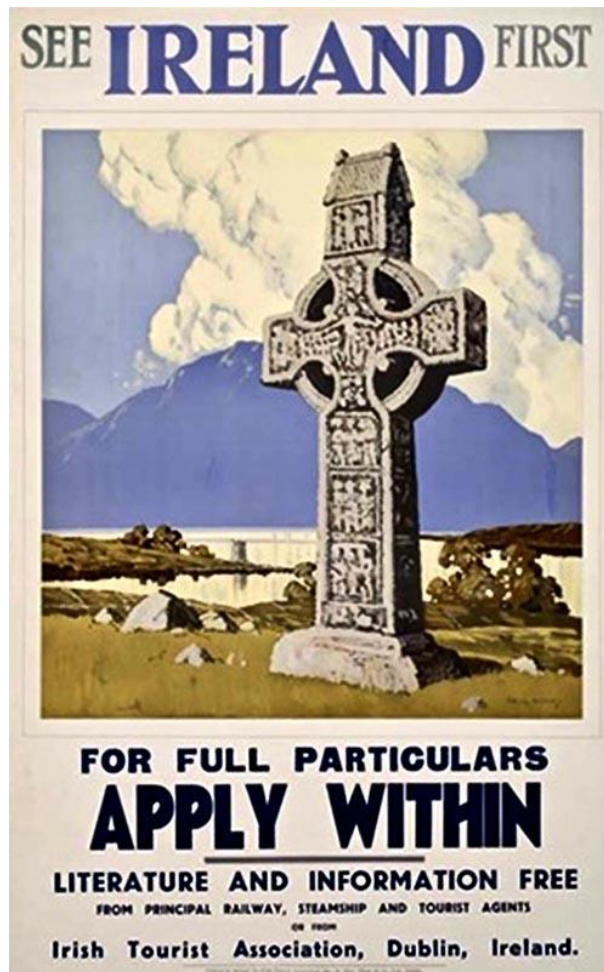


A notable work by Paul Henry, this painting is characterised by delicate brushwork, restrained impasto and a harmonious use of colour. Although the scene is imagined, it is certainly intended to represent the West of Ireland; a mountain lake in Connemara or Mayo, with the landscape enlivened with rocky outcrops and trees. On a hillside above the lake stands a Celtic high cross, dominating the scene, while in the distance are blue mountains and white cumulus clouds, aspects of nature that Henry delighted in depicting. On a promontory on the lake stands a small castle. Henry has divided the painting into planes, with the cross in the foreground; lake and trees in the middle distance, and in the far distance mountains forming a flat backdrop, with clouds and sky beyond. Henry learned this technique of depicting landscape while studying in Paris in the late 1890's under the designer Alphonse Mucha, at James MacNeill Whistler's Atelier Carmen, where he learned to use muted colours, in tonal relationships, to add a sense of gravity and stillness to his paintings.

The Celtic cross introduced by Henry into this imagined scene is based on a real cross of the medieval period; the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice in Co. Louth, a monastery founded by a follower of St. Patrick named St. Buithne. In addition to a round tower, Monasterboice has three high crosses, carved in sandstone and dating from the 9th or 10th centuries AD. Standing nearly six metres high, the Cross of Muiredach is carved with panels representing scenes from the Old and New Testament. It takes its name from an inscription on the base, ÓR DO MUIREDACH LAS NDERNAD IN CHRÓS, or, "a prayer for Muiredach who had this cross made". Henry has depicted the west face; in the centre, surrounded by a carved wheel, a panel represents the crucifixion of Christ; this is flanked by scenes from the Old and New Testament, including Christ being mocked by Roman soldiers.

Although a label on the frame identifies the painting as a view of "Lough Derg", it is largely an idealised West of Ireland scene. However, like the cross, the castle on the promontory is based on an actual tower house; Kildownet Castle, that appears in several works by Henry. Located on Achill Island, this tower house is associated with Grace O'Malley (or Grainne Ni Mahille), the legendary sixteenth-century Irish clan leader and seafarer. Coincidentally, Paul Henry's wife was also named Grace, and in 1914-15 they lived at the coastguard station at Cloghmore, not far from Grace O'Malley's castle. The label identifies the painting as having been in the collection of Sean T. O'Kelly, President of Ireland from 1945 to 1959. It is possible that Celtic Cross was commissioned by the government, as from June 1931 to mid 1932, it appeared as a cover illustration on successive issues of Irish Travel, the official magazine of the Irish Tourist Board. Listed in Brian Kennedy's catalogue raisonné as No. 611 "Celtic Cross 1924-5", the painting perhaps dates from a few years later. It was in an Adams sale in July 1984, and also bears an Oriel Gallery label on the verso.



Having worked at one time as a commercial illustrator—as did his contemporary Jack Yeats—Henry was aware of the power of images to convey meaning and communicate ideas. In 1925, his painting *Connemara* had been used as an advertising poster for the London, Midland and Scottish railways. Although born and raised in Belfast, Henry was very familiar with Achill Island, having gone there in 1910 and stayed for almost a decade. He felt that he encountered ancestral spirits in the West of Ireland, and this feeling is summed up in this depiction of a medieval cross set in a remote location. While initially, Henry had delighted in depicting local people as they farmed and fished in Connemara and Mayo, after he was employed in 1917–18 to administer payments of the Congested District Board, he began to increasingly focus on landscape. By 1930, around the time he completed this work, Henry had come to be regarded as embodying in his art many of the ideals of the newly-independent Irish Free State, with exhibitions of his paintings being held in New York, Toronto, Dublin and London. In many ways, *Celtic Cross in a West of Ireland Landscape* is a quintessential retrospective painting, a summing-up of Henry's life and art, and the qualities and aspirations he had brought to his depictions of the West of Ireland over the preceding three decades.

Peter Murray, February 2020