An ‘Italian palace’ in Co. Roscommon: the creation of Rockingham House, Boyle

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The Rockingham estate, centred on the town of Boyle in Co. Roscommon, was the property of the King (afterwards King-Harman, later Stafford-King-Harman) family for more than 300 years. The family’s first association with the area was in the early seventeenth century when Sir John King (d.1636), a Yorkshire man, obtained a joint lease of the abbey of Boyle in recompense for military services. This grant was confirmed during the reign of James I of England along with a number of lucrative political employments which made the family influential in the civil and military administration of Ireland. Sir John’s grandson, John (d.1676), was raised to the peerage of Ireland as Baron Kingston in 1660; this was his reward for ‘eminent services and steady loyalty in aiding the restoration’ of Charles II despite originally being an active Cromwellian. The Kings continued to grow in wealth and status during the eighteenth century, advancing in the Irish peerage and eventually acquiring the rank and title of Earl of Kingston in 1768. By the nineteenth century, the King family were among Ireland’s chief landowners with estates in the counties of Cork, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, and Tipperary. The lands held in Co. Roscommon had previously belonged to the Mac Dermot family whose medieval seat on The Rock (Castle Island) in Lough Key had been renowned for its patronage of scholarship and its hospitality. According to the writer known as Skeffington Gibbon (fl.1796-1829), Boyle town had many advantages: ‘being in the neighbourhood of the best turbaries and coal mines in this kingdom, and the verdant plains with which it is surrounded, make it one of the most beautiful places in the known world.’ Over the course of two centuries in this vicinity, the Kings constructed a number of great houses including King House, built in the town by Sir Henry King (c.1681-1740), and Kingston Hall, built on the Rockingham demesne by Sir Edward King (1726-1797), the 1st earl of Kingston. This article focuses on the construction of Rockingham House, the mansion commissioned by Sir Edward’s grandson, Robert Edward King (1773-1854), in the early 1800s. The architectural history of this house is complicated by the fact that the original structure was substantially altered in the 1820s, extensively rebuilt after a fire in 1865, and eventually demolished in 1971 following a second devastating conflagration in 1957. It is clear, though, that Rockingham House was intended to convey the social and political status of Robert Edward King – something that the extant Kingston Hall evidently did not express.

The conception of Rockingham House

Robert Edward was the second son of Robert King (1754-1799), 2nd earl of Kingston, and Caroline Fitzgerald (c.1753-1823) of Mount Offaly, Co. Kildare. He was educated at Eton College in England, had a distinguished career as a young army officer and held the office of Member of Parliament (MP) for Jamestown (Co. Leitrim) between 1796 and 1797. He had attained a degree of notoriety by 1798, however, when he was tried for the murder of a relative named Colonel Henry Gerald Fitzgerald. This major society scandal began in London when Fitzgerald eloped with Robert Edward’s sister Mary Elizabeth in the summer of 1797. She was soon discovered and sent back to Mitchelstown Castle in Co. Cork, then the primary country residence of the 2nd earl of Kingston. In order to redress the dishonour brought to the family, Robert Edward and Fitzgerald fought a pistol duel in London’s Hyde Park in October 1797 but there was no outcome. Two months later, however, it was discovered that Fitzgerald had followed Mary Elizabeth back to Ireland. Robert Edward and his father, the earl of Kingston, confronted him at his lodgings at Kilworth in Co. Cork where Kingston shot him dead, later claiming that he had acted in self-defence. Kingston’s trial for murder in the Irish House of Lords on 18 May 1798 was a widely-reported public spectacle but no evidence was brought against him by his peers and he was acquitted.

Robert Edward was also acquitted at the Cork assizes in April 1798 and the scandal does not appear to have impacted negatively on his public or private life. In 1799, he inherited the Rockingham estate and married his first cousin, Lady Frances Parsons (1775-1841) of Birr Castle, King’s County (Co. Offaly), the only daughter and heiress of the 1st earl of Rosse. Robert Edward and Frances had several children including five daughters, Jane, Caroline, Frances, Louisa and Eleanor, and two sons, Robert and Laurence. The marriages of some of these children would secure connections with prominent landed families in neighbouring counties. In the meantime, Robert Edward sat as an MP for Boyle from 1798 until 1800 when the Act of Union abolished the Irish parliament at College Green in Dublin. While he supported ‘the project of the Union’, it was vehemently opposed by many prominent peers including Robert Edward’s elder brother, ‘Big George’ King (1771-1839), the 3rd earl of Kingston. The Union came to pass nonetheless and throughout the nineteenth century (until 1921) Irish MPs were obliged to sit in parliament at Westminster in London. Those who had supported the legislation were rewarded with peerages and titles; Robert Edward, for instance, was created Baron Erris in 1800 and Viscount Lorton in 1806.

To articulate this newly-acquired status, Lorton (as Robert Edward was now generally known) employed John Nash (1752-1835) as the architect for his new house. Nash was the personal architect of the Prince Regent, afterwards George IV, and was responsible for...
a variety of prestigious projects including the remodeling of Buckingham Palace and the design of Regent’s Park, Regent Street and Carlton House Terrace in London. Among the numerous Irish buildings attributed to him or his architectural practice are the following country houses: Kilwroughter Castle, Co. Antrim; Lough Cutra Castle, Co. Galway; Gracefield Lodge, Co. Laois; Ballindoon, Co. Sligo; Shanbally Castle, Co. Tipperary; Killymoon Castle, Co. Tyrone. However, Rockingham House, located on a slightly elevated site above the shores of Lough Key, has come to be regarded as Nash’s greatest creation in Ireland.

Early nineteenth-century watercolour drawings (attributed to G.S. Repton) indicate that John Nash worked in partnership with the English landscape designer Humphrey Repton (1752-1818) to conceive at Rockingham a scheme that utilised the natural scenic beauty of the lakeside demesne to best effect. Inspiration was taken from the form of the classical Italian villa and the proposed house at Rockingham was a contemporary asymmetrical variation with an entrance in the short elevation. This allowed for a suite of reception rooms to run uninterrupted along the façade overlooking Lough Key. The most striking feature of Nash’s design for Rockingham House was a curved central bow, fronted by a semi-circular Ionic colonnade and crowned by a large dome, creating a rotunda within. It is not known if Lorton was guided by Nash in this choice of architectural style. Neo-classicism was very much in vogue in the early nineteenth century, owing to the influence of the Prince Regent, but Lorton would have also experienced its historical precedents. Surviving personal papers show that he and his family were very well-travelled and were particularly fond of Italy, the home of classical Roman architecture and its Renaissance revivals. Thus, the adoption at Rockingham of an Italianate scheme may well have been Lorton’s own preference.

While the preliminary scheme for Rockingham was drafted by early 1809, the foundation stone of the house was not laid until 4 June 1810. Lorton may have been keen to manage the cost of the project and probably had aspects of the initial scheme revised. Two bays either side of the domed centrepiece shown in the watercolour designs were certainly omitted from the completed structure while the entrance portico proposed for the eastern face of the building was realised on the western face. Design features initially retained by Lorton included the central domed section and the four-storey layout: ground floor, chamber floor or attic, upper and lower basements. There was also a mezzanine level within the domed section. The ‘sunken’ basement section resulted in the house having a series of alternating façades but no ‘back’ entrance or visible offices. Staff access to and from the basements was gained by two underground tunnels, one linked to the stable block, the other to the lake. These subways were apparently constructed by John Sutherland (1745-1826), a prominent landscape gardener and architect responsible for fashioning the Rockingham demesne and for erecting some of the bridges, follies and lodges still visible today.

**Building and decorating Rockingham House**

The building of Rockingham House was not without serious discord between Lorton and his architect and it seems that Nash was dismissed in 1811. A protracted dispute ensued as Lorton contested the bill of costs and refused to pay what he deemed a ‘most extraordinary and most exorbitant demand of £2,675 12s. 3d. for Nash’s own services. Lorton also insisted on penalising his architect for exceeding a budget of £20,000 which he claimed he had informed Nash ‘it was his intention to lay out upon an [sic] house’. Subsequently, Lorton employed a surveyor to determine if the amounts charged were commensurate with the value of the work done and materials used while Nash threatened ‘an appeal to the laws’ of his country. Ultimately, in 1813, Nash was forced to settle for a payment which only covered half of his original bill.

By this time, Lorton was borrowing large sums of money from relatives and friends to fund the completion of his new house and by 13 May 1815 had amassed personal principal debts of £6,147 9s. 2d. The Rockingham estate was already carrying a heavy financial burden of around £119,000 in debts, estate charges and legacies amassed by Lorton’s father and grandfather. Anthony Lawrence King-Harman has estimated that the estate, consisting of around 26,000 acres at this time, probably brought in an annual rent of about £10,400 but with outgoings and interest on the various charges amounting to £9,500, there was little to spare for the building of a new house. Still, Lorton persevered, entrusting the execution of Nash’s plans to his clerk of works, John Lynn (d.1864), of Sligo.

Lorton lived primarily at the family’s townhouse on Henrietta Street in Dublin while building works were ongoing at Rockingham but Lynn kept him well-informed, making regular reports which detailed the progress of works as well as the problems encountered with workers, suppliers and payments. The evidence shows that personnel and materials were sourced both locally and further afield: stone was quarried nearby at Cavetown or in the Curleiu mountains, brick-makers came from the Isle of Wight, locksmiths from Wolverhampton, ironworks, wall-paper and fabric from Dublin. Large cargo was typically brought from Dublin via the Royal Canal to Mullingar (Co. Westmeath) or Drumsna (Co. Leitrim) and onto Rockingham by carriage. On other occasions, goods were sent on to Sligo and from there back to Boyle. There was also some recycling of materials, such as lead, flooring, doors and chimney pieces, from Kingston Hall. Rockingham was evidently a hive of employment for craftsmen, tradesmen and labourers, although agricultural duties on the estate took precedence for the latter. Lynn complained in May 1815: ‘as yet there is no labourer to be set at the quarry or anything else but I should think that they must have done planting potatoes soon’.

By 9 August 1816, the total cost of works at Rockingham stood at £51,616 18s. 8d. The building of the house alone had cost £44,693 3s. 6d. while painting and papering amounted to £1,139 9s. 6d. and...
of the library, for instance, was over 19 feet while the drawing room measured 18 feet from floor to ceiling. It seems that Joseph Peacock (1783-1837), a founder-member of the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, was commissioned to decorate some of these spaces. Peacock was a subject painter acclaimed for his large detailed scenes and one of his most famous, ‘The Patron, or Festival of St Kevin at the Seven Churches, Glendalough’, was exhibited in London in 1817 and 1818. Surviving financial records reveal that Peacock worked at Rockingham between 1816 and 1817, ‘enriching’ the dome and gallery with paintings, panels, medallions, reliefs, mouldings in imitation of carvings and stucco work, gold leaf decorations and other ornamentations. The total cost of Peacock’s work was £631 7s. 9d. Among the specific subjects painted by Peacock was a suite of emblematic figures which represented ‘the Twelve Hours, the Signs of the Zodiac and the Four Seasons in colours’. He also painted oil copies of two of the well-known Raphael ‘cartoons’ which represented scenes from the lives of Saints Peter and Paul. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these ‘cartoons’ were regarded as the epitome of Italian Renaissance painting and printed reproductions were in circulation across the European continent. They had been originally executed by the Italian painter Raphael (1483-1520) as designs for tapestries commissioned by Pope Leo X for the Vatican Palace in Rome. While the resultant tapestries are still occasionally displayed beneath Michelangelo’s famous ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, seven of the ten original designs or ‘cartoons’ can be found in London. They were purchased by the ill-fated Charles I of England and remained in the Royal Collection until 1865 when they were loaned by Queen Victoria to the South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum – where they are held to this day.

The commissioning of copies of the Raphael cartoons and the procurement of Peacock’s artistic services are indicative not only of Lorton’s extravagance but also of his social and cultural cognizance, which extended beyond the visual arts. One of the single most extravagant acquisitions for Rockingham House was a musical instrument supplied by the London organ-building firm Flight and Robson. The Flight family are credited with introducing the barrel organ to churches and along with Joseph Robson (c.1771-1841) garnered a reputation for ingenuity in the construction of mechanical organs. They were, for instance, the inventors of the famous Apollonicon, a giant automatic music-playing machine, comprising 5 keyboards, 1,900 pipes and 45 organ stops, exhibited in London in 1817. Although the exact nature or location of the organ at Rockingham House is unknown, a letter from Lynn to Lorton in May 1815 reveals that it required a ‘recess’ that was ‘9 feet 11 inches high and 5 feet 8 inches broad...4 feet deep, it will be 2 feet into the room.’ The instrument itself cost £501 12s. 9d. but further sums were spent on a packing case (£23 16s. 6d.), transport by carriage from Dublin (£15) and freight duty (£15 19s. 6d.). In addition, Benjamin Flight (c.1767-1847) travelled to Rockingham to install the organ for a fee of £82 11s. This meant that the total cost of the instrument amounted to a staggering £638 19s. 9d.

To put this figure in perspective, the annual family income of an average landless labourer, who characterised the majority of the Irish population at this time, is estimated to have been less than £20 in cash and kind.

Remarkably, Lorton made significant alterations to Rockingham House in the early 1820s, removing its most distinctive feature, the central dome, and adding an extra floor of bedrooms. The rationale for these modifications is not entirely clear but it may have been an attempt to compete with Mitchelstown Castle, a large and extravagant neo-Gothic mansion commissioned by Lorton’s brother, the 3rd earl of Kingston, in 1823. The brothers had clashed on many occasions over the years, especially over the inheritance of an estate in Co. Sligo belonging to their great-uncle, which was claimed by Kingston but appears to have been set aside for his younger brother. After a lengthy, bitter and costly legal battle, the courts eventually sided with Lorton – by which time Kingston was displaying signs of the mental illness that consigned him to the lunatic asylum where he died in 1839.

‘A very perfect specimen of an Italian palace’

While the alterations at Rockingham House may have been a manifestation of intense sibling rivalry, it is possible that Lorton’s various civic and military appointments also had a bearing. He was elected in 1822 as an Irish representative peer for life in the House of Lords and was appointed as lord lieutenant and custos rotulorum (keeper of the rolls) of the county of Roscommon as well as colonel of the Roscommon militia, rising to the rank of general in 1830. These offices served to affirm Lorton’s position as the dominant landlord in Co. Roscommon, something he was keen to display by entertaining in princely fashion at Rockingham. Given the amount of time spent building, rebuilding and decorating the house, however, and Lorton’s long absences abroad, accounts of such entertainments feature only sporadically in the historical record. A remarkable description of a ‘boating and dinner party’ on Lough Key appeared in the Freeman’s Journal newspaper in the summer of 1832. Trinity Island, famous for its antiquities, was the focal point of this ‘fête champêtre’ with tents and marqueses ‘erected in magnificient style’. A ‘fête champêtre’ or ‘rural festival’ was a type of elegant outdoor party made fashionable by the French court at Versailles in the eighteenth century.)

As early as 10 a.m. on the morning of Thursday 2 August 1832, the roads and avenues leading to ‘the splendid mansion of his lordship were thronged with the vehicles of the guests’. Among the guests were various members of Lorton’s family, the Bishop of Elphin (whose son was married to Lorton’s daughter Frances) as well as Admiral Rowley, Major Freer and the officers of the 10th depot, Major Roe, the Captains Robertson and Lorton’s agent Morgan Crofton of Abbey View House in Boyle. At 11.30 a.m. Lorton appeared at the helm of The Shannon, a six-oared-boat fitted up with awnings, from where he directed his guests and their families into different boats. The company was first sent in the direction of Castle Island, where the bands of the Roscommon staff and 10th depot were stationed; on Lorton’s approach, they struck up ‘Rule Britannia’. After circling Castle Island, the party proceeded to the Doon shore and ‘remained sailing about the copse for a considerable length of time, enjoying the beautiful landscape of the country and scenery of the lake’. They landed at 4.30 p.m. at Drummonds and sat down to dinner, which was prepared in the most sumptuous style. Around 8 p.m., guests repaired to their assigned boats and returned to Castle Island, where the bands played while tea was taken in the old castle. On Longford Hill, ‘a beautiful part of the Rockingham demesne’, around 60 ‘ladies and gentlemen from the neighbourhood of Strokestown, Elphin, and Boyle, sat down to a cold dinner prepared for the occasion, after which dancing commenced’. Several sets of quadrilles were gone through and dancing was merely kept up until the return of the boats from Trinity Island.

Given Lorton’s connections, it is not surprising to find prominent military men being entertained at Rockingham and the social columns of regional and national newspapers charted visitations by an assortment of noblemen and landed gentlemen. But there were also casual country house visitors to contend with. Improved transport networks facilitated greater mobility, the transfer of ideas and information, and the development of rural ‘tourism’. Among the various ‘tourists’ who travelled around Ireland in the pre-Famine period was the famous English poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the author of ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’ or The Daffodils as it is more commonly known, after staying with the literary Edgeworth family in Co. Longford in September 1829, he paid a visit to Boyle where he viewed the ruins of Boyle Abbey and was shown around ‘Lord Lorton’s house and grounds upon Loch Key’ by Lorton’s younger brother General Sir Henry King (d.1839).
As the nineteenth century progressed, the travel itineraries of sightseers like Wordsworth were increasingly informed by published guidebooks, directories, almanacs and gazetteers. Today, these types of publications provide invaluable historical sketches of Boyle, which was a thriving corporate, market and post town with a population of around 3,400 in 1840. Country houses and their surrounding demesnes were invariably described in these sources too. Samuel Leigh’s *New pocket road-book of Ireland* (1835), for instance, remarked that the house at Rockingham was ‘built solely of limestone, of which a highly polished specimen is seen on the great staircase. It was obtained from a quarry on his lordship’s estate.’ The use of polished limestone or ‘marble’ at Rockingham House was also noted in Bernard Burke’s *A visitation of the seats and arms of the noblemen and gentlemen of Great Britain and Ireland* (1855): ‘Rockingham is a stately palace of pure white marble, erected in the midst of a magnificent domain [sic], which has within its circuit, every variety of picturesque scenery.’ While providing one of the most important nineteenth-century descriptions of Rockingham House and demesne, Burke’s account also offers an appraisal of the Italianate scheme: The mansion is altogether suited for the accommodation of a princely establishment, and for the entertainment of numerous companies of guests. The rooms are both magnificently and commodiously furnished. The architecture is Italian, and considering the date of its building, it is well that it is so; for a large mansion in the Elizabethan or castellated style, built in the beginning of the present century, would, in all probability, have been in the worst possible taste; whereas Rockingham is a very perfect specimen of an Italian palace, adapted to the circumstances of our climate, and conformed to our ideas of comfort.

The period after Lorton’s death in 1854 was marked by uncertainty and hostility within the King family and as members of each generation wrangled over inheritances and entitlements, debts and charges mounted on their estates. Financial difficulties at Rockingham were compounded by a fire in the house in April 1863 that almost completely destroyed the interior and necessitated an internal rebuild to restore it to its former glory. Moreover, since the Great Famine, the estate was bringing in less than half the potential rental income and estate management was inconsistent. Some of the most effective management occurred after 1871, however, when the Rockingham estate was inherited by Lorton’s younger son Laurence Harman King-Harman (1816-1875). He had assumed the King-Harman surname in 1838 as a condition of inheriting the Harman estates in Co. Longford from his grandmother. He worked hard to consolidate the debt at Rockingham and put the estate on a more business-like footing to increase revenue. This work was carried on by his son, Colonel Edward King-Harman (1838-1888), a prominent politician who succeeded in bringing relative stability to the estate. But Edward’s death created another family crisis: his will stipulated that, in order to inherit the estate, his only daughter Frances (1862-1916) had to marry a man approved by her mother. However, Frances’ choice of husband, Thomas Stafford (1857-1935), the local Roman Catholic doctor, was entirely unacceptable. Consequently, it was not legally possible for the Staffords to occupy Rockingham House until their eldest son Edward (1891-1914) came of age and assumed the King-Harman surname. Debts rapidly accumulated and, in 1895, Rockingham was eventually placed in the Court of Chancery which managed the property until it was inherited by Edward Stafford-King-Harman in 1912.

In the meantime, Rockingham House was leased to various wealthy tenants. It came to international prominence in 1903 when it was chosen as the country seat of Lord Lieutenant Dudley, the official representative of King Edward VII in Ireland. The use of the house as a vice-regal residence and the accommodation of a genuine ‘princely establishment’ finally allowed Lorton’s ‘Italian palace’ in Co. Roscommon to realise its full potential.
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REFERENCES

Where appropriate, punctuation and spellings have been modernised in the transcription of primary source quotations.

Abbreviations used:

DEHLG Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
NLI National Library of Ireland
PRONI Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

ENDNOTES

1 The authoritative source for the long and complex family history are: Robert Douglas King-Harman, The Kings, earls of Kingston: an account of the family and their estates in Ireland between the reigns of the two Queens Elizabeths (printed for private circulation, Cambridge, 1959) and Anthony Lawrence King-Harman, The Kings of King House (Bedford, 1996).


3 Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle for the year 1799, vol. 69, p. 350.

4 Freemans Journal, 6 Aug. 1768.

5 For details see 'Estate Record: King (Kingston/Lorton)' in the Landed Estates Database, Moore Institute, NUI Galway (http://www.landedestates.ie/LandedEstates.jsp?estate-show.jsp?id=238).

6 For a useful account of the history of Molygur, including maps and genealogies of the MacDermot family, see Cyril Mattimore, North Roscommon—its people and past (Boyle, 1992), passim. See also Walter J.P. Curley, Vanishing Kingdoms: the Irish chiefs and their families (Dublin, 2004), pp 160-165.

7 The recollections of Sheffington Gibbon from 1796 to the present year, 1829; being an epitome of the lives and characters of the nobility and gentry of Roscommon... (Dublin, 1829), p.135

8 John Clapson and Triona Mullaney-Dignam, Rockingham: memories of a vanished mansion (Boyle, 2007), pp 9-11.

9 The house was known variously as 'Rockingham,' 'Rockingham Castle' and 'Rockingham House'; the latter is used here for consistency.


13 See Bill Power, White knights, dark ears: the rise and fall of an Anglo-Irish dynasty (Cork, 2000) for a comprehensive history of the Mitchelstown branch of the family.


15 For some contemporary details of the spectacle see Hibernian Journal, 18 May 1798, and Walter's Hibernian Magazine, or, Compendium of entertaining knowledge for May 1798, pp 383-84. See also Randal MacDonnell, The lost houses of Ireland (London, 2002), pp 183-90; 185; 226.

16 See a non-contemporary copy of a protest signed by members of the Irish House of Lords (PRONI King-Harman Papers, D/4168/A/8/1).

17 Burke, A general and heraldic dictionary of the peerage, vol. 2, p. 103; A key to both houses of parliament (London, 1832), p. 198.


20 Watercolours by G.S. Repton of proposed north and south fronts of Rockingham House, c.1809 (in private possession). Reproductions can be found in Clapson and Mullaney-Dignam, Rockingham, p.14.

21 See: Journals recording Lord Lorton’s continental travels, mainly in Italy, 1825-1826 and 1836 (PRONI, King-Harman Papers, D/4168/C/6/1-3); Letters from Lord and Lady Lorton to their son Laurence in Naples, Rome and Florence, 1839-1840 (PRONI, King-Harman Papers, D/4168/D/2/1-9).

22 Clapson and Mullaney-Dignam, Rockingham, pp 14-16; DEHLG, An introduction to the architectural heritage of County Roscommon, pp 50-52.


24 Financial accounts, quotations and receipts, 1809-1821 (NLI, MS 8810/8. Part 2)

25 Nash’s statement of account with Lord Lorton, 18 Jan 1813 (NLI, MS 8810/7. Part 3)

26 Ruled account book, 1810-1815 (NLI, MS 3776).


29 Correspondence re: on-going work, payments for tradesmen and supplies (NLI, MS 8810/7. Parts 1-4); Financial accounts, quotations and receipts (NLI, MS 8810/8. Parts 1-5).


31 Ruled account book, 1810-1816 (NLI, MS 3775).

32 Lynn, Rockingham, to Lorton, Stretton Hall, 28 May 1815 (NLI, MS 8810/7. Part 4).

33 The name in the Rockingham accounts was given simply as ‘Mr Peacock’ or ‘J. Peacock’ but it is most likely that the man in question was Joseph Peacock.


36 Mark Evans and Clare Browne (eds), Raphael: Cartoons and tapestries for the Sixtine Chapel (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2010).