



'With no National Trust and a national heritage service so underfunded and understaffed as to be risible, the country has to look to its tenants to recognise, interpret and conserve what has been left to us.' Left: Hamwood in Co Meath, owned by Charles and Anne Hamilton. Inset: the livingroom of Dolly's Cottage, Co Sligo. Photographs from *Living in Ireland*

Restoring the ghosts

IT REALLY does happen: someone can say – "I know who lives here, let's drop in for a cup of tea" – and lo! The unsuspecting host and hostess – in this case Siabhra Durcan and her husband Blaise Drummond – are being photographed for the glossiest of glossy books, in which their work on a ruined 18th-century cottage is pictured in the company of Castletown, Mount Juliet and Leixlip Castle.

No, insists author Barbara Stoeltie: "They did not know we were coming; we were on our way to Temple House when our driver, Helen O'Neill, Siabhra's aunt, suggested we stop off on the way. So they didn't have time even to sweep the floor."

As Barbara and her husband, photographer René Stoeltie, sat drinking tea and eating Siabhra's home-baked bread they decided that this – unfinished and still rough-hewn – was a dream house, ideal for inclusion in their book *Living in Ireland*.

So the camera got to work, and the Stoelties were just a little late in arriving at Temple House.

Living in Ireland is not a title which does justice to the Stoeltie's subject. This publication from Taschen of Cologne deserves the more robust French version: *Vivre en Ireland*. These pages offer evidence of a sturdy Irish Renaissance, a reclaiming of style along with the title deeds which is much more significant in cultural terms than perhaps the Stoelties can identify or express.

Their book seems to assert that something is going on in Ireland which is not merely the maintenance of an architectural or decorative tradition. With no National Trust and a national heritage service so underfunded and understaffed as to be risible, Ireland has to look to its tenants to recognise, interpret and conserve what has been left to us in the context of houses, castles and cottages. The vernacular is not something readily welcomed in this country –

A renaissance is under way – dedicated people are restoring and saving our heritage. This reclamation of buildings, from the Big House to vernacular cottages, is celebrated in a new book. It is, writes Mary Leland, a quiet miracle of survival

yet it is celebrated in this book, where cabins and farmhouses are linked to the great estates as indigenous statements deserving as much protection and admiration (and, if it were not too late, emulation) as the homes of the wealthy landowners. Or even the not-so-wealthy landowners, who are finding their own ways of making these precious old houses pay for their existence, and among whom are so many willing to camp for months, even years, in a single room while floors are re-laid and walls re-plastered and roofs re-slatted with authentic materials.

What may be defining this context is the willingness for so many to seek out expert advice, to use the growing body of skilled conservation craftspeople and artists and architects and engineers in their devotion to authenticity and even, in some cases, to learn how to do things properly themselves. Not for these, the illusionist skills of the antique dealer whose home is inlaid with both the real and the facsimile – yet here too the principle is adaptation: what cannot be bought can be copied.

The Stoelties work to a strong headline of "romance" but their approach is dictated not merely by their knowledge of the still unsated German hunger for whatever might remain of the Celtic twilight, but by what Barbara calls their own lasting love affair with Ireland (they keep a flat in one of Dublin's Georgian streets).

René and Barbara Stoeltie are experts on the possibilities of dreams. Their work on interior design grew from careers begun as artists and art-gallery proprietors and since 1984 they have been contributing to such influential magazines as *Vogue*, *The World of Interiors*, *House and Garden* and *House Beautiful* as well as producing *Irish Georgian* for Thames and Hudson.

For Taschen, a glamorous publishing house begun as a comic-book supplier in Cologne in 1981 by the 18-year-old Benedikt Taschen, they have produced mouthwatering collections on the country houses of several countries or regions, each one radiant with stylistic detail. Taschen itself, whose widely distributed list is impressively eclectic has long ago expanded from its small beginnings (Taschen means pocket in German) to publications on artists, architects from Palladio to Sir Norman Foster and photographers, and to decorative and cultural studies of many countries or eras (although its publication *Dinner Party a la Perestrioka*, surprisingly, did not take). One of its most influential elements is Angelika Muthesides Taschen, editor of this Irish book and specialist in titles on design and contemporary art and the originator of the *Interiors and Country Houses* series to which *Living in Ireland* is a notable addition.

Larchill, Loughcrew, Hamwood and Celbridge Lodge are among the properties de-

scribed here; the castles include Leixlip, Ballinlough, Shankill and Glin, with chapters also on Prospect House and Susan Mosse's ornamental cottage at Kilfane and Westmeath County Council's triumph at Belvedere. Some entries insist on the anonymity of their proprietors, but the work of Charlie and Sally Clements at Killadoon, linked through its architect to Henrietta Street and Aras an Uachtaráin in Dublin, is a reminder of one of the imperatives of preservation: protection rather than enhancement.

John and Clare de Burgh at Oldtown couldn't do much when their house was burned down in 1955 but their move to the surviving stable block is a lesson in adaptability. Patrick Scott's farmhouse in Co Wicklow provides a display of 19th-century peasant furniture, originally forced on him by sheer poverty and now having almost museum status – oddly more appealing in its simplicity than the meticulously restored Dolly's Cottage in Co Sligo. And at Glenlohan Melanie and Desmond Sharp Bolster exhibit the strengths of renewal as an old family home softens its Quaker aesthetic with American flair.

Dadoes and dinner-plates are part of the picture presented by the Stoelties, whose decora-

tive details include valuable information on architects and cultural fashions as well as summaries of family history. There is nothing like enough of this – but then, it's not that kind of book.

Sunny, flower-dressed interiors occasionally give way to lustrous landscapes, as if the camera is escaping from the Sheratons and

stucco and period panelling to the misty fields which supported, for so long, so many of these properties. The mists, the aura, belie the truth that there can be no fairy tale in a country whose acres were divided by the Irish Land Commission, yet this book is a counterpoint to the historical background from which a crew of architectural Cassandras draw their ominous song. We may have suffered great disappointments in terms of our heritage; we may lack that layer of visionary wealth (although there are exceptions, such as Tony Ryan's restoration of Lyonshall) ready to invest in the afterlife of a mansion or estate or even a painting, yet the Stoelties make clear that there is, here and there in Ireland, a quiet miracle of survival which may yet endure.



● *Living in Ireland* by Barbara and René Stoeltie is published by Taschen (£17)