

The Annual Choral Evensong in Commemoration of Elizabeth Bowen

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Introit

Each year, a commemorative Church of Ireland (Anglican) Evensong has been held at the “Bowen Church”, St Colman’s, Farahy, County Cork, beside the now-bare site of the house Bowen’s Court. This has been admirably organised and led by Revd Dr Robert MacCarthy (former Dean of the Church of Ireland’s National Cathedral, St Patrick’s, Dublin) since its inception decades ago. In recent years the service has been embellished by the Clerks Choral of Youghal, directed by Colin Nicholls, former choirmaster and organist at a cathedral in Cork. An ancient and slightly wheezy harmonium (damp follows the Anglo-Irish around like a faithful retriever) does sterling service to the music; or as sterling as it can. The church, which is maintained by trustees and entirely funded by voluntary donations (“to keep the roof on” as Dr MacCarthy pithily puts it), is unencumbered by electricity, and so the service is held in the summer or early autumn, when the congregation’s eyesight is probably at its clearest and the service sheet is legible. In the context of that Bowen novel set recognisably in County Cork, it is appropriate that the Evensong generally takes place in September – although which September may be its *Last* is moot. It remains a valuable and fitting memorial to one of the twentieth century’s finest writers in English.

The church and its preservation

The church is of no particular architectural merit. Built in 1720, it is a small, plain, spare building. It does not strut in the landscape, as so many of its former worshippers’ Big Houses did. Its glow comes from its association with Elizabeth, the house Bowen’s Court and the eponymous book which chronicles its life and afterlife. If the church is exclusively space for a “Protestant life”, its surroundings encompass the totality of Irish death – the graveyard contains the remains of Catholics as well as Protestants, a legacy of the Church of Ireland’s status as the established church until 1871. Elizabeth’s grave, close to the front door of the church, crouches for shelter against a westering wall. Here she lies with her husband Alan Cameron, perhaps closer in death than they ever were in life.

When the issue of establishing a memorial to Bowen was discussed three years after her death, the reservoir of feeling in Ireland about her activities in Ireland at the beginning of the war (she reported on Irish opinion to the UK Ministry of Information in London), as well as the social position of her Anglo-Irish family, erupted again. In May 1976, the Revd Dr Robert MacCarthy proposed the transfer of Farahy Church to commemorate the life and work of Elizabeth Bowen.

He followed this with an appeal to Bowen's friend, artist Derek Hill, to help with the rescue of the church, as well as enlisting others to help financially in the preservation of the modest church that Bowen usually attended when at Bowen's Court. "I was horrified to find holes in the roof, window panes broken and a general air of post-atomic bomb about the place." Would there be about 50 people, he queried, who would be prepared to subscribe to the project at £25 each? The initial absence of support for the project was noticeable: from Bowen's family executor, Gilbert Butler; the bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross; Cork citizens; and the Irish Arts Council (which did eventually donate). Gilbert Butler was in conflict with Hubert Butler and the preservation committee, which staunchly supported the proposal, and the diocese had complications about transferring the ownership of the unused church. According to Dr MacCarthy, Gilbert protested his (MacCarthy's) daring to erect a memorial plaque in the church with "Mrs. Cameron" inscribed on it when they had just "had an official biography done" of Bowen. (Presumably, he had commissioned Victoria Glendinning's biography). Dr MacCarthy defended his passionate effort to save the church, as it was "the last physical reminder of the Bowens in Ireland" and Bowen's writings and the plaque was respectful of "its character as a place of worship, that being the role in which it occupies an important place in Bowen's writing." His request to the diocesan secretary in Cork, Cloyne and Ross included the promise "that the church should be left very much as it is since it positively exudes that austere quality of Irish Anglicanism that Elizabeth Bowen has so well conveyed in Bowen's Court" and the altar a memorial to Bowen's mother; and her uncle who died on the Titanic. But money was needed to repair the roof and to prepare the vestry for assemblage photos, along with the use of Hill's painting "Bowen's Court", then owned by the Colley family at Mill House, Dublin. Dr MacCarthy reported on the progress of repairs on the site in 1978, finding "the one remaining Protestant farmer engaged in mending the holes in the church roof," and he enlisted others to work for little or nothing. There were those who supported the project in a letter to the London *Times* – Spencer Curtis Brown, Rosamond Lehmann and Raymond Mortimer. But the *Irish Times* literary editor, Terence de Vere White, thinking the project impractical and Bowen no moral model, warned that "hers is hardly a name that will draw many pilgrims."

The church was financially preserved, mainly by Bowen's friends in Anglo-Irish circles. Dr MacCarthy concluded in a letter to Hill that the collection of funds for such a modest memorial "in any environment other than that of Southern Ireland ... would be likely to present no insuperable obstacles." He implied to Hill, "knowing the scene as you do," that he understood the hostility toward the Bowens, and to Bowen, the literary daughter, who, from their perspective, took sides against Ireland during the Second World War, interrogating its "neutrality." There is perhaps little doubt that Elizabeth's ambiguous activities during WW2 occasioned much more antagonism than 400-odd years of Cromwellian-originated settlement by the family ever did. But local feeling against Bowen is now largely gone.

Dr MacCarthy suggested that opposition to the church's preservation implied a "Protestant death-wish"; resisting this memorial for Bowen would have ensured the disappearance of the memory of her and her ancestors in Farahy. Dr MacCarthy, no stranger to controversy in the Church of Ireland, prevailed with the Preservation Committee and those who sustained it. On

October 18, 1979, in the repaired St. Colman's Church, a Bowen memorial plaque was unveiled by Gilbert Butler, along with memorial photos of Bowen's Court in the vestry.¹

The form of service

The form of Anglican Evensong used at the annual service is that of the Church of Ireland, but it will be broadly familiar to those who know of the Church of England's equivalent. Dr MacCarthy uses the "old" form of worship from the 1926 Book of Common Prayer which was largely superseded by a revised version in 2004 – set "in modern language", as its *Preface* rather smugly notes. Out went "O Lord, open thou our lips: And our mouth shall shew forth thy praise"; in came "O Lord, open our lips: And our mouth will proclaim your praise". Parts of the service are sung by a cantor and the Clerks Choral. The point is that this is the form of service and the words that Elizabeth herself would have used in all the years she worshipped in this church; similarly for her father's funeral in 1930; Alan Cameron's in 1952; and for herself, buried there in 1973.

The service is enlivened (or otherwise) by a Sermon if delivered by an ordained cleric; or to be pedantic, an "Address" if by a lay person. It is generally expected to interrogate something that is Bowenesque, or proximately so. The boundaries are kept deliberately wide. Prominent in the pantheon have been such as academic interrogators of Bowen, Eibhear Walshe and Roy Foster; Anglo-Irish essayist and controversialist Hubert Butler; Bowen's biographer Victoria Glendinning; and Irish politician and Protestant Martin Mansergh. More recent sermonisers have included an Irish High Court judge, a clutch of Church of Ireland bishops and clerics and the odd outlier like one of the writers of this piece who in 2007 turned himself implausibly into the ghost of Alan Cameron reflecting on his life with Elizabeth. Delivered from a rather rickety pulpit that tends to suggest that it is pitching alarmingly, much like a ship's "Crow's Nest", the addresses and sermons are expected to be sober. Just as well. There's a lot of "rickety" in St Colman's, Farahy, and "bringing the house down" in that environment bears the possibility of an uneasy literality that no-one really wants to test...

The Elizabeth Bowen Society's President, Dr Nicola Darwood, delivered an excellent and informed Address in 2023 and hit the spot exactly. Last year's (2024) Sermon was given by a former bishop of Limerick and Secretary General of the Anglican Consultative Council, Rt Revd Kenneth Kearon. He delivered some thoughtful musings on Bowen's writings, concentrating on *The Last September*, and Bowen's place in the pantheon of Irish writing in the twentieth century.

Here beginneth the First Lesson...

Now a tradition, in September 2024 (as in many previous Septembers) a Lesson was read majestically and sonorously in a beautiful Anglo-Irish timbre by Patrick Annesley, who has the inestimable gift of being able to pronounce tongue-twisting Biblical names and places without

¹ This paragraph and the two preceding ones are adapted from Patricia Laurence, *Elizabeth Bowen, a Literary Life* (London, 2021, 2nd ed.), chapter 11.

hesitation or error. In previous times he has had to wrestle with complexities like “Nebuchadnezzar” and “Mahershalhashbaz”, and always wins. These are indeed essays in poetry. The Annesleys owned an early eighteenth century “Big House” nearby and would have been neighbours of, and doubtless frequent visitors to, Bowen’s Court. While Patrick and his wife Jane (staunch supporters of the church’s preservation and patrons of the annual service) no longer live at Ann’s Grove, they continue to support this endeavour and to add to it their own unique Anglo-Irish tinge.

The congregation of the faithful

And what of the congregation on this dull, dry, warm September Sunday afternoon in 2024? About forty of us – all sorts and classes of people, local and from further afield, not just the few Anglicans still remaining in this remote part of mid-north Cork – braved narrow roads and life-threatening parking conditions to sit in the dusty dark pews and pay due homage to the writer and woman that binds us all in a commonality of admiration and perplexity; and perhaps more specially, in a place that meant so much to her and her ancestors, and where they found their God every Sunday. We dutifully put our offerings on the plate, and prayed in our hearts that these would help to keep the roof on for another year.

The future...

A new crusade may be needed; this annual homage to Elizabeth will need willing souls to carry it on once the major actors have finally departed the scene. It may be that this particular way of honouring Bowen has run its natural course, as these things do. But if we can continue the tradition of such a service, then every effort should be made to do so. Without it, there will be little reason for the church to be maintained, unless an Irish State and its cultural agencies are prepared to step in and preserve it as the only physically remaining memorial to a writer that did her county – and, despite the naysayers, her country – proud. This little church and the annual service is a testament to Elizabeth’s “livingness”. The hope is that both live on.

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