

The Mystery of Erin

Belleek's Figure of Erin is perhaps its most famous figure, but the lady is enigmatic. The figure has been made in just about all periods of Belleek's production and is generally taken to represent either Belleek Pottery itself or Ireland and Irish production. The name "Erin wakening from her slumbers", which is often given to the figure, is highly symbolic... but of what exactly? Does she represent Belleek Pottery when they first became able to produce fine Parian ware or is she allegorical of Hibernia (Ireland), or Irish artistic and industrial Production which had been at a very low level before the mid-1850's and with Belleek Pottery (amongst others) and the efforts of several famous Irish Patriots and Businessmen, truly did begin to waken and show remarkable results?

A second mystery is who actually designed and modelled the piece. She is a Belleek Pottery creation, clearly designed to be produced *only* by Belleek Pottery: no other manufacturer has ever made the piece... but who was the designer? There are two main candidates for this: firstly Robert Williams Armstrong, as Belleek's creative driving force and secondly William Boyton Kirk, who worked mainly for William Henry Kerr at Worcester and was a very well known Irish sculptor and a prominent figure modeller in the 1850's

Erin is a magnificent figure. Many Belleek designs are attributed to Armstrong and his name appears on most of the designs that Belleek registered. However, this does not mean that he actually designed all those pieces himself – he *did* design some of them and for the others acted to represent the Pottery (D. McBirney and Co.). The Figure of Erin was *not* amongst Belleek's registered designs, so we get no clues from this. His wife, Annie Nairn was designer of some pieces that the Pottery produced and, of the workers introduced from W.H. Goss in the early 1860's, Gallimore certainly designed many other Belleek pieces, including figures. Gallimore, indeed had been responsible for many of the Parian figure models that W.H. Goss produced.



So why is Kirk also a candidate? The fact that Erin is most commonly attributed to Kirk by most authors of reference works on Belleek, is of significance. Why, though, should Kirk have been the designer of Erin? Most of the available facts are against it: he never worked for Belleek Pottery, no other Belleek figures are attributed to him, and even more tellingly, by the time Belleek Pottery was producing any Parian at all, in the early 1860's, Kirk had entirely retired from sculpting and had entered the Church, becoming a Church of England minister in the Manchester area (Ashton Under Lyne). As far as we know, Kirk, although tremendously talented and having produced many wonderful figural designs for Kerr and Binns at Worcester (including the famous Shakespeare Service in 1853), never sculpted another piece after 1860.

The enigmatic Erin: what does she represent and who created her? These are the questions, which we may never have definitive answers for. I would however like to present one theory, which although it hasn't been entirely substantiated, is a good story... and it would be nice if it *were* wholly correct – more research is needed to establish this! The story does not contain the usual Celtic mysticism or "Irish" make-believe which are usually associated with stories about Belleek; rather it is based on historical fact and describes the best efforts of a number of highly patriotic and determined Irishmen: so we have...

***** *The Story of Erin, a celebration of Irish achievement.* *****

Let's go back to 1850 and an ambitious and talented young sculptor, William Boyton Kirk has just arrived in Worcester, leaving his native Dublin, having recently received recognition for his work by the Royal Hibernian Academy and then having won a prestigious prize for sculpture in London. Kirk was in Worcester at the invitation of William Henry Kerr, also a Dubliner, who was then a director of the Chamberlain's Worcester Porcelain Company.

Kerr wanted Kirk to work with his good friend Richard Binns (who also came from Dublin) to produce new sculptures and models for the Chamberlain's company to put into production. Unfortunately, the work didn't go at all well and the aim of exhibiting new figural items for Chamberlains in the 1851 London Great Exhibition was not achieved. Kirk made the models, but the Chamberlains company had no history of figure modelling and more importantly, was in financial trouble with the business in serious decline. The trial pieces Kirk modelled failed to fire properly and Kerr agreed that it wasn't feasible to exhibit anything other than "standard" Chamberlains pieces at the Exhibition. The exhibition was a disaster for Chamberlains and a dispirited Walter Chamberlain agreed to hand over full control of the ailing company to Kerr shortly



W.H. Kerr

afterwards. In 1852, Kerr made his friend Richard Binns the company's new art director and brought yet another Irish friend of his, Robert Williams Armstrong, who then had his architect's practice in London, to act as his architect and civil engineer in rebuilding and modernising the old (and fire damaged) Chamberlains porcelain works on Severn Street, Worcester.

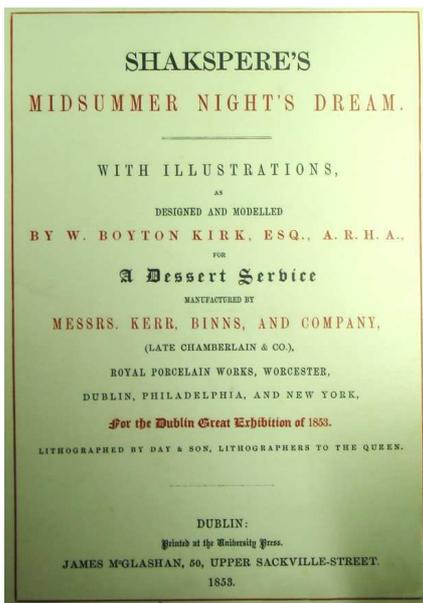


William Dargan

Another notable Irishman, William Dargan, who was Ireland's "Railway King" having been the designer and Chief Engineer on most of the railways constructed by the 1850's in Ireland, was highly discontented by the lamentable state of Ireland's industry. In 1852, only a few short years after the famines, Ireland had virtually no domestic industry. It was then rightly considered to be a "land of raw materials" with little or no production of its own of any manufactured products. Dargan set out to put this right and announced that Dublin would hold an exhibition of Irish Industry that would rival the Great Exhibition in London. What's more, Dargan himself would provide all the finance for it, if he had to!

The Dublin Exhibition was to be held in 1853, and Dargan contacted all his business associates who might be able to help him achieve his ambition to show off Irish production - in fact, he was sadly aware that Ireland would have very little of its own production to show at all if he didn't work fast! Amongst the people he contacted were William Henry Kerr, David McBirney (a Dublin merchant and Co-director of some of his railway companies) and Robert Kane (who had in 1845 completed a survey of Ireland's natural resources). Kerr offered to produce a new porcelain service for the 1853 Exhibition, which would use Irish materials.

Given his complete failure to do exactly this for the 1851 London Exhibition, Kerr was clearly a worried man - he had a lot of work to do in a very short time. Undaunted though, Kerr turned to his friends Binns and Kirk. Kirk had already produced sculptures of Titania and Bottom, from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Binns suggested that this might form the subject for the new service. Worcester had already produced a "Shakespeare" service years before but this would be different - Kerr, Binns and Kirk enthusiastically agreed to make a *new* Shakespeare Service and further agreed that this would be an Irish achievement, modern in design but using Irish Celtic motifs, designed and made by Irishmen, using Irish materials - it would also of course perfectly match the theme of Dargan's Exhibition.



To be thoroughly modern and fashionable, the latest material *had* to be used - this was of course the new Parian. Parian had taken all the greatest honours given to porcelain makers at the 1851 exhibition. There was one major problem however: Parian had never been made before at Worcester and the trials that Kerr and Kirk had made previously had all been failures! So, this was an apparently impossible task: to make a completely new service of modern design, using Parian and made of Irish materials to satisfy Dargan's request - this when no suitable Irish materials were known and they had no knowledge of the processes or recipes for successful Parian!



(left) Description of the Shakespeare Service and (above) a piece from the service

Undaunted, Kerr consulted Robert Kane's 1845 maps of Irish natural resources and found that there were deposits of Feldspar that Kane thought was suitable for producing Parian in Killinney, only a matter of ten miles south of Dublin. He obtained this material and made some trial pieces: the results were not good, as the feldspar, when used in a bone china mix produced pieces that were not stable and were liable to crack. In despair, Kerr resorted to using Swedish materials, which Minton, Copeland and Wedgwood (amongst others) were at that time using successfully in making their own versions of Parian.

The year 1852 was drawing to a close - time was really running out - when Kerr was surprised to receive a package from an acquaintance of his in Dublin, a certain Charles Alexander Cameron, a noted Dublin chemist. It was a sample of feldspar that Cameron said he had obtained while visiting his good friend John Caldwell Bloomfield on Bloomfield's estate up in county Fermanagh. Kerr had the sample made up into a saucer, which miraculously fired perfectly! He sent the saucer back to Cameron in Dublin asking if any more of the material were available. Well, we don't know if Kerr got his Belleek feldspar in time to use it for the Shakespeare service or if he "cheated" and used the "conventional" Swedish material or if he persevered with the inferior Killinney material. Henry Sandon and other authors on Worcester say that Kerr and Binns DID use Belleek materials but other authors are more equivocal, saying that the poor Killinney feldspar was used... anyway, it was a race against time and the service was not fully complete for the start of the exhibition. The W.H. Kerr and Co. Shakespeare Service, however, was received with great acclaim as a magnificent Irish achievement although Kerr and Binns may have had to cross their fingers somewhat when receiving the fulsome praise that was heaped onto them!

Dargan was delighted, pieces from the service were sent for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to view privately, but Dargan and Kerr were then disappointed as the Queen did not buy the service - if she had, it would have conferred the kind of recognition to Irish industry that Dargan craved. It appeared that the Queen felt she could not be seen to give special praise to a product apparently entirely from Ireland as the strong English porcelain makers lobby would have been mortally offended! This is somewhat ironic, as the service was actually made in Worcester - a fact conveniently glossed over in the effusive reports of the Exhibition.

So Dargan and Kerr basically "got away with it" at the 1853 Exhibition! There was, however, the little matter of the Fermanagh feldspar... this really *was* an excellent Irish material, as was shown by it soon being in great demand for use by the English porcelain and Parian makers who avidly imported it. There was still no Irish production, though. It was left to Bloomfield, who was now making money exporting the feldspar from his estate to England, to try to drum up interest in using the material in Ireland. He approached Dargan, to see if he could come up with the necessary finance to build a pottery. Dargan, at this time (1855) had expended a great deal of his personal fortune on this type of venture and was exhausted following his efforts in the 1853 Exhibition, so rather than getting involved himself, he thought of his friend and railway co-director, David McBirney. McBirney was introduced to Kerr, who was by then already using the Belleek feldspar very successfully for his Worcester Parian. Kerr was naturally highly enthusiastic and McBirney visited him in Worcester, where Kerr and Armstrong, Kerr's architect, managed to persuade him (by their great enthusiasm and practical knowledge) that the venture was feasible, and more importantly that this was an excellent way for Ireland to move into the modern world of manufactured products. As an inducement, Kerr offered the services of his best sculptor, William Boyton Kirk and also offered practical help with the recipes and moulds for Parian production.

The agreement was made. The foundation stone of Belleek Pottery was laid in 1857 (or thereabouts!). The building was designed by Armstrong, the finance was provided by McBirney, the land and workforce and a lot of other financial and moral support was provided by Caldwell Bloomfield. William Henry Kerr had relinquished his architect, Armstrong, to be the Architect and Art Director of the new venture, and also gave many other forms of practical and business support and advice. Meanwhile, Kerr's best sculptor, Kirk, had made the surprising announcement that he intended to give up his successful sculpting career, at the height of his fame, to enter the Church, which he now considered to be his calling.



On this page: details from "Erin": the "Belleek Pot", Celtic Cross and Irish Harp

So, what about Erin, where does she figure in this long involved story?

...well, I would like to think that in one last gesture, even though by then, Belleek Pottery had not managed to make any Parian at all, having only just started the first production of earthenware, Kerr persuaded Kirk to complete a final commission to celebrate the hoped-for truly *Irish* success. This was Erin. She represented the completion of a great project that had involved years of effort and sacrifice by a group of patriotic Irishmen. The efforts of Dargan, Kane, Bloomfield, McBirney, Armstrong and Kirk, all of them Irish, all talented in their different ways, all striving to show everyone that Ireland could take its place on the World stage as an important manufacturing nation, resulted in the creation of Erin. She is indeed symbolic of Ireland: Hibernia waking from her slumbers. Belleek Pottery was the vehicle that allowed this to happen, Erin was made by Belleek, but Erin was much more than just the achievement of Belleek Pottery.

Kirk's last commission was his most significant – in a very real sense, he didn't make Erin for Belleek or for Kerr and Binns in Worcester, but for *Ireland*. In this light, Belleek Pottery itself can be seen as the channel that allowed Ireland to show the World what it could do. Of course, Bloomfield, McBirney and Armstrong would have liked the Pottery at Belleek to be a commercially successful business venture but this was emphatically NOT the main reason for the creation of Belleek Pottery. McBirney lost his money in the venture, Armstrong died a broken man trying to keep the pottery going after McBirney died in 1883; Bloomfield lost most of his money, his estate later becoming derelict; Dargan used most of his considerable fortune supporting other altruistic Irish ventures and died in 1869 after an unfortunate riding accident; Kerr went bankrupt after trying to fund the development of the Queen's Institute in Dublin and died in 1879 at an early age. Only Kirk prospered in his new role as minister of the Church in Ashton Under Lyne although he never returned to his sculpture. Finally the Pottery in 1884 fell into the hands of Belleek businessmen who no longer held the Pottery's original high ideals as paramount- they actually wanted to make money! So, did this story end in failure? The answer to this is "emphatically not" because Belleek Pottery DID fulfil the dreams of the group of idealistic men who planned it. Erin is a fitting symbol of this: she represents the success of a patriotic Irish dream rather than the commercial or artistic success of a small Irish company.

- Chris Marvell

