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# “ERIN”: AN EARLY VICTORIAN STONEWARE STATUE PERSONIFYING IRELAND - IN TRIBUTE TO POET THOMAS MOORE

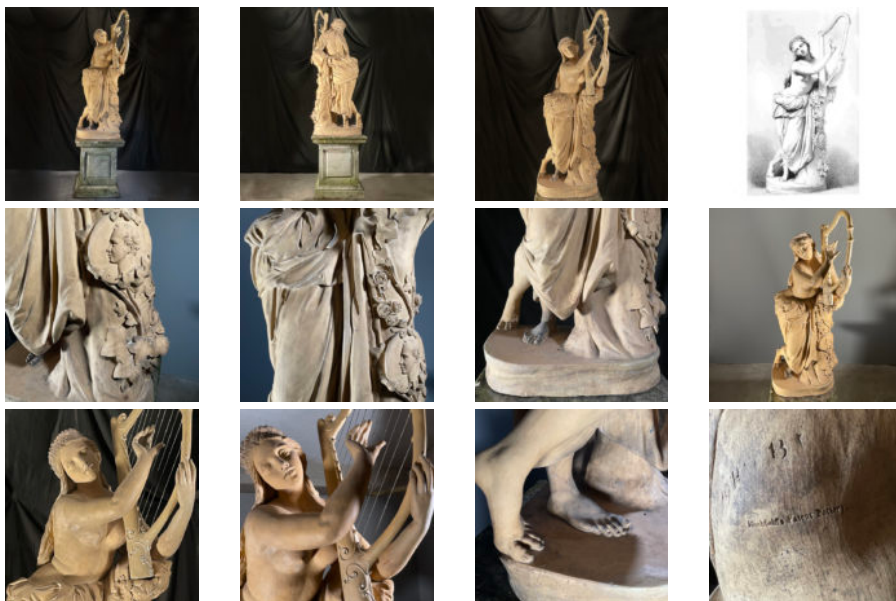
by John Bell working for J.M Blashfield, c.1852, stamped “Blashfield’s Patent Pottery”

the lifesize female figure with a shamrock diadem, scantily dressed - her dress fallen to her hips and her long hair falling to her waist; her weight borne on her right leg, she leans against an ivy-covered stump on which her harp is supported, her right arm reaches-up to pluck the strings, a portrait medallion of the poet hangs from the stump

DIMENSIONS: 182cm (71<sup>3⁄4</sup>”) High, 60cm (23<sup>1⁄2</sup>”) Wide, 42cm (16<sup>1⁄2</sup>”) Deep, height including harp

PRICE: POA

STOCK CODE: 47183



## HISTORY

This figure is a rare model - only three are known to have survived; it is likely that only three may ever have been created. With the exception of the harp (which is separately made and

slots into place in Erin's arms) the figure was fired in one piece – testament to J.M. Blashfield's peerless firing abilities.

The statue was illustrated in Blashfield's catalogue, first published in 1857 during a fruitful period of output having engaged John Bell as sculptor after seeing his work exhibited at The Great Exhibition in 1851.

The success of the Hyde Park show sparked successive national exhibitions in the ensuing decades, one of the first was "The Great Industrial Exhibition" staged in Dublin in 1853. Blashfield saw an opportunity to showcase his works and with Bell conceived "Erin". She was, with her harp and shamrock head-dress, to appeal to Irish tastes in not only personifying Ireland, but as a tribute to Thomas Moore the great Irish lyricist and poet who had died in 1852. It is Moore's profile portrait that can be found as a medallion incorporated in the sculpture. Erin is, we can imagine, playing a Thomas Moore lament on her harp. Ultimately though they were too pushed for time – the figure was not ready in time for the Dublin exhibition and was not shipped.

Bell was then in a rich vein of form and produced spectacular works including "Una and the Lion" and the huge "Australia" (both ultimately destroyed in the catastrophic fire at The Crystal Palace in 1936).

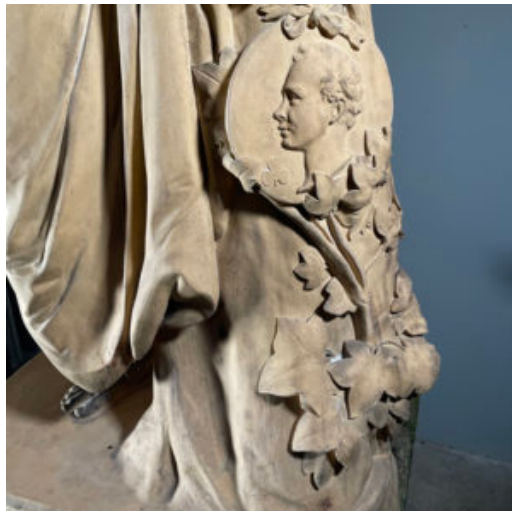


Bell's statue of Erin featured in Successive Blashfield catalogues

Perhaps best known of his works from this period is “Triton”: the stoneware merman figure with tentacle legs that forms the centre fountain outside the Radcliffe Infirmary – an Oxford landmark. Based on Bernini’s Triton in Rome (there with a conch shell) Bell’s figure is perched on an outcrop of coral and, straining to hold aloft a large scallop into which he blows, forces jets of water into the air. (The fate of the original Blashfield Triton figure is currently attracting criticism – see LASSCO News).



John Bell’s “Triton” figure – this a remake of Blashfield’s original. Photo(c) A.Reeve



The profile portrait medallion of Thomas Moore with a small Shamrock – incorporated into the Erin sculpture

**The People involved in inspiring and creating Erin:**

**Thomas Moore 1779-1852 ... *the Poet to whom the figure is a tribute:***

Born above his parents' grocery shop in Dublin, Thomas Moore could be considered the national bard of Ireland, much as Burns is of Scotland.

Educated in Latin, Greek, French and Italian from an early age, Moore was published at the age of 14. Amongst the first cohort of Catholic students to attend Trinity College, he moved in a politically energised milieu, roused by recent events in France; avoiding involvement in Irish uprisings straddling the turn of the century (his friend Robert Emmet was executed for high treason in 1803), he later professed regret at the failure of a revolutionary French expedition of 1796 to land troops into Ireland.



Thomas Moore memorialised outside  
Trinity College Dublin. Photo (c): G.Blane

Continuing his education at the Middle Temple in London, Moore's 1800 translation of Anacrión, dedicated to the Prince of Wales, gained him a certain renown and an introduction to the future King. With a lyrical flair and taste for the bawdy he found favour in aristocratic and artistic circles and was often addressed by the moniker *Anacreon*. Moore became embedded into the Whig establishment, travelling with Lord John Russell and penning political squibs. He became firm friends with Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, and was a key player in the scandal surrounding the disposal of Byron's papers on his death.

Moore's Irish Melodies, published in ten volumes between 1808 and 1834, found an international audience and were admired by both Byron and Sir Walter Scott. His lyrics, set largely to tunes scored in Edward Bunting's *A General Collection of Ancient Irish Music* (1797), exhibit a sentimental longing for, and lamentation of the passing of an earlier, unencumbered Irish experience. Some critics and academics, certainly late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish Nationalists, viewed Moore's output as somewhat blithe, his accommodation of English tastes acquiescent. A more recent revival in his reputation foregrounds the lyrical acuity and dexterity with which he wove themes of dispossession and subjugation through the approachable and vital melodies of vernacular song. For more on the life of Thomas Moore [click here](#).

The relief portrait profile incorporated in the Erin sculpture is a strong likeness to contemporary images of Thomas Moore. *Erin, Oh Erin* is one of his more famous works; it expresses hope for the future of Ireland and a new flowering after dormancy as represented by the lily,

*'The lily lies sleeping through winter's cold hour,  
Till Spring's light touch her fetters unbind,'*

Memorial statues to Thomas Moore can be found in Dublin and in Central Park New York, Australia and elsewhere.

### **John Marriot Blashfield 1811-82 ... whose workshop fired the statue of Erin.**

Blashfield was an entrepreneurial businessman whose eventful and inventive career included the manufacture of wonderful stoneware garden ornament such as this statue. Blashfield had started out in the manufacture of terracotta, scagliola and cement mosaic pavements. He operated from a sizeable yard on the Isle of Dogs – an extant business he had bought-out in the 1840's.

He was long associated with, and influenced by, Owen Jones. He continued to diversify the factory's output and, being familiar with the last years of Eleanor Coade's business up-river, looked to prevail on the growing market for stoneware garden ornament. By the time of the



Great Exhibition, he had a showroom in Praed St in Paddington. Having seen Mark Blanchard's wares at the Exhibition he was further encouraged. It led to the commission for Blashfields to create the set of colossal statues by John Bell for the Crystal Palace when it was repositioned on Sydenham Hill in 1854 (later destroyed in the fire).

Blashfield had got his fingers burned in the 1840's having taken on the development of properties at Kensington Palace Gardens: his property company went bust. But the terracotta works prospered. He published a number of catalogues, illustrating his wares, through the 1850's and was employing dozens of men. Erin is illustrated.

In 1859 Blashfield made a big move - he took the entire manufacturing business from the Isle of Dogs, north to Stamford in Lincolnshire in order to be proximate to the best clays that he needed for his kilns. He had bought Grant's Iron-works that had a wharf on the River Welland.



The statue bears the Blashfield stamp:  
"Blashfield's Patent Pottery"

Whilst the relocation seems to have paid-off, in the 1860's Blashfield over-stretched himself with attempts to expand his markets into the United States. The costs of shipping made the operation unprofitable and continual breakages were delaying payments - notably for architectural embellishments for new Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The Stamford Terracotta Company - as it was then known - collapsed in 1874. Blashfield declared bankruptcy in 1878.

**John Bell 1812-95 ... the Sculptor who made the statue for Blashfield to produce in**

**stoneware:**

Bell grew up in Suffolk and went on to attend the Royal Academy Schools in 1829 and within three years was awarded a Silver Medal from the Society of Arts for a bust. In 1839 he competed for the Nelson memorial, but his design was rejected and he afterwards presented it to Greenwich Hospital.

In 1844 Bell sent his statues of "The Archer" and "Jane Shore" to Westminster Hall. The former, which had already been shown at the Royal Academy in 1837, was later described by the Literary Gazette as "a performance so striking and masterly that it at once fixes the attention, not only by the novelty of the subject, but by the ability of the treatment".

His "Babes in the Wood," of 1842 was a great success and caused the Art Union to say of the sculptor: "His mind is deeply imbued with poetic feeling, he is one of the few artists who attempt higher efforts than mere busts."

The Crimea monument of the Brigade of Guards at the junction of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place is his. The work soon came to be known somewhat irreverently as "The Quoit Player," and was criticised by some for the mournful repose of the figures.

In 1845 he had designed "the deerhound hall table," for the Coalbrookdale Company. Rupert Gunnis, author of the "Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851" was not a fan: The bronze comprised four life-sized deer-hounds, cast in iron and supporting a table decorated with fruit and game. This "canine monstrosity" (as Gunnis puts it), illustrated in the Art Union of 1845, was however a great success and was shown at the Paris Exhibition; it ended up at Osbourne House. His statues of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort in bronze and ormolu, appeared at the Great Exhibition of 1851 as did his monumental work in iron: "The Eagle Slayer" now at the Museum of Childhood in London.

As detailed above Bell was employed by Blashfield from 1852 in order to produce his work in terracotta.

In 1858 Bell modelled heads of various animals which were cast in iron and used as part of the railings for the Metropolitan Cattle Market at Pentonville. Five years later he made a fountain for Kew Gardens with the figure of a child raising a shell to its lips. His treatise on "The



Origination of the Principle of Entasis as Applied to the Obelisk," an obsession of his, eventually led to the raising of his obelisk in Bermuda, to the memory of Sir William Reid.

Bell went on to carve one of the four groups at the base of the Albert Memorial - a bison personifies Canada, a First Nation male stands for the USA. And "Peace," of 1876 for the main hall of the Foreign Office, was ultimately presented to the London Guildhall in 1888.

He died on 14 March, 1895, at 15, Douro Place, Kensington, where he had lived for more than forty years.

*Footnote:*

*Bell's Triton fountain was demounted and restored a few years ago. Understandably it was decided to make a reproduction of the Blashfield figure for re-instatement at the Radcliffe Infirmary, and restore the original. Bizarrely, the original has been relocated to a perspex box embedded in a wall in the grounds of some Oxford Student Accommodation block the other side of the railway. We join The Oxford Sausage in their cry to "Free Triton" and display him more suitably!*