

Preface to the second edition

The first edition of this book came about in circumstances that prolong themselves into this, its much enlarged and extended second edition.

Some twenty years ago, when I first made my home in Northern Ireland, I chanced to remark that I regarded myself as an atheist. I was then asked, with what seemed to be a straight face, whether or not I was a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist. The question, which anywhere else in the United Kingdom might seem bizarre, struck me at once as very interesting, because I recognised myself as belonging to the first category. I positively and firmly disbelieved in what I intuited was a very Protestant style. Moreover, looking more closely into the matter, I felt I could identify in my own convictions a clear and definite dimension which I understood to myself as a consequence of Quaker schooling. I wanted to understand what this dimension meant, because in the circumstances of neighbourly hatred then existing in the streets around me, there could be entailments. This was at a time when a man might be shot for simply walking on the wrong side of the road. Indeed, during the time of writing, seven were killed in my immediate neighbourhood, including one woman beaten to death with clubs; one acquaintance survived a political assassination attempt merely because the gun jammed, and another died on active duty. In the context of a piece I had written on the notion of 'heritage', a unionist journal described me in print as a member of a clique 'who would be given corrective therapy when the facts were known'.

At the time of starting this second edition, the major acts of violence have become a thing of the past; yet around me sectarian hatred continues to drive people from their homes and schools, and random murders scar the peace. Religious

differences are used to account for these crimes.

It seemed to me then, as it does now, important to understand these matters at a level beyond the daily or recent historical explanation, because religious differences have been one of the great moving engines of political history. The constitution and creation of the British State, and the subsequent settlement of what was to become the United States of America began with the assertion and the subsequent consolidation of religious difference. These differences have not been the sole causes: but without doubt qualitative factors of great consequence, which have a bearing on how people see themselves and conduct themselves.

In Northern Ireland the apprehension of these questions in recent years has led to an extended and not always fruitful debate on the supposed existence of 'two cultures' in an oppositional relationship. Affiliation to one or the other was seen as a guarantor of 'identity'. Now we are all classified under 'perceived religious affiliation' in official documents.

Under modern conditions, to align culture with a singular identity is to miss the main and salient fact of contemporary life, that we all simultaneously participate in many cultural domains and plural identities, and do so continuously in all levels of private and public life – nearly all of which are held in common. Singular identity has been reduced almost to vanishing point by the empires of capital and global communication. The insistence on 'identity politics' serves to hide or confuse common experience and interests, and to erect or reinforce barriers that cloak or deny that common sphere. This book is not a contribution to that misleading discourse.

However, to live only within contemporary plurality is to miss another main and salient fact, that the conditions under which we experience are not of our choosing; we live in historical time and bear the scars of it, along with the blessings. Accordingly, the aim of the first edition of *The Plain Style* was to enquire into the historical reality of a putative 'Protestant culture' so as to make it a little clearer what it might mean to assert this identity on the little, but bloodily vindictive, stage of Northern Ireland.

It soon became apparent that I had engaged upon a task that needed a good deal more space than I had allotted. The theme was running away with itself; I could only point to where it might lead, or allude to further 'topics for research'. In the end what I wrote was not much more than a suggestive sketch of a book. I

described it as ‘a kind of provocation’. It was well received by those that read it.

My aim in this edition is to turn that sketch into a painting, by filling in all those forms I had merely outlined before, and by giving my study greater perceptual depth. The main theses remain, but given what I hope is greater critical attention and support, together with a much wider geographical and historical scope, leaving behind what Churchill once described as ‘*the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone*’ for wider and more fertile territory.

The essential method remains the same – that of aligning material practices of building, design and the like with theological concepts. Like Max Weber:

*we are interested . . . in those psychological sanctions, which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct, and held the individual to it. Now these sanctions were to a large extent derived from the peculiarities of the religious ideas behind them.*¹

I am concerned with what I call a ‘Protestant aesthetic’. By ‘aesthetic’ I mean a characteristic attitude toward materials and workmanship: by ‘Protestant’ I mean grounded in certain theological concepts and in the attitudes to authority that spring from them. Together these formed a set of intellectual structures which helped to fashion canons of taste and aesthetic expectations, which in turn outlasted the original situations that gave them birth. They also, I shall argue, informed the development of technics and the manufacture of objects. This complexity is the substance of design history, in all circumstances.

In the seventeenth century these interactions produced, throughout Britain and (with many local differences) other parts of Protestant Europe, a manner of building, of furnishing, of clothing, as well as of writing, speech and music, that was based upon two perceived qualities, ‘plainness’ and ‘perspicuity’. This was sometimes spoken of as The Plain Style:

*This term plain style’ is not something I have devised or that some ingenious historian has invented, like ‘metaphysical’, ‘Augustan’ or ‘Victorian’ as a convenience in narration. It was consciously used by the Puritans themselves.*²

This manner or Plain Style was then extended by British and Dutch immigrants into the North American colonies, and later reinforced by numerous other settlers until it became a predominant feature in the material culture and visual *habitus* of the new found lands.

This book also relates to two large-scale questions which historians often refer to as the Weber Thesis and the Merton Thesis. The first, originating in Max Weber's book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), links the Protestant and specifically Calvinist discipline with an ethic of work and purposive living which leads to an accumulation of capital and its investment in both economic and social forms. The second, first stated by Robert Merton in *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1938) argues that the Puritan spirit fostered the growth of independent enquiry which led in due course to the development of science. Both of these volumes have attracted and continue to attract criticism, commentary and development to an extraordinary degree. My discussion of the Plain Style and the rejection of imagery relates to that discourse, and gives some support to both theses. I do not, however, attempt to tackle either of them directly.

The principal debt that I owe to Weber lies in the general strategy or method of the present work; the presupposing of an ideal type, albeit of a provisional nature. One supposes the existence of an object of study in order to gain leverage on the leaden weight of data. If the data can then be moved into a comprehensible pattern, then we may assume (again, provisionally) that the lever we have chosen corresponds to some feature of reality.

The weakness of the strategy lies in this; that the ideal type is a mental construct that can never fit exactly to any one real case. The method cannot be a map that exactly renders the terrain; what it aims to give is a method of surveying the ground. To refer to Weber again:

*Thus, if we try to determine the object, the analysis and historical explanation of which we are attempting, it cannot be in the form of a conceptual definition, but at least in the beginning only a form of provisional description.*³

Both writer and reader are in the position of those early navigators who, knowing that there is land, attempt to sail round

it to prove it an island, and having landed make straight for the highest point. We ask of their description not, is it accurate, but, is it useful? It is certain that the accumulating mis-matches between the ideal type and the brute facts must in time render the original chart redundant; but in the meantime the explanatory structure provided has generated discourse and helped to direct research toward sounder conclusions.

In fact, one thesis that begins to emerge in this book arrives at conclusions significantly different from those put forward by Weber. It discounts the sole importance of Calvinism and argues that the essential qualities of our 'Protestant aesthetic' are not particular to Calvinism or reducible to its influence.

What has not received much attention in these debates is the effect upon cognition of the destruction of pictorial memory and its replacement by emblematic and diagrammatic schemes of memorisation, which was one of the main aims of Reformation education, following upon the destruction of actual imagery in worship. This is an important theme in the following pages, in which I argue that it was a significant element in the early formation of modernity, and that it had significant aesthetic consequences. These matters seem to me to have some important bearing on the development of scientific language, through the refusal to use figurative speech and the espousal of plain terms. As such, parts of the following book tend to support the 'Merton hypothesis', as will become clear. I enlarge upon this in Chapter Five.

The book has its origins in an article that I wrote for CIRCA magazine in 1986. 'The Reformation and the Practice of Art' (CIRCA No.26. pp. 20-23) was part of a larger enquiry into this question occasioned by the deplorable condition into which Northern Ireland had fallen. That article derived from a much larger, book-length study on which I had engaged, covering much the same ground as this book. I was unable to interest any publisher with that project and so it lapsed. Much of the research work I had begun was being undertaken, at an altogether higher level, by historians such as Margaret Aston and Patrick Collinson. But today one perceives, on a worldwide scale, ancient antagonisms being revived for modern reasons. It becomes all the more important to look into the foundations of cultural difference to find our common humanity.

In writing this book I have benefited from the work of some of my students, and from conversations and seminars I have had with staff and students in Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania and the Keogh Centre for Irish Studies at Notre Dame University, not to mention friends and colleagues here in Belfast. The staff of the University of Ulster Library have never failed me. In my short case studies of Quakers, Shakers, Amish and other 'plain people' I met several friendly and helpful individuals from whose conversations I have had benefit. They are too numerous to mention and some of their names are unknown. But I should like to mention Graham Gingles and Alastair MacLennan, whose art provided me with a way back into these matters, and I owe a particular debt to the friendship of Michael Quinn, who edited the early edition, and with whom I worked on several ventures.

I have tried to write in as straightforward a style as I can, as befits the subject, but some matters are unavoidably difficult or technical and don't resolve into easy prose. I have put a lot of detail into the footnotes, but on some occasions readers may have to grit their teeth. If you want to eat the kernel you must first crack the nut. Most of the books I have cited contain extensive and useful bibliographies.

All photographs, unless otherwise stated, have been taken by the author or Barbara Freeman.

1. Weber, M., *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* tr. Parsons (London 1976) p. 97
2. Miller, G.E.P., *Nature's Nation* (New York 1967) p. 211
3. Op. cit p. 48