

NELSON ON HIS PILLAR
(Paper to the Belfast Literary Society)
Dennis Kennedy, 3rd October, 2005



O'Connell Street, Dublin c 1950. Hilda Roberts.

On the 18th of November 1805 the Dublin City Assembly agreed that some public monument of respect to that gallant and illustrious hero Lord Viscount Nelson (should) be handed down to posterity. News of the victory at Trafalgar on October 21st, and of Nelson's death, had reached London on November 6th, and Dublin on the 8th, so just ten days later Dublin was moving very rapidly to honour Nelson. It was on that same day of the City Assembly meeting, November 18th, that Napoleon Bonaparte, campaigning in Austria first received the news of Trafalgar.

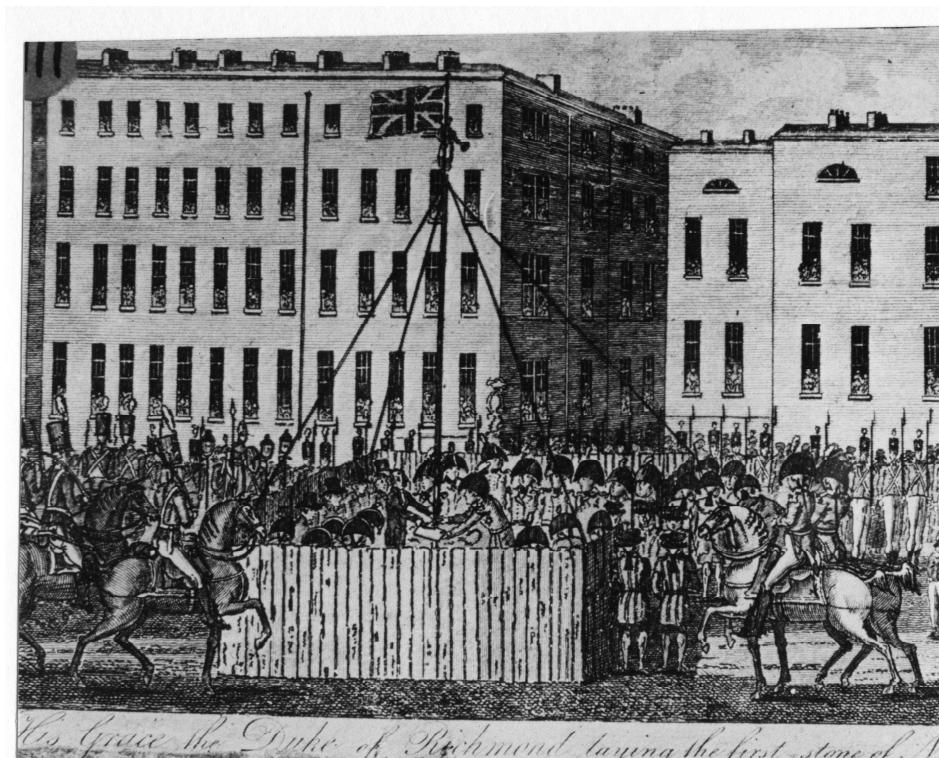
Less than a week later, on the 23rd, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alderman James Vance, had called a meeting of the nobility, clergy, bankers, merchants and citizens at the Royal Exchange for the purpose of erecting a monument to the memory of Nelson. The meeting agreed that a subscription be opened for the purpose of erecting a suitable memorial to Nelson, in order to give to our fellow subjects of every situation an opportunity of contributing to the commemoration of a name equally dear to all ranks. It also agreed that a committee of Twenty One be appointed to whom the entire management and execution of this public object be entrusted.

That committee was set up on 28th November under the Lord Mayor James Vance. It included four MPs . John La Touche, Robert Shaw, Hans Hamilton and John Claudius Beresford . as well as two other members of the La Touche family, and one Arthur Guinness. The presence of the Chief Secretary, Charles Long, indicated support for from Dublin Castle. Also included were two prominent Catholic merchants, Randall McDonnell and Denis Thomas O'Brien . Catholics were still excluded from public office in Ireland.

While Dublin's Pillar was among the first significant public monument to be erected to Nelson in any major city in the empire, it was not the first. That honour probably belongs to Glasgow, which managed the large memorial obelisk on Glasgow Green by 1806. Montreal, with a column and statue similar to Dublin on the banks of the St Lawrence by 1809 still claims to have been first . as do Bridgetown, Barbados and Birmingham. The Montreal column was begun in 1808, and completed in 1809, as was Dublin's, where the statue of Nelson was placed on the top of the pillar, probably in August 1809ⁱⁱ. Birmingham managed a grandiose statue by October 1809. Edinburgh's memorial . the signal tower on Carleton Hill . was actually started in 1807 but was not completed until 1816. It was 1843 before Nelson's Column made it to Trafalgar Square.

Despite the enthusiasm of November 1805, it was not possible to start work on the Dublin pillar until February 1808; the monument was completed and opened to the public before the end of 1809. For 158 years the 13 foot statue of Admiral Lord Nelson on top of his 121 foot pillar dominated Dublin's O'Connell Street, the acknowledged centre of the city and focal point for its social life. As a symbol of the city, it was almost as iconic as the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Why Dublin? Nelson had no particular connection with Dublin, or indeed with Ireland, though one of his many lady loves did settle in Ireland and corresponded with him from there.ⁱⁱⁱ He almost certainly never visited it, and Dublin was not a naval base. It would seem Nelson was not much enamoured of Irish national aspirations. Serving in the Caribbean in 1785 he reportedly refused an invitation to a St Patrick's Day function on the island of St Kitts because the town was flying Irish flags hoisted by, in Nelson's words, vagabonds^{iv}



Laying the first stone, 1808

When the Pillar was built, a small proportion of the population of Dublin would have regarded Nelson as a foreigner if not an enemy. But they would have been a very small minority, for neither 1808 nor the subsequent Emmett rebellion had popular support, and in the early years of

the 19th century Dublin would have been a staunchly British city. That is not to say it was staunchly unionist, for the city merchants were not enthusiastic supporters of the Union, and claimed that the loss of the Irish Parliament had damaged their interests. By 1810 they were sufficiently disillusioned with the Union for the City Assembly to pass a resolution calling for the restoration of the Irish Parliament, and for them to invite the rising leader of the Catholic movement, Daniel O'Connell to address what was termed an aggregate meeting to which Catholic Freemen of the City were invited as well as Protestant.^v

On November 9th 1805 the Freeman's Journal had infinite pleasure in releasing the news of Nelson's victory to its readers, adding:

We congratulate our country upon the glorious defeat of the enemy. To the people of Ireland it should particularly be a matter of great exultation as part of the plan of operations of that fleet which has been so defeated and shattered was an attack on this country.

Some commentators have suggested the commercial interest of Dublin's merchants was the reason why the city was in such a hurry to honour Nelson. The French blockade of these islands had cost them dear and the significance of Nelson's victory in restoring freedom of the high seas would have been immediately apparent to them. But they would also have been aware of the wider significance of Nelson's victories, culminating at Trafalgar, in the epic struggle with France.

Almost continuously since 1793 Britain and Ireland has been engaged in a war with revolutionary France which was quite different in kind from anything that had preceded it in Europe. This was not about rival states adjusting the balance of power or squabbling over territory, it was about the survival or destruction of states, about the overthrow of regimes, order and religion as these had been understood.

As one of his biographers has put it, Nelson's heroic role was played out in the context of a total British response to the revolutionary era that generated a national identity and in Nelson himself became the central figure in a new national identity. Around him coalesced the very concept of Britain, a state committed to God, King, parliament and liberty.^{vi} The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had come into existence largely to counter the threat to Britain posed by France's readiness to exploit Irish discontent. The Act of Union was essentially a security measure following the events of 1798.

Nelson was a popular hero long before his death at Trafalgar. After Cape St Vincent in 1797 . when Jervis was in command and Nelson his subordinate . Nelson returned to a hero's



welcome, a knighthood, the freedom of the city of London and promotion to Rear Admiral Sir Horatio. After the Nile in 1798 he became Baron Nelson, and his popularity soared even higher after Copenhagen in 1801 as Viscount Nelson. He was portrayed as the saviour of the nation, often with religious overtones, the icon of a newly emerging sense of Britishness, which was certainly shared by many, though not by all, in Ireland.^{vii}

One Irishman may have been so impressed by Nelson's victories that he changed his name in his honour. In 1802 when Patrick Brunty, or Prunty, of Co Down, registered as a student at St John's College Cambridge, he did so as Patrick Bronté. According to some accounts, the father of Charlotte, Anne and Emily changed his name as a mark of respect for the Duke of

Bronté, which title the King of Naples had bestowed on Nelson in 1799. Branwell Bronte wrote a poem in honour of Nelson.

Dubliners in 1805 would still have had the French invasion of 1798 - and the failed expeditions to Bantry Bay and Lough Swilly - fresh in their memories. In 1803 Emmett's rebellion in Dublin had again raised the spectre of French invasion. Emmett had been part of the United Irish delegation which had travelled to the Continent to seek support for a rising in Ireland, and he had met Napoleon - then First Consul - and discussed with him French aid for an Irish rebellion.^{viii} Napoleon had displayed considerable interest in another French expedition to Ireland, and in January 1805 had ordered his fleet at Brest to prepare to land troops in Ireland. This order was intercepted by the British secret service, and while historians now believe it was part of a grand Napoleonic bluff, it was enough to alarm both government and public in Britain and Ireland.

Dubliners of all ranks in 1805 would have had at hand an immediate and physical evidence of the French threat in the extensive building programme of Martello Towers around the city, which had begun in 1804 to meet the dangers of attack by sea. About 50 of these towers were built, and would have been highly visible, and daily, reminders of the French danger.

Many ordinary Dubliners would have had strong personal and family reasons to rejoice at the victory of Trafalgar. It is estimated that one quarter to one third of the sailors who manned Nelson's fleet were from Ireland. There were Irish-born officers too, and one of Nelson's ships, the *Tonnant*, was captained by Dublin-born Charles Tyler. Of almost 500 men aboard the *Tonnant* at Trafalgar, 272 were English and 128 Irish, with 44 Scots and 33 Welsh.^{ix} The ship's casualties at Trafalgar were 22 killed and 50 wounded, the wounded including Captain Tyler.

The commander of the marines aboard *Victory* at Trafalgar was Captain Charles William Adair, from County Antrim, one of the Adair family of Ballymena. He fought on deck alongside Nelson in repelling the attempt by the *Redoubtable* to board the *Victory*, was first wounded and then took a second hit and died. Captain Henry Blackwood, who commanded the frigate *Euryalus*, was on the *Victory* with Nelson as the battle commenced. He was the son of Sir John Blackwood of Ballyleidy County Down and Dorcas, Baroness Dufferin. A close colleague of Nelson, he witnessed the disputed codicil to Nelson's will just before the battle. Having failed to persuade Nelson to direct the battle from his frigate rather than from the *Victory*, for his own safety, Blackwood was sent back to his own ship. He survived Trafalgar and ended up Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Blackwood. Dr William Beatty, the surgeon who tended the dying Nelson on the *Victory*, though often described as Scottish, was an Ulsterman from Londonderry.^x

The National Archives' listing of all the Royal Navy personnel who fought at Trafalgar shows 59 Murphys - all but two with Irish home addresses, and the same number of Sullivans, all but three Irish.

Certainly the news of the victory at Trafalgar was greeted with celebrations in the streets of Dublin wild enough to develop into riots. Rule Britannia was sung in the theatres. The death of Nelson seems not to have cast undue gloom over the celebrations. The city was illuminated, and at the Mansion House an elegant transparency showed Neptune laying his crown at the feet of our gracious sovereign, seated on his throne supported by Britannia and Hibernia.

On November 27th the Lord Mayor, the Recorder, Aldermen, High Sheriffs Common Council et al attended by the City regalia went in procession to the Castle, preceded by a grand

band of music, and presented to HE the Earl of Hardwicke an address of congratulations to His Majesty upon the late glorious victories at sea.^{xi}

The Dublin establishment would have been anxious to emphasise its loyalty to the new United Kingdom, and Dublin's importance as the second city of the kingdom. It would also have been eager to assert its Britishness, and the Britishness of Ireland, and what more appropriate way of doing this could there be than erecting a magnificent monument to the man who had heroically embodied that Britishness.

(Similar motivation may have been present among the backers of the Montreal monument. Captured from the French in 1760, Montreal was still a largely French settlement in 1800, with no more than 8,000 inhabitants. But it had acquired a strong merchant elite of Scottish fur traders, who had fled Scotland after the 1745 Jacobite rising. By 1805 these Scots were beginning to



dominate the commercial life of Montreal, and were also anxious to assert their Britishness and their recently acquired loyalty, whatever the disposition of the rest of the residents of the city. The Montreal Column, recently restored, has, since 1930, shared La Place Jacques Cartier with a statue of the French Canadian 18th century hero Jean Vauquelin . just as Nelson shared a street with Parnell and O'Connell. It has survived efforts by Quebec nationalists to have it removed.)

As the 19th century progressed and Dublin's population grew rapidly, many Dubliners would have seen Nelson as representative of an imperial occupying power. In the 20th century, after independence, many, perhaps most, thought it ironic, to say the least, that the great British hero should continue to hold pride of place in Ireland's capital city, and that he should do so in such close proximity to such a shrine to Republicanism as the General Post Office.

In 1805 the initiative to erect Dublin's monument came from the City Assembly and the Lord Mayor, but it was built by an independent committee set up to raise the necessary funds, and establish a trust to take responsibility for the supervision and maintenance of the monument. This trust was the actual owner of the monument - an accident of birth that proved useful later in its life.

At that time the exclusively Protestant Dublin Corporation's main function, according to one historian, was to pass resolutions of loyalty to the Crown and to the Viceroy. Whatever functions it may have had as regards the upkeep and welfare of the city had been transferred to boards appointed by the Viceroy.^{xii} It was itself a self-perpetuating oligarchy open only to freemen of the city, and remained that until the major reform of 1840, under which Daniel O'Connell became Lord Mayor.

Reports of the first meeting on November 28th 1805 suggest that John La Touche took the lead in proposing the monument. The La Touches were a French Huguenot family long settled in Ireland. Coincidentally, the one French admiral who could claim a victory over Nelson was Louis Rene de Latouche-Treville, who had defeated Nelson at Boulogne in 1801. When he died of natural causes later that year, Nelson wrote to a friend that Latouche has given me the slip

The committee had three main tasks. It had to raise the money, it had to select the design of the monument and its design, and it had to decide where to put it.

This last was immediately a matter of some controversy. Though the site of the Pillar became the acknowledged centre of Dublin, the very heart of the city, this was far from the case in 1805. Upper and Lower Sackville Street had only recently been connected with the main part of the city south of the river by the construction of Carlisle Bridge in 1793/4 . to facilitate those members of the Irish Parliament who had their houses in Sackville Street and neighbouring north-side areas, and who had, up to then, had to go the whole way round to College Green via Essex Bridge.

Some of the residents of Sackville Street wanted the pillar positioned on the banks of the river, giving the Admiral a view out to sea. Some even wanted it put on Howth Head. One argument in favour of the location chosen was that a statue had once stood there. It was of General Sir William Blakeney, later Lord Blakeney, born in County Limerick in 1671, whose long military career took off during the War of Jenkins's Ear, when he served with distinction at a then little known spot on the south coast of Cuba called Guantanamo Bay. Later action in 1746 saw him defending Stirling Castle against the Jacobites . possibly including some who later became fur-traders in Montreal. He spent ten years as Lieutenant Governor of Minorca, defending it against the French for 70 days during the Seven years War, before surrendering on honourable terms. The statue, by Van Most, was erected after his death in 1761.

It appears to have been damaged, and removed before 1805. By then too Sackville Street was on the way down, rather than up. The closure of the Irish Parliament had meant no need for grand residences within easy reach of College Green, and some of the steam had gone out of the Wide Streets Commission's plans to make Dublin an architectural showpiece. A few years later, when the decision was taken to build the GPO in Sackville Street, three derelict houses were occupying the site.

So the construction of a major monument after 1805 may have been seen as a welcome boost to the flagging fortunes of the street. So despite the reservations of some residents, and worries even then of the impact of the monument on traffic, the middle of Sackville Street was chosen.

But what sort of monument? The vogue for the classical was dominating public architecture throughout western Europe, and Greece and Rome provided many examples of how to commemorate a public hero. The best known to architects and men of taste who had travelled was Trajan's column in Rome, a 125 feet high marble pillar on a smallish plinth, with an inner spiral staircase leading to a platform at the top, just beneath the statue. In the event Dublin's pillar was just slightly taller and looked remarkably similar to Trajan's, without, of course, the spiral freeze around the outside which is the great distinctive feature of Trajan's column.

While a column was no doubt appropriate to a hero of Nelson's stature, there were not many precedents for it in Irish public architecture. There were some obelisks - at the site of the Battle of the Boyne, erected in 1736, and one on Killiney Hill, 1742. The Phoenix column had been set up in the Park in 1745, but the only comparable memorial column with a statue on top seems to have been that of the Duke of Cumberland, erected in Birr in 1747 to the victor of the Battle of Culloden in the previous year. The tall Doric column, by Samuel Chearnley, is still there, though the Duke has been missing for 90 years.

The same Duke, incidentally, had led the force which had relieved Stirling Castle during the 45 Rebellion . the Castle having been stoutly defended by the same General Blakeney we

have already met via his statue in Sackville Street. Unlike Nelson the Duke was not blown off his pillar by Irish malcontents. Instead he was removed in 1915, reportedly on safety grounds, the statue having been badly damaged. One story is that it had been used for target practice by members of a Highland Regiment stationed in Birr, mindful of Culloden.

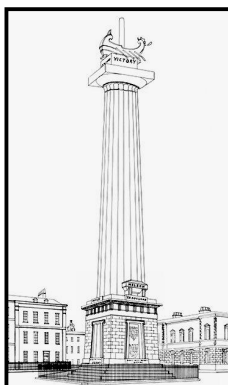
The Nelson committee publicised its project in 1806 and invited the artists of the United Kingdom to submit proposals for designs for the intended object. The winning submission came from a young English architect, William Wilkins, then aged 29, who proposed a tall Doric column on a plinth, with capital and abacus supporting a Roman Galley. The estimated cost was £5,000, not including the sculpture on top. (About £250,000 in today's money. Or one might get a better perspective by recalling that the Bank of Ireland had paid £40,000 to purchase the Parliament House in College Green a few years earlier.)

But Wilkins was never formally commissioned to build the pillar: the committee subsequently acknowledged their obligation to William Wilkins Esq, Architect, Fellow of Caius College Cambridge, for that which furnished the groundwork of the beautiful column. But they went on to say that they could never cease to regret that means were not placed in their hands to enable them to gratify him, as well as themselves, by executing his design precisely as he had given it.^{xiii}

They then added that Francis Johnston, Esq. of Dublin, Architect, afforded the necessary assistance with his acknowledged ability, which, notwithstanding his various and important avocations, he did with utmost cheerfulness.

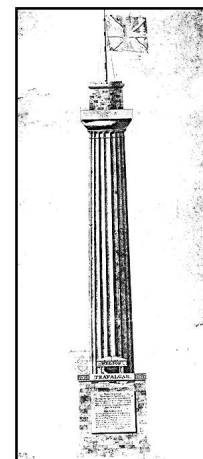
Wilkins, (1778-1839) is best known for his National Gallery in what became Trafalgar Square, and for his work on University College London, Downing College, King's College, Trinity and the New Court of Corpus Christi, all at Cambridge, and for many country houses. The Dublin Pillar is generally listed among his early works.

Irish writers on the Pillar tend to emphasise Johnston's role in the project, and some ascribe the Pillar to him, pointing to the differences between Wilkins' original design and the finished work. The accounts of the committee, which are detailed, include no payment of an architect's fee. Shortage of funds seems to have been the main reason why, having accepted Wilkins' design, the committee could not proceed with the commission to him.



This picture shows Wilkins' original winning design, and we can identify the changes made in the execution of the project. The Roman Galley on top was replaced by the statue of Nelson, but the plinth is also somewhat different, set upon four steps and lighter, slightly raked in sympathy with the tapering of the pillar. A drawing (right) in the archives dated 1808 and signed by Johnston follows Wilkins closely, including the catafalque with Nelson on it above the name Trafalgar. But the galley has gone, replaced by what could be the base for a statue still to be decided upon, while the plinth is rugged and four-square, and the steps somewhat indistinct.

If cost was the reason why Wilkins' original project could not be carried out, these changes made by Johnston may have been to save money. Whatever the explanation, I think we can say that Wilkins designed the pillar,



but Johnston was responsible for its erection and, to some extent, for its final appearance.

Francis Johnston, (1760-1829) was eighteen years older than Wilkins and, in 1806-7 was already an established architect, having been appointed in 1805 as architect to Dublin's Board of Works and Civil Buildings. He was born in Armagh, the son of an architect, and in 1784 became architect to Primate Robinson. For Robinson he built the Armagh Observatory and was responsible for the interior of what is still today one of the most exquisite buildings in Northern Ireland . the Archbishop's Chapel in the grounds of the Palace in Armagh.

He is chiefly remembered for the Chapel Royal in Dublin Castle, and for St George's, Hardwicke Place, for long regarded as the finest church in Dublin, but now in sad neglect, and also for the General Post Office in Dublin (1815-1817), built almost a decade after the Pillar,. He was one of the founders of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1813, and is regarded as the successor to Gandon in the pantheon of Irish architects.

The foundation stone for the pillar was laid with enormous pomp and ceremony on 15th February 1808 by the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Richmond. (The anniversary of Nelson's first great victory at Cape St Vincent in 1797.) For the committee their joy must have been mixed with both relief and anxiety. At a meeting on 31st December 1807 they had noted that to that date they had raised only £3,827, while the estimated cost of the work was now £6,500. This manifest inadequacy they said, had prevented the commencement of the work.

There was some encouragement from the fact that the Duke of Bedford, who had served briefly as Lord Lieutenant in 1806 and 1807, had promised £200, as had his successor the Duke of Richmond. Sir Arthur Wellesley (Chief Secretary from 1807 to 1809) had put himself down for £108. So the subscription list was reopened, but the response must have been somewhat disappointing, for in early February they were still appealing for subscriptions.

On February 10 the committee published a notice saying that despite all their zeal and diligence to increase the fund to a sum worthy of the nation and of the man, and equal to a highly approved and beautiful plan which had been adopted, they had not attained their object. Under the circumstances they were reduced to the alternatives of either returning the subscriptions already received, or erecting such a monument as the funds would admit of. Having, however, resolved that a monument should be erected, they have ventured on a middle course and adopted a plan which, though the funds will not at present meet, they think a moderate exertion may enable them to accomplish. This plan is simple that it may be inexpensive, without emblem or sculpture

The notice went on to say that the Lord Lieutenant had agreed to lay the first stone on February 15th . the 14th, the exact anniversary of Cape St Vincent, being a Sunday. It ended with a further appeal for subscriptions. Should the nation by a general expression, feel that the capital of Ireland should build a prouder pillar, and that the original and more beautiful design should be adopted, there is still time.

Despite the shortfall in funding, the committee in January 1808 had agreed a contract with builders, Messrs Thomas Baker and Robert McCartney, to construct the pillar at an estimated cost of £4,503 on the basis of drawings supplied by Francis Johnston. (According to Constantia Maxwell, Baker supervised the construction.^{xiv})

The following May the committee were still appealing for help. If they were to complete the objectives announced in February there will be wanting a very considerable sum. They trust therefore that the name of Nelson is not yet forgotten, and that those who have omitted to enrol

their names will now come forward. That notice was published regularly in the newspapers throughout the summer of 1809.



The Nelson Pillar, c 1830

The final total cost was £6,856.8s 3d, and, in the end, did include the statue of Nelson. This cost £630 and was the work of Thomas Kirk. Kirk had been born in Cork, the son of an Edinburgh father who had lived in Newry before settling in Cork. Kirk was trained in Dublin, and in 1807-8 was still in his twenties. Nelson was one of his first commissions. His fee was £300, while the

Portland stone needed cost £243. 18s 7d.

The Pillar itself was built of black limestone faced with white Wicklow granite, and must have looked very different from the grubby dark pillar that we remember.

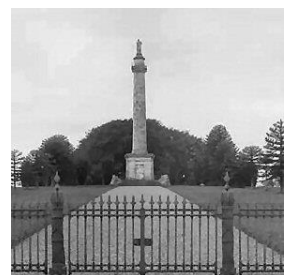
The full list of subscribers makes interesting reading; the Earl of Caledon gave £100, the Earl of Castlestewart £50, and George Canning, Foreign Secretary from 1807 to 1809 gave £22.15s.0d. Dublin Corporation gave £200, Trinity £100, and the three Guinnesses . Arthur, Benjamin and William together managed £25. At least two prominent Catholic merchants . the committee members Randall McDonnell and Denis Thomas O'Brien . contributed, and probably several others judging from their names.

Oddly missing from the list is Castlereagh . surely the most prominent Irish aristocrat politician of the time. He had been Chief Secretary from 1798 to 1801, and even more relevant, he was Secretary of State for War in 1805 . and therefore Nelson's political boss at the time of Trafalgar. It was Castlereagh, in fact, who gave Nelson his sailing orders personally in London before the Trafalgar campaign. He was again Secretary of State for War when the committee was appealing urgently for subscriptions in 1807.

The Earl of Caledon, when he gave his generous £100, was not to know that he too, like Nelson, would end up on top of a Doric column, sculpted by the same Thomas Kirk, and a century later, would be blown off it by misguided zealots.

For the ceremony on February 15 1808 the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Richmond, in General's uniform, accompanied by the Duchess, in deep mourning for the dead hero, followed a procession from Dublin Castle which included Horse Yeomanry and Foot Yeomanry, sailors, Officers of the Army and the Navy, subscribers, the committee, the Provost and Fellows of Trinity College, the Lord mayor, the Common Council, Sheriffs, Aldermen, and Peers according to their degrees.

The Duke laid the stone, the yeomanry fired three volleys, followed by a discharge of artillery, and the crowd gave three cheers. Less than two years later and the pillar was complete, and opened to the public on Trafalgar Day 1809. At its final meeting in June 1811 the committee handed the Pillar over to four Trustees . John Leland Maquay, Peter Digges La Touche, Randall McDonnell and Arthur Guinness. And it was all paid for . some 230 subscribers, plus income on money deposited, had raised a total of more than £7,000. A surplus



The Caledon Column, c1960.

of £281.18s 11d, was invested in government stocks to help pay for the pillar's upkeep, as did the admission fee extracted from those who wanted a closer look at Nelson and an unparalleled view of the city^{xv}.

And there it stood until half past one on the morning of Tuesday March 8th 1966, when a string of explosives placed around the inside blew Nelson and the top half of the pillar down into O'Connell Street. It was the last of many attempts to remove him.

At the time of its construction opposition to and criticism of the monument was almost entirely non-political . related to the location of the pillar and its effect on traffic, and to its aesthetic quality, not to the merits, political or moral, of the man on top. The one adverse political comment cited by historians appeared in the *Irish Magazine* of September 1809 on the occasion of the placing of Nelson's statue on top of the pillar. It remarked that the event excited no notice and was marked with indifference on the part of the Irish public, which had little interest in the triumphs of a Nelson or a Wellesley.

The writer commented that these might extend English dominion and trade, and perpetuate English glory, but Æ an Irish mind had no substantial reasons for thinking ð that our prosperity or our independence will be more attended to

The piece ended on a note of high rhetoric:

¶We have changed our gentry for soldiers, and our independence has been wrested from us, not by the arms of France, but by the gold of England. The statue of Nelson records the glory of a mistress and the transformation of our senate into a discount office.

The *Irish Magazine* was the publication of Watty Cox, a one-time supporter of the United Irishmen, an eccentric and a scourge of Dublin Castle, though he eventually accepted a government pension on condition he left the country.

Generally the pillar was welcomed, both as an adornment to the city, and as an appropriate memorial to a great hero. Reporting the stone laying in February 1808 the *Freeman's Journal* noted the pomp of a great public spectacle, and said there were few who did not experience the throb of nationality when they saw the constituted authorities of their country, and the most respectable citizens of the capital, emulate each other in the demonstration of respect and affection to the memory of a real hero.

But there were some who did not like it, or at least did not like it where it was. One of the most savage criticisms of it came in the 1818 *History of Dublin* by Warburton, Whitelaw and Walsh.

¶It is of most ponderous proportion which is not relieved by the least decoration. Its vastly unsightly pedestal is nothing better than a quarry of cut stone, and the clumsy shaft is divested of either base or what can properly be called a capital. Yet with all this baldness and deformity it might have had a good effect when viewed at a distance, or placed somewhere else; but it not only obtrudes its blemishes on every passenger, but actually spoils and blocks up our finest street, and literally darkens the other two streets opposite, which though spacious enough, look like lanes.

The writers go on to comment that the original objections to its site had now become Æ still stronger since the building of the new post office near to it, for by contrast it in great measure destroys the effect of one of the largest and finest porticos in Europe.

One must presume that Francis Johnston, the architect of the post office and also the builder of the pillar did not share this view. Messrs W.W. and W. were harsh critics; in the same

book they described the Wellington monument . not then built, but approved and exhibited as a model -as an absurdity and a deformity, heavy, bald and frigid.

But others liked the pillar, and many commented on how it enhanced the street, helping fill the broad empty space stretching from the river to Rutland Square (now Parnell Square.) In the years since, opinions have been divided on the architectural merits of the pillar. Yeats said it was not beautiful object, and that it divided the street, spoiling the vista. Maurice Craig, on the other hand, thought it both beautiful and well-placed.

Prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Puckler-Muskau, who visited Dublin in 1828, found the pillar to be ~~without taste~~ as indeed he found the statue of William the Third at College Green. He did not like the Castle, with its ~~miserable state apartments~~ nor the monument at Kingston harbour to mark the visit of George IV, while the Wellington obelisk was ~~ill-proportioned~~

Thackeray was more easily pleased, and admired the broad and handsome Sackville Street with Nelson on his pillar. ~~In front of Carlisle Bridge,~~he wrote ~~and not in the least crowded~~ though in the midst of Sackville Street, stands Nelson upon a stone pillar. The Post Office is on his right hand (only it is cut off).~~q~~

Thackeray's viewpoint on Carlisle Bridge would have given him a decent perspective on the pillar, but my own memory of it is dominated by the large and rather brutal blockhouse on which it stood. In a crowded O'Connell Street that was all you saw, and it did not have too much merit. The heavy base also blocked off the view from either Henry Street or North Earl Street. This photo dating from the 1930s shows just how massive the pillar was in relation to the street in general and to the GPO in particular.

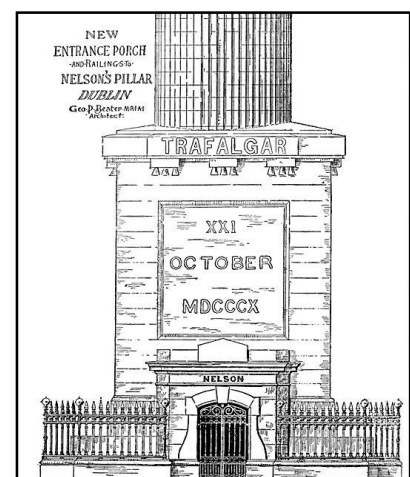
My own guess is that Wilkins may have designed the pillar without ever visiting Dublin, for its size and presentation seem to me to demand a much more open and perhaps elevated site. Wilkins used almost exactly the same design for a memorial column to Nelson erected in Great Yarmouth in 1815, only this has a statue of Britannia on top, and is about 10 feet taller than the Dublin work.

It is possible that the competition for the design was held before a decision had been taken on location of the monument. At least one design submitted shows an obelisk on a rocky foreshore with a Martello Tower on the cliff behind.^{xvi}

In the course of the 19th century, as Dublin expanded in all directions, Nelson found himself at the very centre of the city. While the city changed dramatically, the monument remained largely unchanged. Some minor alterations were made early on . the ornamental railings around the base, seen in early prints, disappeared, as did the catafalque on the side over the name Nelson. Thus exposed, the steps at the base became a favourite resting place for what Thackeray called ~~loungers~~

The one major alteration was made in 1894, when the original sub-ground level entrance was replaced by one at ground level, and a new, heavy, porch was added with the name Nelson over it, adding to the formidable impact of the plinth. The railings around the base were reinstated.

From the start the opponents of the siting of the pillar had argued that it would obstruct traffic. Maps of the time suggest that the concern was not the



effect on traffic along Sackville Street, but on the then much busier route from west to east, that is along Henry Street from the heart of the city and down North Earl Street and Talbot Street towards the Custom House and the docks. The pillar, was, of course, slap in the middle of the intersection of this route with Sackville Street. As the century progressed, traffic became heavier and heavier, and demands that the pillar be moved, or removed, began to be heard. A plan for the future development of Dublin exhibited at the exhibition of 1853 proposed this, and there were suggestions that it be relocated in one of the city's squares.

This was discussed by the Corporation in 1876, but came to nothing because of the legal status of the pillar; it was vested in the trustees and would require an act of parliament to move it. The Corporation had no powers to touch it. Six years later, in 1882, the Moore St Market and North Dublin City Improvement Act actually authorised the dismantling of the pillar and its re-erection further along Sackville Street, towards the northern end, close to where Parnell now stands.

This was to be done by the Moore Street Market Company, set up under the Act, within a strict timetable laid down in the Act, which meant its re-erection had to begin within one month of its dismantling, and had to be completed within two years . on pain of a hefty recurring fine. Once done, to the satisfaction of the Board of Works Engineer and of the Trustees . which still included a La Touche . the company would take over all responsibility for the pillar.

It never happened, apparently because it would have cost too much, certainly much more than the funds held by the Trustees. So the authority to move the pillar lapsed, and it stayed where it was. The motivation behind the campaign to move the pillar seems to have been non-political and directly related to traffic problems. The sponsors of the Bill included prominent Protestant firms such as Findlaters, and indeed Arthur Guinness . the then head of which firm had sat on the original committee in 1805, and was one of the first Trustees. Their common interest was as owners and operators of drays hauling heavy loads across Dublin. The fact that the pillar formed a massive block to traffic trying to cross from Henry Street into North Earl Street and vice versa was the nub of the problem.

Less than a decade later the Pillar was again before the Westminster Parliament, this time in the form of a Private Bill of 1891 promoted by prominent tradesmen in Sackville Street, and entitled simply the Nelson's Pillar (Dublin) Bill. Once again traffic was cited as the reason for moving the pillar, and once again it was envisaged that it would be dismantled and re-erected. Some political flavour was given to the debate on the Second Reading in the Commons by the fact that all opposition to it came from northern Unionists.

But the argument was still largely non-political. Opposing the second reading Mr McCartney, Antrim South, said the proponents of the Bill had to prove three things:

- That the pillar was a serious obstacle to traffic
- That its removal would benefit traffic
- And that the proposal to move it had the general assent of the citizens of Dublin.

It seems they were able to do those three things, for the Bill passed its second reading, but before it could go to committee it was withdrawn, partly because several petitions against it had come from Dublin interests, partly because the Trustees had declared themselves against it, and probably also because the question of who was going to pay for the work was still unresolved.

So it stayed where it was. It was part of Dublin, and the life of Dubliners. Joyce took his wandering Bloom up it, and there are half a dozen references in *Ulysses* to Horatio (one-handed) Nelson, or the one-handed adulterer (possibly to distinguish him from other two-handed monumental adulterers nearby.) He even finds his way into *Finnegans Wake* with at least two decipherable mentions . one to the pillary of the Nilsens and another to Nelson and his trifulgurous pillary Louis MacNeice, in his poem *Dublin*, has Nelson on his Pillar, watching his world collapse.

Dublin Opinion loved Nelson, and found him a great collaborator in puncturing Dublin pomposity.

The Pillar survived the widespread destruction of Sackville Street in 1916, and a fresh assault during the Civil War in 1922-23. One of the many ironies surrounding Nelson and his Dublin perch is that his monument in Great Yarmouth . designed by Wilkins and almost identical to the Dublin monument apart from the statue on top - was in almost as much danger of demolition in Easter Week 1916 as was the Dublin pillar. On the night of April 24/25, 1916, that is Easter Monday to Tuesday, Great Yarmouth was bombarded by the German High Sea Fleet.



Yarmouth was a naval base and an important target for the Germans; at the same time Lowestoft was also shelled, and other east coast centres were bombed by Zeppelins in a prelude to Jutland, but the timing of the bombardment was almost certainly deliberate, to coincide with the Easter Rising, of which, of course, the Germans had prior knowledge.

Photographs of Sackville Street after the Easter Rising show the Pillar remarkably unscathed between the ruined shell of the Post Office on one side, and the wreckage of the Imperial Hotel and Clerys on the other. At one point in Easter week consideration was given to demolishing it with artillery fire. On Tuesday morning Pearse had ordered the occupation of the Imperial and Clerys on the other side of the street as a means of strengthening his garrison's position. Communication across the street was greatly aided by the pillar, which provided cover against fire along the street for those making the dash back and forward.

A senior British officer asked the artillery battery at Trinity if they could demolish the pillar with shell-fire. He was told they could, but only the column itself, not the base which was providing the cover, and that demolishing the column would simply fill the street with rubble and provide even more cover. So he decided against it.^{xvii}

Once the Irish Free State was set up it was inevitable that there would be demands for the removal of Nelson from the centre of the newly independent capital, and not just to ease the traffic. It began almost immediately in 1923 with a resolution from the Dublin Citizens Association calling for its removal. In 1925 the Dublin Civic Survey said the site was quite unsuitable, and there should be legislation to permit its removal. The Dublin Metropolitan Police Association also wanted it moved. In 1926 the Citizens Association again called on the Corporation to move the Pillar.

In 1931 Dublin Corporation voted in favour of removing the pillar. By now the argument was political and personal. It was a shame that the English hero, and adulterer, held pride of place

in the capital city while there was still no statue to Tone, or Brian Boru or Patrick Sarsfield. But the problem remained that no one had the power to remove the pillar, and no one was offering to pay the cost. In the post-war period, after the Free State became the Republic, the argument became more heated.

In 1955 the Corporation formally requested the permission of the Trustees to remove the statue of Nelson from the pillar and put it in the national museum. (It wanted Wolfe Tone instead.) The Trustees replied that they could not do that. The terms of their trusteeship imposed on them the duty to embellish and uphold the monument in perpetuation of the object for which it was subscribed and erected by the citizens of Dublin.

In 1956 Dublin City Council responded that it was intolerable that such a public monument should remain in private hands, and demanded that there should be legislation to enable the City Council to take possession of Nelson Pillar with power to remove or demolish the said Pillar in part or in whole as they see fit.

The Pillar and its fate were also debated briefly at Stormont. In November 1955, Morris May asked the Prime Minister, Brookeborough, if he was aware of the desire of the citizens of the Republic that the monument known as Nelson's Pillar should be demolished, and was he prepared to offer to take the monument and have it re-erected in some suitable public place in the city of Belfast.

He got a dusty reply; Brian Maginness, answering for the PM, said the name of Viscount Nelson occupied a unique position in British history, as a supreme naval strategist. But he went on in a manner which will not surprise those familiar with the limited vision of unionism in those days.

Curiously enough, he is also one of the few great British leaders whose origins were not in the North of Ireland. Whilst the Government appreciates the laudable sentiments which inspired the question, the Hon Member should understand that there are many great British leaders whose connections with Northern Ireland are much more close than Lord Nelson's and whom particularly Ulster might well desire to honour by the erection of a suitable tribute to their greatness.

Mr May remarked that if space could not be found for Nelson in Belfast he could assure the Minister space could be found for him in the town of Newtownards. Mr Stewart (East Tyrone) suggested that if the statue did come north, the Minister should ensure that it was ground down and used for road metal for the counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh.^{xviii}

The idea of removing Nelson but retaining the Pillar was gaining support, but the inter-party Government of John A Costello did not share Fianna Fáil's zeal. Costello himself said that on historical and artistic grounds the Pillar should be left alone. Thomas Bodkin, former Director of the National Gallery, defended both the architectural merits of the Pillar and Nelson himself as a man of extraordinary gallantry. Desmond Ryan, sometime secretary to Pearse, argued that Nelson had acquired squatter's rights to his place in O'Connell Street, and praised his unique contribution to the symmetry of the street.

Ryan also raised what he called the almost insoluble problem (of finding) any suitable tenant for the pillar, if Nelson was removed. At one time or another, the nominees had included, as well as Tone, St Patrick, the Virgin Mary, St Laurence O'Toole, Patrick Pearse, and even John F Kennedy.

Ironically, the problems caused by the pillar to the traffic in O'Connell Street, seemed to have disappeared by the middle of the 20th century. The question of cost, however, remained, and probably helped deter Fianna Fail when it returned to office in 1957, and when the question was raised at Cabinet level in 1959. Even when a specific proposal was made in cabinet in 1964 to replace the Pillar with a statue of Pearse to mark the 50th anniversary of 1916, the normally decisive Sean Lemass did no more than agree to look at the question.

In reality Nelson and his Pillar had probably been in much greater danger for many years from illegal activists than from Corporation or Government. King William III's statue in College Green had been blown up in 1929, George II, of St Stephen's Green, went the same way in 1937, Field Marshall Lord Gough in 1957 and Lord Carlisle in 1958. Lord Eglinton, another Viceroy, disappeared from Stephen's Green. Queen Victoria had suffered the indignity of being hoisted from her perch outside Leinster House in 1948, but at least that was done legally, and there were arguments for it. The statue was generally regarded as ugly and ill-sited, it was right in front of the national legislature, and Ireland had just become a Republic and left the British Commonwealth. Wellington's obelisk in the Phoenix Park proved massive enough to defy the attempts of the dynamiters.

Nelson, on the other hand was extremely vulnerable. He was bang in the middle of the city, everyone who paid his admission had access to the inner staircase, and, as events proved, it was not too difficult to blow up.

Reactions to his sudden departure in March 1966 were varied. There was, as always, the



sneaking regard for a bit of bravado and for any violent action in the name of Irish freedom. Indignation at what was called an act of monumental vandalism was defused by the prompt composing and recording of a witty ditty entitled *Up went Nelson and the Pillar too* and thoughts turned to the two-week celebration of the golden Jubilee of the Easter Rising. Dublin Opinion, as ever, found a funny side.

But there was genuine regret that the city's most prominent landmark had gone, and that the principal street of the capital was not what it was. Looking back on its destruction Owen Sheehy-Skeffington told the Senate that he had felt a sense of loss, not because of Nelson but because the pillar symbolised for many Dubliners the centre of the city. It had a certain rugged, elegant, grace about it. The man who destroyed the pillar made Dublin look more like Birmingham and less like an ancient city on the River Liffey because the presence of the pillar gave Dublin an internationally known appearance.

The 1969 Nelson Pillar Act terminated the Nelson Pillar Trust, and vested the site where the pillar had stood in Dublin Corporation. It awarded the Trustees £21,170 in compensation for the destruction of the pillar, and additional compensation for loss of earnings from admission fees.

That was not quite the end of the story. In 1987 a body called the Metropolitan Streets Commission proposed that the pillar be rebuilt, but found no takers. The following year architects and sculptors came together to mount the Pillar Project, and invited proposals for what might be done to replace the pillar. This resulted in 17 imaginative submissions, some very strange indeed.

The Pillar Project was a theoretical frolic for architects and sculptors related to the City's celebration of its own millennium, and not a competition for real proposals.

That came later, when the Corporation launched an international competition in 1997 for proposals for the site to mark another millennium. The winner was Ian Ritchie's Spire of Dublin, which now graces O'Connell Street. 120 metres high it is three times as tall as Nelson's pillar, but extremely slim, even at street level. Giles Worsley, *Daily Telegraph* architectural guru, has described it as a feat of astonishing technical competence, a truly 21st century monument which does not proclaim the authority of a king or a conqueror, nor memorialise some terrible act of savagery. Instead it is an affirmation of the essential optimism of the human spirit. The Spire captures the spirit of the new Ireland, healing the wounds of earlier nationalisms while promising the revival of what should be a great European boulevard.^{xix}

It is hard to find any such enthusiasm for The Spike in Dublin. I am beginning to warm to it a little, especially since the improvements to the centre of O'Connell Street. Viewed from O'Connell Bridge, or from down Henry Street or Talbot Street it is very striking indeed, quite beautiful. At its base the contrast with the Pillar could not be more remarkable. The Spike at street level is unobtrusive to the point almost of invisibility.

But, Dubliners ask, what does it stand for? One told me recently that the Spike meant nothing. It was beautiful and well designed, but it had nothing to do with Dublin or Ireland. It was not, he felt, a monument. The Millennium was a global artificial concept. The Pillar, on the other hand, was all about Ireland's history, about great events like Trafalgar, about Ireland's relationship with England, about the golden period of Dublin architecture. The Spike was grand, but it was about nothing.

The destruction of the Pillar left Ireland with, as far as was generally known, no public memorial to Nelson. But there was one other; in Castletownshend, in county Cork, a stone memorial arch stood on a hill top in the Domain Woods, reputedly built by seamen in 1805 when news first reached them of Trafalgar and the death of Nelson. In 1966 it was badly damaged by persons unknown, but was partially rebuilt, only to be finally destroyed in 1976.^{xx}



Nelson Arch at Castletownshend, 1896.

While researching this paper over the summer I found another Nelson memorial, this time in Dervock in north Antrim. In the Allen and



Nelson and Blackwood before Trafalgar

Adair Hall, attached to St Coleman's Church of Ireland, there is a rather splendid memorial stained glass window, showing the scene prior to the start of the battle at Trafalgar, with Nelson talking to Hardy and Captain Blackwood on the poop deck. In an adjoining panel, Captain Adair is talking to his uncle, Captain William Prowse.

The hall was built in 1936 by the Allen family of Lisconnan, near Dervock who had married into the Adair family of Ballymena in the 19th century, to honour the memory

of two of their forebears . General Sir William Adair, and Rear Admiral Thomas Benjamin Stratton Adair. But the only Adair in the Trafalgar window is Captain Charles William Adair, who died on the *Victory*.

I can add a final postscript to the Adair story. In 1847 the officers of the *Victory*, then the flagship of the Admiral at Portsmouth, held a farewell dinner for their commander, Rear Admiral John Pasco. Pasco had been the Signal Lieutenant on the *Victory* at Trafalgar, and it was at his suggestion that Nelson altered his signal from *England confides that every man etc* to *England expects* on the grounds that this would be much quicker, as *confides* was not in the nautical signal vocabulary and would therefore have to be spelled out letter by letter.

At the dinner in 1847, the officers presented to Pasco a memento from the *Victory* . a pistol which had been found years after the battle between beams in the marine officers' cabin. It had been restored, its rotted wooden stock replaced with a new one made from oak from the *Victory*. Pasco immediately recognised it and informed the company that it was Captain Adair's pistol.^{xxi}

Pasco is also immortalised in the Dervock window, supervising the hoisting of the signal.

ⁱ Quoted in *Nelson's Pillar* by Patrick Henchy in *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol 10, 1948.

ⁱⁱ The September 1809 issue of the *Irish Magazine* records that the statue had been placed on the column.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Moutray was the young wife of Captain Moutray, Dockyard Commissioner at Antigua when Nelson, aged 25, served there in 1784. After her husband's death she retired to Ireland with her daughter. News of Nelson's death was sent to her in a letter from Collingwood who had also fallen for her charms in the West Indies.

^{iv} Pocock, Tom *Horatio Nelson* Pimlico, London 1994. p 72.

^v MacDonagh, Oliver. *O'Connell* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1991. p102.

^{vi} See Andrew Lambert, *Nelson, Britannia's God of War*, Faber, London, 2004. pps xv and xviii.

^{vii} *Ibid* p 180.

^{viii} See *Robert Emmett: A Life* by Patrick Geoghegan. Dublin, 2004. p 101.

^{ix} *Trafalgar the men, the battle, and the storm* by Tim Clayton and Phil Craig.. BCA 2004. pp 41,42.

^x See *Nelson's Surgeon* by L W B Brockliss, John Cardwell and Michael Moss. OUP. 2005.

^{xi} *Freeman's Journal* 10/2/1805.

^{xii} *Local Government in Nineteenth Century Ireland* by Virginia Crossman . Ulster Society of Irish Historical Studies. Belfast 1994.

^{xiii} *A Description of the Pillar, with a list of subscribers*.. Pamphlet published in 1846 by the Committee. In National Library of Ireland.

^{xiv} *Dublin under the Georges* by Constantia Maxwell. Lambay Books. Dublin. P 303.

^{xv} *Nelson's Pillar; A Description of the Pillar, with a list of subscribers*. Dublin 1846.

^{xvi} See *Drawings from the Irish Architectural Archive* by D J Griffin and S Lincoln. Dublin 1993. p 51.

^{xvii} See *The Easter Rising* by Michael Foy and Brian Barton. Sutton Publishing. Shroud. 1999. p 175.

^{xviii} NI Parliament, House of Commons Debates vol XXXIX, cols 2896, 2897. 9th Nov 1955.

^{xix} See *Daily Telegraph*, 16th August, 2003.

^{xx} Conversation with Mrs Ann Cochrane-Townshend of Castletownshend., September 2005.

^{xxi} From *The Nautical Standard*, October 9, 1847.

For published accounts of the Pillar see:

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The Politics of the Street Monument by Paula Murphy, in *Irish Arts Review*, 1994.

And Nelson on his Pillar, by Wm Bolger and Bernard Share, Dublin 1976.

Irish Public Sculpture; A History by Judith Hill Four Courts Press. Dublin 1994.
