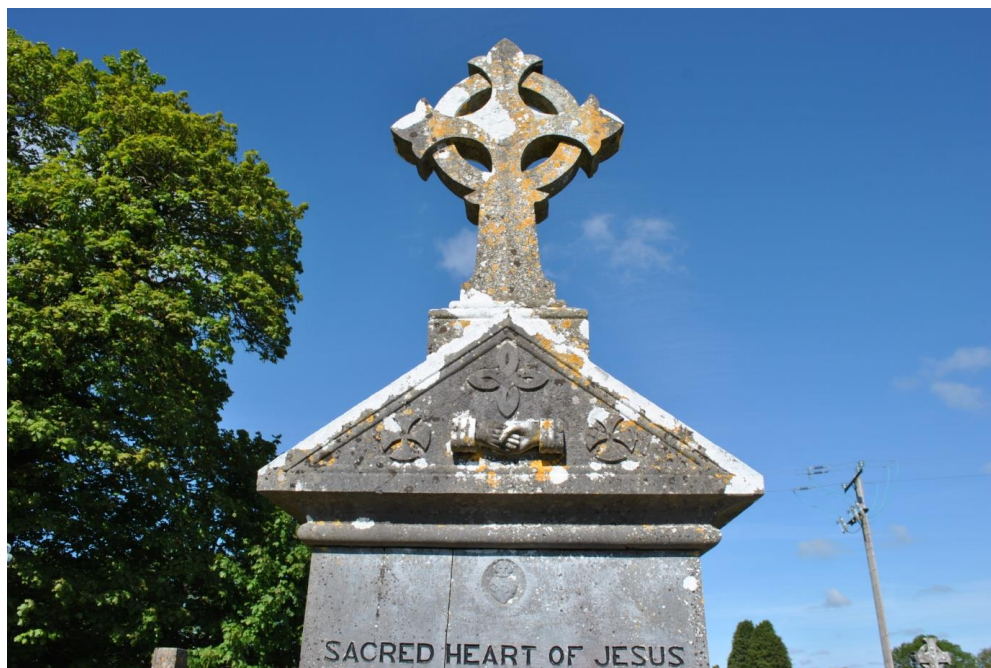


## Discussion

A branch of the Murphy family of monumental sculptors still maintains a stone cutting workshop beside the old graveyard in Glenamaddy, another branch is based in Mountkelly, and so the family craft is alive and well in the area. Some very fine examples of the Murphy stone cutting tradition can be found in the old graveyard. Two names are prominently carved on the bottom of their work W. Murphy and M. Murphy - Walter and Martin. Their sculptural work consists of an assortment of

headstones, ledgers, elaborately carved Celtic crosses and a number of statues. The Murphy stone sculptors employ a distinctive style of iconography that is quite exclusive to them in the way it is presented. Their use of naturally occurring garden flowers such as roses, lilies and ivy in their floral arrangements, variations of clasped hands and well-executed crosses and crucifixion scenes are but a small part of their extensive repertoire. They are believed to be in the stone cutting business for at least two centuries and started out in their profession in Stonetown on the Ballymoe road. As stated, their work is found in graveyards all over the North Galway area but is likely to be found in the graveyards of Roscommon and Mayo also. This quick survey does not extend beyond the confines of the parish.

The old graveyard in Glenamaddy is well worth a visit and will reward close investigation! Murphy work, when encountered in a graveyard leaps out to the tuned eye. What is especially significant is that theirs is a living tradition, as they are still producing high quality funerary monuments. Tall headstones with tapering heads forming into elaborate Celtic crosses are a 'stock in trade' of the Murphy workshop. They are generally ornamented with lavish floral motifs based on various types of garden flowers.



In this particular image, a pair of clasped hands carved in relief forms the central motif. The image of the clasped hands is quite powerful and symbolically represents love and fidelity; and illustrates the bond between the deceased and those who are left behind. Both a male and female hand is represented. Two small 'cross of arcs' and a quatrefoil knot accompany the clasped hands motif. Additional to this an image of the Sacred Heart is carved in false relief above the inscription on the lower panel. The use of the Sacred Heart as a religious symbol became very popular in the seventeenth century, when the noted visionary St Margaret Mary Alacoque was given the twelve messages of the Sacred Heart in one of her visions. Margaret Mary entered the order of the Visitation Nuns when she was 24. The image of the Sacred Heart is shown here surmounted by a flaming cross and banded by a crown of thorns. and nun



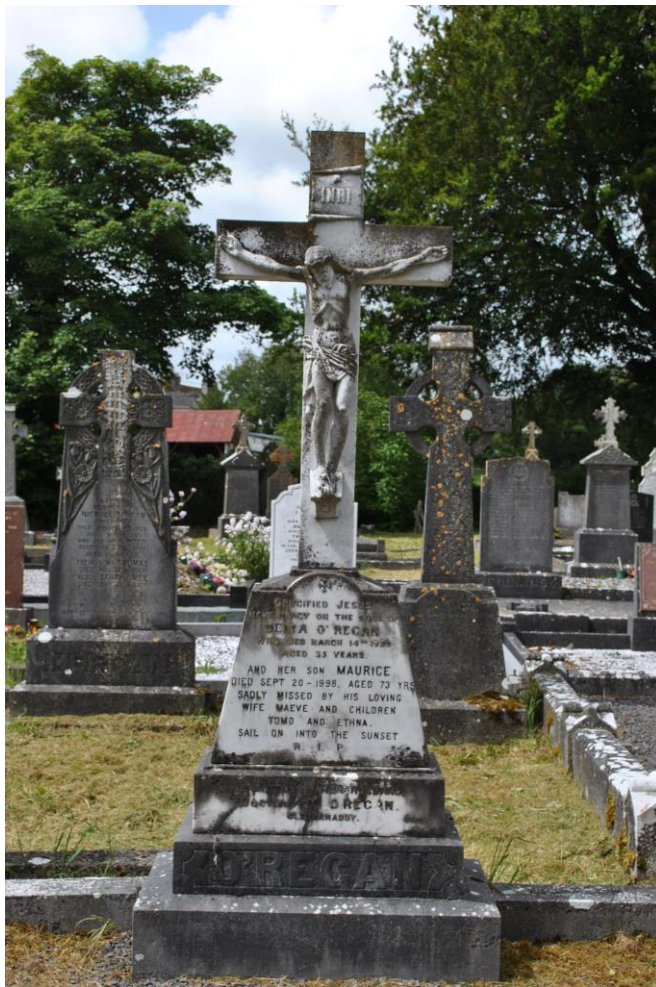
This particular headstone has the stonecutter's name W. Murphy inscribed on it. It bears an intricately carved Sacred IHS monogram with floral devices consisting of trefoil, probably vine leaf and ivy on the uprights of the H and I. A pair of angels with their hands joined in prayer fills the angles at the bottom of the panel. They are both shown floating on a cloud in a style that is found in a number of late medieval churches around Co. Galway. The wings are fully extended with the feathers clearly evident. The hair of each angel (which hangs down over the shoulders), and the faces of both, are presented in a somewhat similar way to that of the images of the Virgin Mary discussed below. An extended band of palm leaf with three trefoils in circular frames divide the upper decorative panel from the inscription beneath.



This large rectangular ledger located in Boyanagh graveyard bears a very well wrought figure of the crucified Christ. Relief carving of this type leaves no room for error on the sculptor's behalf. It is a perfect example of the high-quality work undertaken by the Murphy sculptors. The body or *corpus* of Christ is displayed on a wide cross with the feet crossed, supported on a *suppendaneum*, and fixed



by a single nail. Christ's arms stretch upwards, while his fingers are shown to curve inwards almost covering the nails. A *perizoma* or loincloth is tied across the waist. It is a standard feature of the crucifixion in art and is believed to have been first used in the 8th century. It was added by artists to preserve modesty (Wikipedia), seemingly it was common for people to be stripped and presented naked when being crucified. The ribs are clearly shown, as are the muscles of both arms, while the head inclines towards the right shoulder. Christ is shown with long hair falling down on to the shoulders and a rather full beard. Rays of light radiate outwards from the head, which is crowned with thorns.



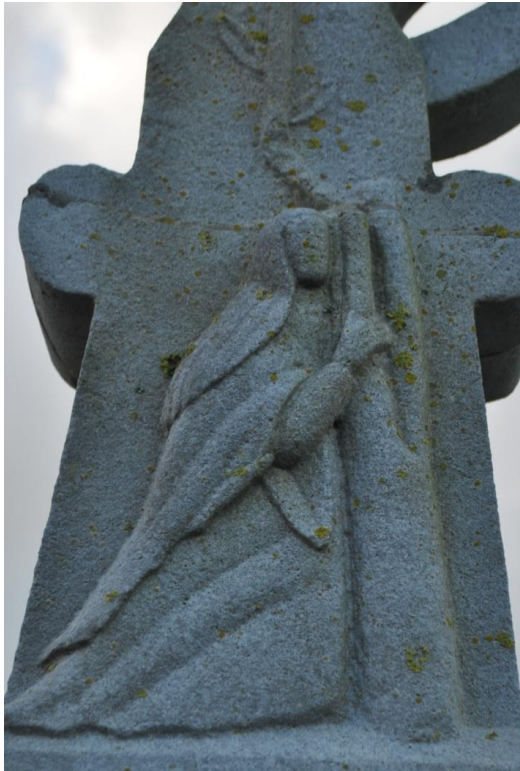
This large marble crucifix erected by the O' Regan family of Glenamaddy is a further example of the high quality of the work undertaken by the Murphy's. The crucifix, which is set on a stepped limestone Calvary base, bears a full *corpus* of Christ, carved in high relief. Christ's feet are crossed and nailed to the cross with a single nail. They are supported on an angular footrest or *suppedaneum* in a similar manner to the crucifixion on the Boyanagh ledger. The *titulus* bearing the INRI is mounted in the form of a scroll above the figure of Christ. A single nail secures it to the cross as is indicated by the presence of an elaborate square nail-head. Murphy's purchased their marble from Harrisons of Dublin while they sourced their limestone from a local quarry near the village of Ballymoe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pers. Comm. Paul Murphy, 22 August 2016.

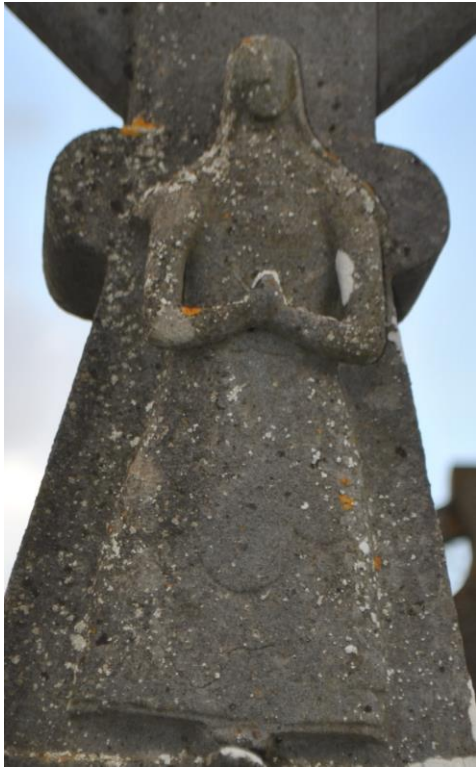


Certain plants and flowers have acquired a symbolic meaning and are used as religious motifs on graveyard memorials to express specific ideas and themes. Many flowers are chosen due to their shape or colour, others for their association with a holy person or event. For example, blues and white represent Heaven and Purity. The chrysanthemum, as the sound of the word implies, is associated with Christ, and is regarded as the Christ flower. The poppy is a symbol of eternal sleep. The rose is a popular flower. Our Lady is sometimes referred to as the rose without a thorn. The rose is an attribute common to many female saints, for example St Elizabeth of Hungary, St Dorothy, St Elizabeth of Thuringia and St Rose of Lima, St Rosalia of Palermo, St Rita and of course St Therese of Lisieux. The Passion Flower is regarded as a symbol of Christ's passion and crucifixion on the cross. The pointed tips of the leaves were taken to represent the Holy Lance. The tendrils represent the scourges used at the flagellation of Christ, the ten petals and sepals represent the ten faithful apostles. Absent from this number are St Peter, who denied Christ and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him for the 'thirty pieces of silver'. The three stigma of the flower represents the three nails of the crucifixion, while the five anthers are taken to symbolise the five wounds of Christ. Numbers have always been allotted a sacred meaning in Christian art and where these sacred numbers occur in nature they have been adopted into Christian iconography.



This detail on a cross in the old graveyard of a woman clinging to the bough of a tree very likely represents the Virgin Mary. The tree in Christian art has multiple meanings. One has only to look at the concordance of any bible to see how many times it is mentioned in scripture. It is often presented as the Tree of Knowledge and also the Tree of Life. The former being a popular motif on Irish High Crosses where it is associated with the downfall of Adam and Eve. A tree with a lopped trunk signifies life cut short, so is in that particular instance a mortality symbol. The tree can also be seen as type for the cross. Of most significance here is that in Christian teaching Mary is regarded as the new Eve, just as Christ is regarded as the new Adam. She is therefore often portrayed under an apple tree in a similar manner to Eve. The treatment of the cloak and hair in this scene appears to derive from a native Gaelic influence.





The scene above comprises of another representation of the Virgin Mary. This time she is portrayed in a long dress, with an ornamental band at the bottom. Her arms are balanced with hands joined in prayer. Like the earlier example, Mary is portrayed with long hair hanging down to her shoulders. In a similar fashion to the former example, she lacks a halo, which is somewhat surprising, but for the sculptor much easier to execute.



The Virgin and Child flanked by a pair of elongated plants, probably representing the Tree of Life, is shown with her hands joined above. Her hair is shoulder length similar to how it is depicted in other images from the Murphy school. The bottom or hem of the Virgins robes are folded in a manner

reminiscent of the style found in the late medieval period in East Galway. The expression and shape of the face resembles that found on late medieval wooden and stone statues of South East Galway; for example, the polychrome St Catherine from Kilcorban near Portumna.



On the upper angles of the monument are a pair of inclined angels. They are depicted with elongated faces that seem to have a strong medieval influence. The long hair trails down the back in the same manner as on the various examples of the Virgin Mary depicted within the graveyard. The particular treatment of the hair is a recognisable stylistic trait of the Murphy 'school'.



A highly ornate carving of the Sacred IHS monogram is used as a reduced form for Christ. This abbreviation is derived from the first three letters of the Greek name of Jesus, IHΣΟΥΣ (iota, eta and



sigma) or IHΣ. It has been variously interpreted and given different meanings over the years. For example, it is sometimes interpreted as *Jesus Hominum Salvator* (Jesus, Saviour of Men) in Latin. It is also associated with the Roman Emperor Constantine. It is recalled that while he was sleeping before a battle with Maxentius that he had vision of the IHS and the sun with a cross of light above it, and thus the meaning *In hoc Signo Vinces* (in this sign you will conquer) was born.



This panel exhibits a hand holding a Celtic cross with a Crown of Thorns at its centre. On other memorials, the cross is carved in the form of a plain Latin cross. The cross is flanked by a pair of attractive floral devices. The hand is very accurate in the way it is portrayed, even the nails are evident. The cross and Crown of Thorns are symbols related to the passion of Christ. Over thirty individual symbols can be associated with the passion and crucifixion of Christ. The meaning of the majority of them is quite obvious such as the cross and Crown of Thorns, others can be slightly vague and require a bit of detective work. In this instance, the cross should probably be seen as a symbol for victory of the Christian soul over death.



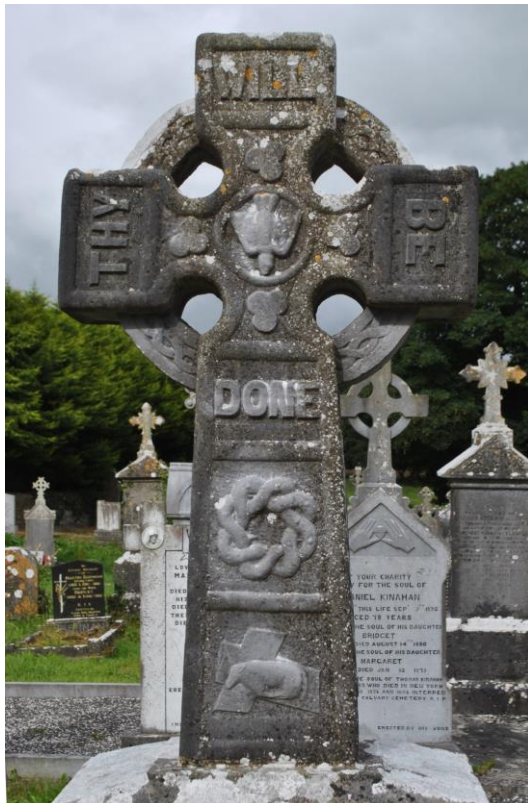
This is another variation to the decorative panel. It consists of a pair of hands holding the heart between the index finger and thumb. The image of the two hands holding the heart is well carved. As in all of their work, the fingers and nails have been carved with great attention to detail. There is

an interesting iconographical theme portrayed in this image. A triangle is formed by the positioning of the thumbs and index fingers. This symbolises the Holy Trinity and is a commonly used in Christian art as a motif to portray that iconographical message, while the heart with the crown of thorns symbolises Christ. Of interest, the thumbs and forefingers joined, known as the Cohanim hands, is a Jewish symbol that represented the priestly tribe of Aaron. Religious symbols often have a multiple-meanings which are often borrowed from other traditions and beliefs.



This headstone bears a pair of co-joined hearts framed within entwining trefoil and ivy leaf. Both are depicted as flaming hearts - a form of the Sacred Heart. The use of the trefoil is a common Celtic Revival motif, while the ivy is an evergreen and is often used to represent eternity. The scene is set within a triangular frame similar to other symbols carved by the Murphys. The rather unusual form

of the ring on the cross-head may be caused by the use of square cusps. The open lozenge in the centre of the cross-head is reminiscent of seventeenth-century cross-heads.



This large Celtic Cross is quite rugged in its presentation. It bears a number of religious symbols and motifs. At the base of the cross shaft a rather naive carving of the *Agnus Dei* or Lamb of God is shown. This motif derives from the words of greeting "*Ecce Agnus Dei*" -(Behold the Lamb of God) uttered by St John the Baptist on meeting Christ. This event was followed by the Baptism of Christ in the River Jordan by St John. We are told that after His baptism by John the Baptist that Christ spent forty days and forty nights in the Judean Desert. Above the *Agnus Dei* is a large Crown of Thorns, formed from a pair of entwining brambles with rows of sharp menacing thorns. This is a symbol associated with the Passion of Christ. The cross-head imitates the ringed cross of early medieval times and bears interlace on the face of the rings, expanded terminals to the head of the cross and open cusps beneath the arms. A short prayer reading "Thy Will Be Done", the third of the seven petitions found in the Lord's Prayer, is carved in relief across the face of the four terminals, while a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit is set within a circular frame in the centre of the cross-head. Four shamrocks or trefoils are also present.





The history of this attractive limestone statue of the Virgin Mary is interesting as it represents the work of several generations of the Murphy sculptors. It was carved by Walter Murphy for his parents Thomas and Mary Murphy but remained unfinished in the cutting yard. Walter's son Martin Murphy, whose signature appears as M. Murphy on many of the memorials in this graveyard, finished the piece and added the plinth. He dedicated it instead to his parents Walter and Ellen and his sister Margaret. The couple for which it was originally carved, Thomas and Mary (Martin's grandparents), are also commemorated. It was erected about 20 years ago (c.1996).<sup>2</sup> The statue comprises of an effigy of the Virgin Mary depicted wearing a Crown of Thorns over her mantle, thus is likely meant to portray her as the Mother of Sorrows. Her facial expression is typical of the Murphy style and in many ways is reminiscent of the style of carving one finds on the late medieval carving of St Dominic above the elaborately carved north doorway at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. The fingers on one hand and one foot remained un-finished at the time when Walter died in 1913.

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<sup>2</sup> Pers. Comm. Paul Murphy Monday, August 22, 2016 during a Heritage Week event.



This headstone is not by the Murphy's but by the Farrells of Lanesborough, Co. Longford. It bears interesting iconographical motifs. It consists of a ring headed cross executed in a medieval form, where the arms of the crucified Christ are outstretched in death. The treatment of the face is rather archaic in appearance and is not too dissimilar to examples more at home in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. A number of the instruments associated with the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ are shown beneath the crucifix. They consist of the scourge used for the flagellation of Christ, the hammer and nails used to fix Christ's hands and feet to the cross and a lance bearing a sponge offered to Christ by the centurion Stephaton after he uttered the fifth of his seven final sayings 'I thirst' (John 19:28). The ladder used at the Deposition or taking down of his body from the cross is also shown. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are the two men traditionally associated with the final act of taking Christ's body from the cross and placing him in the tomb. Nicodemus withdrew the nails - this is generally represented in religious art by a pincer. Joseph helped him to wrap the body of the dead Christ in a shroud and to place it in the tomb. An example of Celtic Revival floral ornament can be seen beneath the upper scene consisting of a pair of large trefoils or shamrocks. The trefoil is one of the devices traditionally used in the art of the Celtic Revival period. This device is found on many other memorials in this graveyard.

### *Conclusion*

The Murphy style of funerary art is an important regional style, which adds enormously to the cultural significance of the various graveyards where it is found. I believe that it should receive more scholarly attention than it has heretofore. It also needs to be recorded and mapped in order to ascertain the full extent of its distribution. It would make a wonderful publication in its own right and is an ideal topic for a student undertaking studies in art history or a similarly related topic.

### *Acknowledgements*

I wish to acknowledge the families whose memorials I chose to illustrate this paper. I hope by doing so I do not offend them in any way and hope they accept this short piece as a further tribute to the memory of their loved ones. I would, also like to thank Paul Murphy and Oliver Murphy the 'keepers of the flame' for their insights into their family craft.