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# A Pronounced Character

## Sir Charles Edward Bainbridge Brett (1928-2005)

When a new edition of *Perspective* is released, I always look forward to Dr Paul Larmour's retrospective. From infrequent isolated pieces they have increased in regularity, becoming a fixture of the publication. Occasionally focusing on names with which I am familiar, they more often examine individual practitioners of which I have little more than a passing awareness. Regardless of my own familiarity with the topic, I always find them intricately researched and written with a sense of clarity and understanding that can only derive from the author's intense interest in the topic at hand.

On hearing that Dr Larmour was stepping back from *Perspective* in order to bring his long-standing research on the great Victorian architect Sir Charles Lanyon and his partners to fruition in a major publication, I was somewhat taken aback to be asked to step up and produce a series of historically focussed articles in his place. Flattered and intimidated in equal measure, I made the decision to try and produce a different type of article than that of Dr Larmour. Not only did I want to avoid stepping on any toes, but I felt my strengths lay elsewhere and saw an opportunity to explore different aspects of the story of local architecture.

I decided to focus on more recent history, broadly speaking from the 1960s onwards. This enables me to talk directly to people who were there and get their views and opinions, as opposed to relying on the archives. That said, the topic of this first article – Sir Charles Edward Bainbridge Brett – is no longer with us, passing away in 2005. However, his considerable legacy remains clear in several organisations that continue to have a significant bearing on our local built environment, and Sir Charles was such a prolific writer that it feels like we can still talk with him directly. He was an individual of diverse interests, and in a great many of these he was incredibly accomplished. He was by one turn an apolitical provincial lawyer, by another an ardent socialist and Labour man; an adept building conservationist and 'amateur' architectural historian, as well as a progressive housing boss. **Dr Andrew Molloy**

### BUILDINGS OF BELFAST

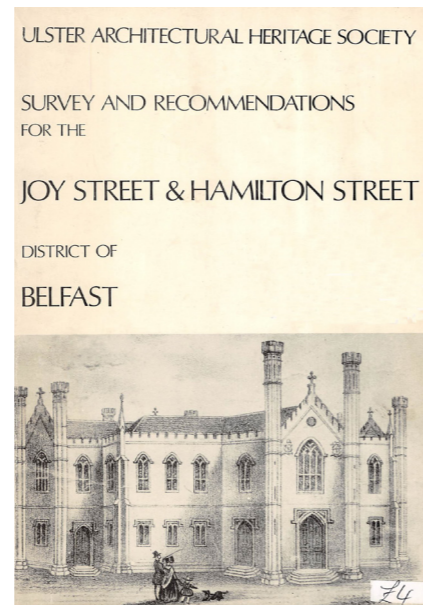
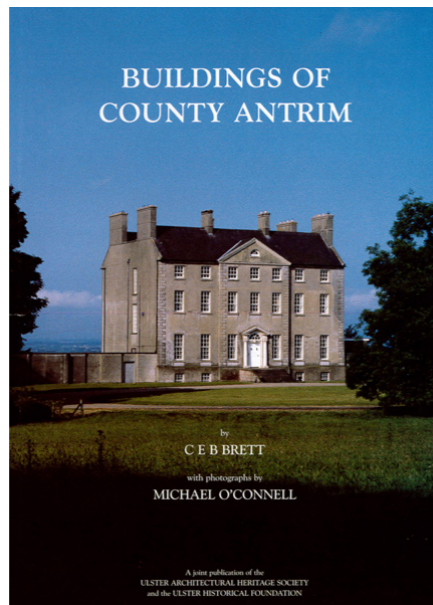
1700-1914 REVISED EDITION C.E.B. Brett



Sir Charles E.B. Brett – known affectionately as Charlie to those who knew him – was born on 30th October 1928 in County Down. He attended school in Aysgarth, Yorkshire; where he gained a passion for poetry at age 9, and then to Rubgy; about which he recounts unhappy memories of wartime rationing and the “hoary shellbacks” brought in to replace the younger masters away at war. In 1946 he attended New College, Oxford, where – of his own admittance – he did not work very hard although enjoyed himself enormously. “I remember principally,” he recalls, “the beer, the girls, and long summer days spent in punt or canoe on the river Cherwell...but most

of my attention was concentrated on poetry. I read it, I wrote it, I talked endlessly about it, and I came to be the chairman of the university Poetry Society.”<sup>1</sup> This is how he came to know Dylan Thomas, with whom he spent many uproarious drunken weekends.

It was these extra-curricular activities that led to him leaving Oxford with a “mediocre second,” which – given the life he led during his Oxford years – left him neither surprised nor disappointed. Resisting his father's suggestions to join the family firm of solicitors, Charles moved to Paris in 1949,



Left / Portrait of Sir Charles Brett by Jeffrey Morgan, commissioned in 2005 by Peter Marlow, former Chairman of UAHS.

James Ramsay, partner of Thomas Garrett, was a friend of Mary Ann McCracken, sister of Henry Joy McCracken. Garrett's son James Ramsay Garrett, named after his father's colleague, assisted celebrated Irish naturalist William Thompson in writing his lauded four volume *Natural History of Ireland* and was a council member of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (the organisation that founded the Ulster Museum whose building at 7 College Square North is now incidentally the home of the UAHS). Charles Henry Brett, great grandfather of 'Charlie,' was incredibly active in civic life. He established the Belfast Philharmonic Society and served as president of the Belfast Art Society; he was acquainted with artist Sir John Lavery and eminent Belfast historian George Benn, and he helped establish the Ulster Reform Club before being deemed too liberal for the liberal unionists by virtue of his support for Gladstone's Home Rule.<sup>2</sup>

In 1955, on the death of his grandfather Alfred E. Brett – a founder member of the National Trust in Northern Ireland – Charles was invited to become a member of the regional committee in his grandfather's stead. In a much-recounted story, he asked committee chairman Lord Antrim what books he should read on Northern Irish architecture to prepare for the job. “He answered that there were none: incredible as it may seem, he was substantially correct,” recounts Brett. “It occurred to me then that, if there were no books on the subject to be read, there must at least be some to be written. I started using my eyes and looking properly at the buildings by which I was surrounded, and found them to be unexpectedly rewarding. In 1957 I started assembling material for a book on the buildings of Belfast, ultimately published ten years later.”<sup>3</sup>

A slim but impeccably researched volume, *Buildings of Belfast* lies somewhere between the exhaustive and objective early lists of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and the personal favourites recorded in his later *Buildings of Antrim, ...Country Armagh and ...North County Down*.<sup>4</sup> Brett describes this book as a labour of love, compiled during his lunchbreaks, and was well timed given the onset of the Troubles in 1968 along with its associated bombing campaign and the intense militarisation of the city centre; a situation that led to the defacement and loss of much of Belfast's historic building stock.

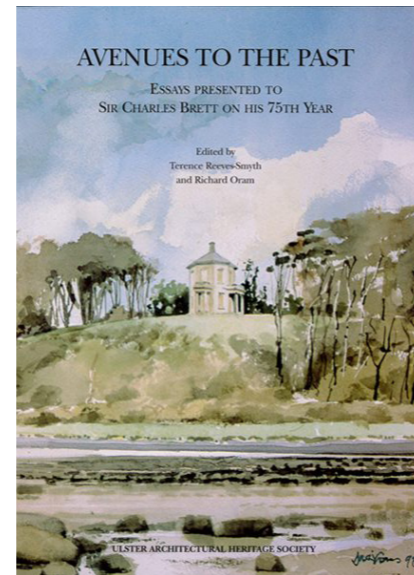
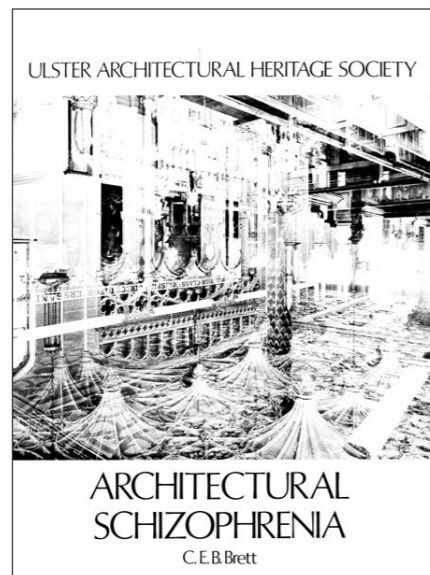
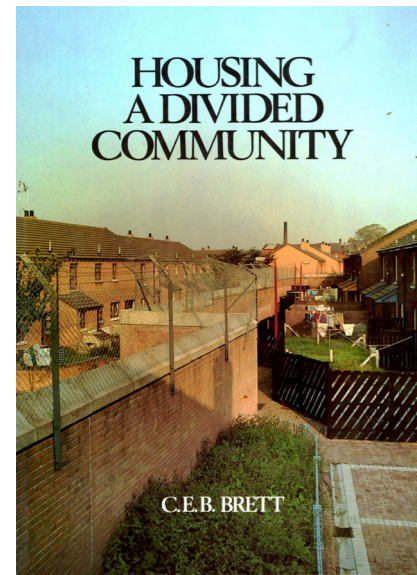
Concurrent with the development of his interest in architectural history was Brett's involvement in the Northern Irish Labour Party. Having previously kept out of politics, he had a strong social conscience and he “was clear that (his) sympathies were overwhelmingly on the side of those less privileged than (he) had been.”<sup>5</sup> In 1956 Brett helped write a policy paper

working for the English Service of the French radio where he spent an interesting year turning his hand to the production of all manner of content – interviews, news reading, sports presenting, quizzes – while leading an exciting and bohemian life. Despite the obvious enjoyment, Brett asked himself seriously if he wanted a career in journalism. On examination the answer was a no, and he returned to Belfast in 1950.

He began an apprenticeship in the family solicitor's firm which began practice in Belfast in the year 1796 under the name 'Ramsey & Garrett: Attornies' (sic); co-founder Thomas Garrett being Charles Brett's three-times great grandfather. Later adopting the name of L'Estrange and Brett, the principals of the firm through successive generations were deeply entrenched in the progressive, liberal and at times revolutionary aspects of Belfast's history, reaching back to the United Irishmen. It is this strong familial and professional thread that, I believe, led to Brett's twin interests in housing and heritage; two practical outcomes from his ideological preoccupation with personal identity, social responsibility, and place.

for the Labour Party titled Rents and Houses, “advocating public ownership of all rented housing accommodation, and private ownership of all other houses; a rent-rebate scheme; security of tenure for public-authority tenants; and an improvement in the quality of new houses.”<sup>6</sup> Further to this, the Labour Party also proposed a single unified points scheme to govern housing allocation, and the establishment of a single housing authority expanding the functions of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust. These ideas were broadly laughed off by the Unionist establishment of the late fifties. As tensions in Northern Ireland gradually worsened over the

The 1969 inquiry into ‘Disturbances in Northern Ireland’ concluded that the situation had arisen from an inadequacy of housing provision along with unfair methods of allocation, which in turn caused Home Secretary James Callaghan to advocate for a single housing authority some 15 years after the ‘Rents and Houses’ paper. The Housing Executive Bill was put before the Northern Ireland Government in July 1970 and, after a rather rocky road, was eventually passed in February 1971. The board of the newly established Housing Executive “comprised, on a sectarian analysis, five Protestants, three Roman Catholics, and one agnostic.”<sup>7</sup> That



course of the sixties, Charles Brett’s apparently divergent interest in architectural conservation and his ideas with regards to social housing were to pay dividends, creating a set of vital organisations which have survived the worst days of the conflict and undoubtedly improved the quality of the built environment in Ulster; namely the founding of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and playing a key part in the establishment of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Events such as the ‘squatting in Caledon’ incident highlighted public mistrust in the allocation of public housing overseen by the old Housing Trust and this, along with myriad other issues that had been building for several years if not decades (arguably centuries), lead to the civil rights movement and the series of riots and civil unrest considered to have been the ignition point of the contemporary Northern Irish Troubles.

agnostic was Charles Brett, who must have felt considerable pride at finally realising what he had suggested back in 1956 but also aggrieved that it had taken the steep social decline of his place of birth to bring it about.

As the province descended into sectarian violence, the 1967 publication of Buildings of Belfast had led to a broader awareness that while there was value to be found in Northern Ireland’s built heritage, there was no legislation in place to protect it. Discussing Conservation Amidst Conflict in 1986, Brett explained “the legislative and planning structure at this time was unsophisticated; the subordinate parliament of Northern Ireland had neglected to enact legislation equivalent to the Planning Acts which had existed in the rest of the United Kingdom since 1948; no inventories of historic buildings had been prepared, and it was not until



The Markets (left) and Joy Street (right), where Brett’s interest in housing and heritage collided.

1973 that building conservation laws comparable to those in Great Britain were given effect.”<sup>8</sup>

The Ulster Architectural Heritage Society was founded in 1967 by Charles Brett along with a small but dedicated group of frontier conservationists including Alistair Rowan, Lady Dunleath, Robert McKinstry and Richard Oram, to name but a few. The society was established to “to promote the historic environment, its protection, conservation and heritage-led regeneration for people and communities.” Listing legislation would not have been introduced to Northern Ireland in 1972 had it not been for the campaigning of the UAHS, whose early work involved the compilation of lists which would play a key part in the identification of heritage buildings for listing across Northern Ireland, as well as successfully campaigning for the establishment of an Historic Buildings Council in 1974 and, in 1975, the establishment of conservation areas in Northern Ireland.

After a series of significant demolitions including Queen’s Elms, Robbs Department Store and Charles Lanyon’s Deaf and Dumb Institute, early listings included the Palm House and the Grand Opera House, both at risk of demolition at the time. It is difficult to imagine a Belfast without these buildings and it is thanks to the UAHS that the death-by-a-thousand-cuts being inflicted on the delicate fabric of architectural heritage in Ulster was slowed, although by no means stopped.

As part of his work on the board of the Housing Executive, Brett prepared a working paper in 1973 establishing a set of development standards for new build social housing which focused on the design ethos of housing estates in cities, country towns villages and rural settings (and also set against



high rise development such as the Divis complex). This was followed by the introduction, during his chairmanship of the Executive from 1979 to 1984, of spatial standards laid out in the 1961 report Homes for Today and Tomorrow – better known as Parker Morris standards – as the minimum aspiration for new houses built by the Executive. This was progressive and revolutionary, and led to a real high point in the design and construction of public housing in Northern Ireland throughout the eighties and into the early nineties.

His twin passions of quality public housing and architectural heritage met in the redevelopment of the Markets area, in southeast inner-city Belfast. Here, Brett oversaw the demolition of a large area of inadequate housing, and some buildings that he himself had highlighted as being of historic importance in one of the early UAHS lists. This was carried out in the interest of providing well laid out and contextually appropriate social housing. However, when it came to the grand Georgian terraces on Hamilton and Joy Streets Brett pushed back, recognising these buildings as being historically and contextually important. Here HEARTH stepped in.

HEARTH (the Historic Environmental and Architectural Renovation Trust for Housing, one can only assume a ‘backronym’) was established in 1972 as a joint venture between the National Trust and the UAHS, with Charles Brett again leading the way in its establishment. Initially set up to save the smaller buildings of historic interest rather than the large public buildings which were the focus of the UAHS and the country houses of the National Trust, HEARTH had set up a Housing Association wing in 1978 under the chairmanship of Marcus Patton, concentrating on the rehabilitation of historic buildings as social housing.<sup>9</sup> The houses on Joy and Hamilton

Streets were a risky venture for the Executive but HEARTH Revolving fund with its housing experience took on the task of restoring the buildings, demonstrating the value of tactical retention of historic buildings which might initially appear unsavable and unsuitable for contemporary reuse.

Over the ensuing years, Charles Brett continued to run the family solicitor's practice while continuing his interest in architectural conservation, history and urban development. He was appointed a CBE in 1981 and was awarded a knighthood in 1990 for his services to public housing. From 1986 to 1989 he performed the thankless task of acting as chairman for the International Fund for Ireland, established by the controversial 1985 Anglo-Irish Treaty. He continued to write, contributing regularly to the *Ulster Architect* (an independent journal on local architecture published between 1984 and 2007), penning a series of opinion pieces styled 'Brett on...' (including one rather scathing article about Robinson McIlwaine's proposed Waterfront Hall<sup>10</sup>) and producing three volumes examining the buildings of Antrim, Armagh and North Down for the UAHS.

Sir Charles Brett passed away in 2005, but his presence is still highly evident within the built fabric of Northern Ireland. Whether it is one of the 60,000 Housing Executive houses constructed during his chairmanship, the architectural identity of the cities and smaller villages of Ulster maintained by the retention of otherwise overlooked historic buildings by the UAHS and HEARTH, or one of his many publications regularly consulted by contemporary conservation professionals, it feels difficult to overstate his contribution. ○

**Dr Andrew Molloy**



The Palm House (above left) and the Grand Opera House (right), saved thanks to the UAHS campaigns.

The following endnotes are included here as recommended reading as much as they are references. For a more complete bibliography of Sir Charles Brett's published works refer to the final chapter of 'Avenues to the Past' published by the UAHS in 2003.

1. Brett, C.E.B. *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977*. Edinburgh (etc.): J. Bartholomew, 1978. Pg 43.
2. Brett, C.E.B., and Hewitt, V.A.. *L'Estrange & Brett: A History, 1796-2007*. L'Estrange & Brett, 2007.
3. *Long Shadows Cast Before*. Pg 68.
4. Brett, C.E.B. *Buildings of Belfast 1700-1914*. 1st Edition. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967.  
Brett, C.E.B. and O'Connell, M. *Buildings of County Antrim*. Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1996.  
Brett, C.E.B. and O'Connell, M. *Buildings of County Armagh*. Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1999.  
Brett, C.E.B. and Merrick, A.C.W. *Buildings of North County Down*. Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 2002.

The original UAHS lists, compiled by Sir Charles and a great many others, are available to purchase on the UAHS website. <https://ulsterarchitecturalheritage.org.uk/product-category/publication-downloads/>

5. *Long Shadows Cast Before*. Pg 62.
6. *Long Shadows Cast Before*. Pg 129.
7. Brett, C.E.B. *Housing a Divided Community*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration, Dublin in association with the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1986. Pg 14.
8. Brett, C.E.B. 'Belfast: Conservation Amidst Conflict'. *ICOMOS Information*, December 1986, 15-20.
9. Patton, M. 'Conservation at the Coal-Face: A Short History of HEARTH'. In *Avenues to the Past: Essays Presented to Sir Charles Brett on His 75th Year*. Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 2003.
10. Brett, C.E.B. 'Brett Blows His Top'. *Ulster Architect* 11, no. 2 (1994): 10-11.