

## Book Review by Ron Jones, Liverpool History Society

### Some Liverpool Streets and Buildings – Sir Charles Reilly

Just over 100 years ago Sir Charles Reilly, Professor of Architecture at Liverpool University, wrote *Some Liverpool Streets and Buildings in 1921*, based on a popular series of articles he wrote for the *Liverpool Daily Post & Mercury*.

It is quite hard to find nowadays but happily the Merseyside Civic Society (which doesn't have a library) has donated a copy to us. It is a fascinating little book, just 84 pages long and without illustrations. Professor Reilly was the doyen of Liverpool architects and was knighted for his contribution to architecture. He had very firm views about his profession and did not hold back in his criticism of Liverpool buildings or their architects. For example, he lets rip over the 'Three Graces': "...one of the best, or worst examples in the world of excessive individualism in architecture." In particular, he takes aim at the Royal Liver Building: "For the architect...it is a mass of incongruities..." and "...it rears into the sky two quite unnecessary towers, which symbolise nothing but the power of advertisement." How times have changed!

He describes Bold Street as "...the pleasantest street in Liverpool". Church Street was "...in essence picturesque and romantic", and its former Athenaeum building was "...one of the treasures of Liverpool." Not any longer Sir Charles! He was not impressed by Lord Street generally or the Victoria Monument ("...a poorly-placed and poorly-conceived whole"). Castle Street fared much better – "...certainly our noblest [street]." Reilly hated Water Street's Tower Buildings...even more than the Royal Liver Building. He contrasted it with the Bank of West Africa Building opposite. It "...has all the good points the Tower Building lacks."

In Dale Street he points out the good – "There is no more original, and at the same time satisfying, doorway in England than the main entrance [of the former Liverpool & London & Globe Insurance building at No.1 Dale Street]. And the bad? – Sir James Picton's The Temple: "Its mixture of coarse Roman and Low German detail do not suggest anything very pleasant." Of Sir James' design skills, Reilly was of the opinion that he "...appears...to have been a better chairman of a building committee than architect in his own right."

Of the University's buildings, he is no fan of Sir Alfred Waterhouse or the hard-tiled, lavatorial interior of his Victoria Building at the top of Brownlow Hill. Perhaps by way of showing him how it should be done, Sir Charles designed the highly regarded hybrid classical-style Guild of Students building diagonally opposite.

Courtesy of the Luftwaffe, town planners and property developers, many of the buildings and even entire streets Reilly describes are no longer with us so we shall have to content ourselves with his very entertaining, and very opinionated, perambulation around some of the streets and buildings of Liverpool 100 years ago.

Ron Jones  
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Photos:

1) Sir Charles Reilly (1874-1948) by Thomas Alfred West ©University of Liverpool, Victoria Gallery & Museum.

2) Gone forever. Not only is John Foster's wonderful Custom House no longer with us but South Castle Street in its entirety has disappeared. Image courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.