

## CONTROVERSIAL CROCKERY

Category: scholarly paper

**Abstract:** Several pieces of industrially produced ceramics made ca. 1880 are secreted throughout the display cases of the National Museum of Ireland's Decorative Arts collection. These are mainly intended for domestic use, serving as teapots and plates, cups and saucers, though their surface decoration is incongruent with their functional design. The paper explores the use of what could be considered controversial imagery and text by referencing the pieces of ceramics telling a highly politicized story in the domestic settings of urban and rural homes in Ireland. It offers a brief consideration of colonial and post-colonial themes in the broader cultural or political context in Ireland, to help frame the discussion of *Controversial Crockery* in the Decorative Arts Collection of the National Museum of Ireland and beyond. The paper also examines other ceramic objects within Irish collections that tell multifaceted stories on the technical and aesthetic levels but also on levels relating to politics, history, folklore and material culture.

**Keywords:** Bally Brit pot, *Erin Go Bragh* tea set, Fonthill vase, Home Rule teapot, National Museum of Ireland, Carlow County Museum

### Introduction

People are drawn to ceramics for many different reasons. Some are devoted to the manufacturing process, be it a steady traditional method or a highly industrialized one. Many adore the fluid nature of 'White Gold', the fine porcelains used all over the world, or the layers of intricacy of celadon glaze, or lustre or majolica. Others are driven by methods that turn clay into ceramics, by fire and fuel, in reduced or oxidized atmospheres, with wood and gas, soda and lead. Some stand strictly by the traditional pot or the abstract ceramic form. Collections of ceramics all over the world can fuel the interest of historians and anthropologists, artists, collectors and curators, and everyone else that lies therein. The options and opinions, neither right nor wrong, are endless, because these criteria for appreciation are about taste, experience, preference and knowledge.

Do the objects themselves have a story to tell outside the technical, aesthetic, visual and traditional values? Many people and interests were involved in their creation. These pots were created to celebrate, recognize, congratulate people, events and happenings. In other words, many pots memorialize these kinds of events. However, after the event and as time lapses, these events may become a distant memory of diminishing significance. The paper seeks to demonstrate that despite this, the pots still have stories to tell. The element

of the humble function of these pieces should also be taken into consideration: while telling stories or marking events, they also serve as functional, useful objects which can operate perfectly in the domestic setting. In contemporary ceramic art, there are many solid examples of challenging, even controversial practice, e.g. Richard Notkin's wall piece with harrowing images of nuclear mushroom clouds, or Paul Scott's blue and white ware transposing contemporary images of urban decay, pollution, refugee migration, and the implosion of contemporary society.

This paper will begin with a quieter focus – the examination of the collection of the Decorative Arts Sector of the National Museum of Ireland in Collins' Barracks in Dublin. Some unusual associations and intended functions for seemingly simple, functional and decorative pottery will be explored. The paper will briefly examine the broader historical context and landscape which surrounded these objects at the time of their creation and test their controversial character. It will further analyze other ceramic objects of equal if not greater significance. However, the primary focus of the paper is to consider functional and domestic objects rather than those elaborately decorated or celebrated. The purpose of the examination is not to provide an all-encompassing survey of the so-called *Controversial Crockery*, as it is already provided in publications such as *Confrontational Ceramics* (Schwartz 2008).

The Decorative Arts collection of the National Museum of Ireland contains some quietly controversial crockery. The Collins Barracks stock is an immense collection in an imposing and inspiring building,<sup>1</sup> loaded with significance regarding the evolution of the Irish Free State, just like some of the artefacts. In 1997, the Collins Barracks became home to the Decorative Arts and Military History collection of the State. It contains pieces from all over the world: an immense collection of Irish silverware, the Albert Bender collection<sup>2</sup> (History & Architecture of Collins Barracks n.d.), and comprehensive permanent retrospective exhibitions by designers such as Eileen Grey, Sybil Connolly and Ib Jorgensen. It also houses the oldest piece of Chinese porcelain in a European collection 'The Fonthill Vase' (Ceramics. n.d.). These highlights of the museum collection

<sup>1</sup> A four-sided quadrant building was built in 1702. It served as the home to the British Army until 1922 and housed the Eastern Command of the Irish Defence forces until 1997. In 1922, 'The Royal Barracks' name was changed to 'Collins Barracks' after Michael Collins, the first Commander in Chief of the Irish Free State (History & Architecture of Collins Barracks n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Bender was a Dublin based collector and businessman who donated extremely significant artifacts to the National Museum of Ireland which became known as the Albert Bender collection.

may eclipse the topic of this paper in terms of prestige and contemporary impact. Nevertheless, they will be examined more closely for the stories they tell and journeys they have made.

The objects discussed in this paper are all linked in that they have been housed in one collection in Ireland for a significant period of time. Nevertheless, only one of the four items was probably made in Ireland. The paper initially focuses on two areas: the 32-piece bone china tea set 'Erin go Bragh', made in 1888, and the Home Rule teapot made in Scotland ca. 1880. Later examinations will focus on the Ballybrit pot or urn and the Fonthill vase.

Therefore, we must take into consideration the social and political landscape of Ireland, where some of the pieces were created ca. the 1880s, only thirty years after the 'Great Hunger', the Famine that ravished the countryside, while stockpiles of food lay on the docks in Dublin (Williams 1956; Lyons 1972, 17). A mostly Roman Catholic population was prohibited from owning land, instead paying rent to absentee landlords and aristocracy living in England. When these rents were not paid, evictions followed. The Potato Blight of 1845–1849 destroyed the main food source for tenants or evicted tenants, few of whom could acquire education, or join any professional employment, or live near towns of a significant size. They were also deprived of the voting right or chances to gain entry to parliament. This led to the emigration of millions, the creation of a global Irish Diaspora and the death of over a million people (Killen 1995). Those who survived were exhausted, angry and desperate. The key issue was land – owning it, surviving from it and earning a living from it. The population looked to a new generation of liberal politicians, still elected to the House of Commons in London, to introduce and effect change, including in the key areas of land reform and home rule.

### The *Erin Go Bragh* Tea Set

'Erin go Bragh' translates from Irish to English literally as 'Ireland is Great (or Good)'; however the nuances of the Irish language would deem a closer translation as 'Ireland forever' or 'Ireland until Eternity'. Placed in the context of the political activities aimed at defining the status of Ireland within the British Empire (O'Day 1998), these simple domestic pieces of crockery reveal far more layers of meaning and significance than simple utilitarian domestic use.

The *Erin go Bragh* bone china tea set comprises of a total of 32 plates, side plates, cups and saucers. According to the catalogue of the National Museum of Ireland, the set was made by Skelson & Plant of Stoke-on-Trent in 1888. The design, which was registered on 15 May 1888, features the portrait and side profile images of Archbishop Dr. Thomas William Croke, Michael Davitt, John Dillon, W. E. Gladstone, William O'Brien and Charles Stewart Parnell (Moore 2013). All are noted for their roles in Irish politics and culture. Croke was the second Roman Catholic Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand, and in Ireland, he was heavily involved in the Irish Nationalist and Land Reform movements and is said to have fought on the barricades in Paris during the 1848 French Revolution (Hickey and Doherty 2003: 96). Davitt was also an

Irish Nationalist and he founded the National Land League. Dillon was a member of the British Parliament and the Irish Parliamentary Party, and on one occasion, he shared a prison cell with Parnell in Dublin's Kilmainham Gaol (Jackson 2003: 43). Gladstone served four terms as British Prime Minister and proposed Home Rule for Ireland, which the House of Commons rejected (Hachey and McCafrey 2015: 99–100). During Gladstone's tenure, a second bill was passed by the Commons, to be rejected by the House of Lords in 1893 (Hickey and Doherty 2003: 41). O'Brien was a land reform activist, journalist and a member of the British House of Commons. Perhaps the most widely known was Charles Stewart Parnell, who was High Sheriff of County Wicklow. He studied for a time at Cambridge University, was a member of the British House of Commons and was the Land League Leader in Ireland.

Acquired to the museum collection in 1971, the tea set is decorated throughout its surface with the main portraiture either on the centre of the flatter plates and side plates, whereas on the cups, the portraits are positioned facing to and away from the user while drinking from the cup. The portrait is not the only image contained thereon. Symbols of Irish myth and legend appear throughout. The musical harp, a symbol of Hibernia also appears (Lanier 1999), as well as the iconic round tower (Smiddy 1876). These towers can be found throughout Ireland; they protected villages and villagers from raiding Vikings. The entrance to the towers was elevated from ground level, above a ladder. In advance of raiding Vikings, the last villager would pull the ladder up into the round tower to prevent the raiders from gaining deadly access. The surfaces of the tea set are also adorned with the imposing image of the Irish wolfhound, symbolizing power and fidelity, and, finally, the Irish shamrock, with associations of Christianity and St. Patrick (Foster 1989). The *Erin Go Bragh* Tea Set is stamped on the underside with the makers' mark.

Although the tea set references the individuals who were pressing for Home Rule, where Ireland would govern itself while still loyal to the Crown, this particular tea set is actually celebrating the contribution these men made to land reformation and the Land Acts established in Ireland. Both the Home Rule teapot and the *Erin Go Bragh* tea set were intended for the Irish population: they were manufactured primarily for sale and use in Ireland.

### The Home Rule Teapot

Made in ca. 1880, the Home Rule Teapot has a spout stemming from its base and a counter balancing handle (Moore 2013). Circular in construction, it appears to be slip cast. The words 'Home Rule' run twice on a diagonal line on either side of the teapot from bottom left to top right. It is glazed in a medium to dark brown glaze, which covers the entire pot, lid, spout and handle. The removable lid and hollow spout, which are evident, indicate this is intended for domestic use over decorative display. Over the edges of the protruding lettering and rims of the teapot, the dark glaze breaks to an amber or yellow colour where the glaze runs thinner. The 'Home Rule' lettering appears to be mounted on a

banner or flag as the background, elevating the text from the wall of the teapot, giving it increased visibility and a sense of jubilation. The handle stems from the base of the teapot and cuts an almost ninety-degree angle, ending in a horizontal line towards the lid of the teapot, creating quite an austere if not dramatic effect. The teapot is topped with a faceted knob atop the lid. The teapot was acquired to the Museum collection in 1981 and is described as a 'glazed earthenware' teapot 'possibly Castle Espie, circa 1880'.<sup>3</sup>

There seems to be more information available with regard to the *Erin Go Bragh* tea set than the Home Rule teapot. This is partly due to information about the producer of the tea set in Stoke-on-Trent and also, quite clearly, with regard to the political and public profiles of those individuals displayed on its surface.

The question arises: who were the intended users of these pots and plates? Were they mass produced to disperse and promote a political message, or were they more the one-off, celebratory artefacts? One can only speculate that they were intended for the affluent classes who had social and political influence. However, the transfer-printed tea set and the hand-painted shamrocks indicate more of the bespoke level of production. This can be possibly contrasted to the slip cast process of the Home Rule teapot, which indicates a greater production output, suggesting that it may have been intended for a wider audience.

### The Fonthill Vase

Many terms can apply to the Fonthill vase as it certainly has lived several lives in its journey to Collins Barracks. Although not strictly controversial, it is significant on multiple levels and worthy for consideration herein. The Fonthill vase was made in Jingdezhen, China, and it belongs to the 1300–1340 Qingbai porcelain period (Jékely 2010). It has a rounded belly form towards the foot-ringed base with incised decoration under a glazed white surface. Four delicate carved floral reliefs progressing to the mid-section of the vase are raised in surface and texture from its body. Some reliefs feature a bunch of three or four floral clusters, none of which are identical to each other. These are twice ringed by fine trailed lines of porcelain to frame each cluster. The two horizontals of a fine porcelain (possibly extruded) line sit across the case in a collar form, marking the smooth transition from the belly to the fluted neck of the vase. There follows a simple circular line, moving the eye upward towards the mouth of the vase, and a slight turn in the neck of the vase, not perfectly straight. Rather violently, just under the neck of the vase, a hole is drilled to facilitate the attachment of a silver handle, spout and lid, which was also clamped around the neck and mouth of the vase, leaving permanent marks and scars on it. These are the physical manifestations of the Fonthill vase. Now, we must consider the next story layer.

The Fonthill vase has travelled over eight thousand kilometres in its lifetime from China to its current home in the capital of Ireland. It was gifted, traded, transferred, altered and

adapted in at least four European countries. It functioned as a hollow vase, and as a pouring spouted and lidded pitcher. In this instance, a silver handle spout and vessel were attached as above with heraldic crests from Hungarian royalty. Gifted to Naples and travelling through France, it was included in a painting in France in 1713 and a still-life illustration in Hungary. Its story was eventually pieced together by Peter Lane of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1961 (Lane 1961). The Fonthill vase becomes this nomadic object, passing through several royal and religious households, artist's studios and private collections. It has had its function altered and is identified as the oldest piece of Chinese porcelain, from Jingdezhen, in a European collection dating back to the 1300s. It stands as a real centrepiece of the National Museum collection, significant for the lives it has lived, its adaptations as well as its cultural pedigree (Jékely 2010).

### The Ballybrit Pot

The Ballybrit pot is a Bronze Age vessel with an intensely rugged and aged surface patina. In the context of this discussion, it has two levels of intrigue. The first is related to its construction. It is a circular vessel with a round belly and a tapered base, with a notched top rim. Three marked, constructed sections are easily identified. The shoulder is high with a straight visual line, slightly tapered inwards and upwards towards the rim. Over the surface of the shoulder, four distinct carved lines are repeated in opposing diagonal lines creating a chevron pattern. The waistline of the pot is full and defined, and it includes three extruding horizontal coils of clay with, like the top rim of the pot with angled cut notches. Below the waistline and moving towards the base of the pot, the diagonal incisions recur, similar to those on the shoulder of the pot, but in a less organized and rhythmic fashion. Overall, the Ballybrit pot has a sense of the rugged, well-used quality with rich surface textures and a material appeal that is strong to the hand and eye.

The second story related to this object begins prior to 1928, when the Ballybrit pot joined the collection of the National Museum of Ireland; namely, it takes place between 1862, when the pot was first discovered, and 1928. The Ballybrit pot was found in County Carlow, Ireland, under a nearly two-ton granite boulder by a man named Thomas Eddy, locally known as 'The Cornish Miner'.<sup>4</sup> He presented it to his employer (builder) Joseph F. Lynch, who was based in Ballybrit, County Carlow Ireland. Lynch presented it to Colonel Kane Burbury of Rathvilly County Carlow, as the pot was found on the Colonel's estate, and the Colonel further presented it to his estate Mr. James Smyth who was rumoured to be his illegitimate son. Upon Smyth's death, the pot was bequeathed to auctioneer Robert Bell, who gifted it to his brother-in-law, Mr. Hobson, and the pot travelled to New York. Hobson's widow brought the pot back to Ireland and a local schoolmaster made the assistant keeper of antiquities of the National Museum of Ireland aware of the pot. The keeper, Mr. Liam S. Grogan, received the pot into the collection of the National Museum of Ireland from the school master in 1928.

<sup>3</sup> Information obtained from the NMI Museum descriptor of the Home Rule teapot

<sup>4</sup> Anyone born in Cornwall, United Kingdom can be termed 'Cornish'

In 2017, the Ballybrit pot moved from the National Museum of Ireland to the Carlow County Museum, closer to the site of its discovery under granite (Lee 2017: 4). Again, this is an example of a simple, humble vessel, that, following its original intention and purpose as a hand-made container, perhaps deliberately made to contain human remains, becomes a 'voyager'. Like the Fonthill vase, it takes on an immense 'other life' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, generations after its original creation in the Bronze Age. The particular exterior decoration of the Ballybrit pot may impart more significance to the piece than simple domestic servitude. It may be assumed that the incised markings and rolled and ribbed edges were indeed intended to elevate the purpose of the pot to a more significant role, within the funerary or sacrificial context.

### Conclusion

This allows us to consider the parallel stories of the objects we encounter, be it in the domestic, gallery or museum context. We can value these objects on the merits of their tactile and visual richness and also through the lives they have lived, taking into account the hands of the people these objects have passed through, those who made them, those who used and sold them, their lives and stories, as well as the events that have surrounded their existence. The paper examines four examples relevant in this context. Three of them are closely associated with Ireland, two objects were made outside the country, in England and Scotland, but they promoted Land Reform and Home Rule. Although the Ballybrit pot may have travelled, it may have been traded or may have followed a nomadic tribe as part of their belongings, it was definitely found in Ireland. Of the three examples, two are unquestionably about nationalism, politicized with the agenda of those who commissioned the works to the fore of visual impact in otherwise domestic functional objects. The Fonthill vase is now held by a museum in Ireland but it travelled through many owners, countries and incarnations of function both in utility and decoration. It was drawn and painted and included in artistic compositions. Since its installation at the National Museum of Ireland it has been undoubtedly photographed thousands of times. Accordingly, these objects have layers of value – monetary, historical, technical, cultural, geographic, national, nationalist or political. They have lived through all the global incidents that have passed since their inception, like sentinels watching them pass by, watching, waiting and, crucially, surviving for those of us who value ceramics and can appreciate them on all of these levels.

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## Резиме

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## КОНТРОВЕРЗНА ГРЊЧАРИЈА

На почетку рада констатује се да су предмети од керамике присутни како у техничким и естетским оквирима укуса, традиције, процеса и технике, тако и ширем културно-политичком контексту, и износи се тврђа да су домаћи, функционални, декоративни предмети присутни на сасвим посебном нивоу постојања, укључујући и контекст историјског значаја, високополитизоване националне тежње, подстицање промена у званичној политици и борбу за независност. Примери којима се поткрепљује ова тврђа јесу сервис за чај *Erin go Bragh* (Ирска заувек), са представама водећих заговорника аграрне реформе у Ирској, и чајник *Home Rule* (Ирска аутономија), који слави коначно доношење Закона о аутономији Ирске 1920. године, којим је осигурана независност 26 ирских горфовија од Британије. У раду се надаље испитују предмети који нису везани за политичке тежње, а ипак имају друштвени и

културни значај изван првобитне намене, односно употребе у домаћинству. Као пример се наводи ваза „Фонтхил“, због свог необичног путовања од Кине до Ирске кроз домове црквених великодостојника и краљева, кроз читаву Азију и неколико европских земаља, да би на крају постала најстарији примерак кинеског порцелана у европским колекцијама. Други пример је посуда из Балибрита која потиче из бронзаног доба, а откривена је тек у XX веку, када се отиснула на још једно номадско путовање преко Атлантског океана, у оба смера, у релативно кратком периоду од тридесет година. У раду се показује да захваљујући поменутиим случајевима, догађајима и згодама везаним за ове сасвим обичне посуде, њихово присуство у савременој материјалној култури има далеко већи значај од онога који би могао проистећи из њихове изворне, скромне намене.