

CUSTOM HOUSE KEYSTONES

Variations

Rory Breslin

CUSTOM HOUSE KEYSTONES

Variations

Rory Breslin



Front Cover, Mask of the Lee, bronze detail
Page 3, Mask of the Barrow, bronze detail
Back Cover, Mask of the Erne, bronze detail



Edward Smyth. Engraved by H. Meyer, after a drawing by John Comerford.

Custom House, Dublin



Preface

The Custom House was one of the first major public buildings built in Dublin as an isolated structure with four monumental façades. It is often considered architecturally the most important building in Dublin and is sited on the river front with Beresford Place to the rear.

Designed by James Gandon, it was completed in 1791 at a cost of nearly half a million pounds. There is a strong Irish theme to the sculpture with the Irish rivers being symbolised and Hibernia the main pediment sculpture. Given that there was an Irish Parliament at this time, the building was a demonstration of the aspirations of the Irishmen who were responsible for running the country. Gandon engaged Edward Smyth (b.1749 d.1812) to execute the various decorations in the frieze and in the interior of the building, and the fourteen heads symbolical of the principal Rivers of Ireland, on the keystones of the arches.

Vigorously modelled in a fusion of baroque energy and classical control, the keystones personify the Atlantic, and the rivers Bann, Barrow, Blackwater, Boyne, Erne, Foyle, Lagan, Lee, Liffey, Nore, Shannon, Slaney and the Suir. The heads of the rivers are laden with the fruits of their basins.

The Custom House was destroyed in the Irish Civil War of 1921-22, when the building was completely engulfed by fire which blazed for five days, destroying a huge quantity of public records and devastating the interior. Aside from the Liffey, the Slaney and the Barrow, which suffered damage probably by gunshot, the keystones were insulated from the internal heat by the stone walls.

This booklet is primarily a visual portrait of the River heads, the miniatures and the bronze keystone variations, replete with some of the delightfully dense detail, both man-made and organic. The making of the bronze variations was a project initiated to show how these works are as vibrant and dexterous today as they were when they were originally conceived and carved. Some of the images portray the clays, waxes and other materials to give an idea of sculptural method. The keystones here follow the Custom House sequence clockwise from the Liffey at the centre of the Southern facade and the average bronze mask dimensions are 88 x 42 cm.



Photographs of the lost wax miniatures. *Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.*

1916: The destroyed RHA building on Abbey Street



Wax miniatures

Included in this booklet are photographs of Smyth's wax miniatures with the corresponding finished river. These photographs were discovered during the making of the *Variations* by chance in the papers of Dermod O'Brien, painter and former president of the RHA between 1910 and 1945, at the National Library of Ireland. It is assumed that the photographs were taken of the works at one of the RHAs Annual exhibitions and judging by the frame and nail size, these models are estimated at between five and eight centimetres in height.

Twelve of these small wax models Smyth exhibited in the Parliament House in 1802. They are described in the catalogue as "twelve models in wax emblematically representing the commercial rivers of Ireland, decorated with the produce of the counties through which they flow, designed and executed in Portland stone at the new Custom House." Ten of these models were reported as presented by Gandon's son, also James, to the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1837. They are the rivers Bann, Shannon, Foyle, Nore, Suir, Barrow, Blackwater, Lagan, Anna Liffey, and the Atlantic Ocean. Given that there were fourteen finished keystones and twelve were exhibited in 1802, the omission of the Erne and the Boyne in Gandon's presentation is unusual and there seems to be no record of the representations of the Slaney and the Lee.

Unfortunately, the RHAs premises in Abbey St. were destroyed by fire during the Easter Rising in 1916. Most of its contents, including Smyth's waxes were lost. Such was the high esteem in which these models were held that they were exhibited at the RHA on four different occasions, 1837, 1840, 1852 and 1853. They were also exhibited in Whitechapel, London in 1913. When he died, Smyth's obituary in the Freeman's Journal lauded him as the Irish 'Praxiteles', the renowned Athenian sculptor.

Contents

Liffey 11
Erne 13
Foyle 15
Slaney 17
Nore 19
Suir 21
Lagan 23
Lee 25
Shannon 27
Bann 29
Atlantic 31
Blackwater 33
Barrow 35
Boyne 37
The notes 39



LIFFEY





Clockwise from left...

Wax miniature.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

Wax mask

Clay detail

Situated centrally over the main doorway of the Custom House to emphasise its pre-eminence, the only female in Edward Smyth's river-head series approaches the ideal of Greek classical beauty. This interpretation depicts the visage framed by her braided locks, flowing hair and crowned by flowers and fruits. Blackberries, peas, damsons and wildflowers are perhaps a reference to the Liffey's fertile banks as it flows through Dublin, while the Scots pine-cone and a diadem of ornamental ferns may refer to the rivers source at Kippure and the Wicklow Mountains. The symbol of maritime dominance, the trident is flanked by two broad spears or pilums. The suggestion has been made that these are symbolic of the rights of Admiralty possessed by the city over the waters of the port and the Bay of Dublin.



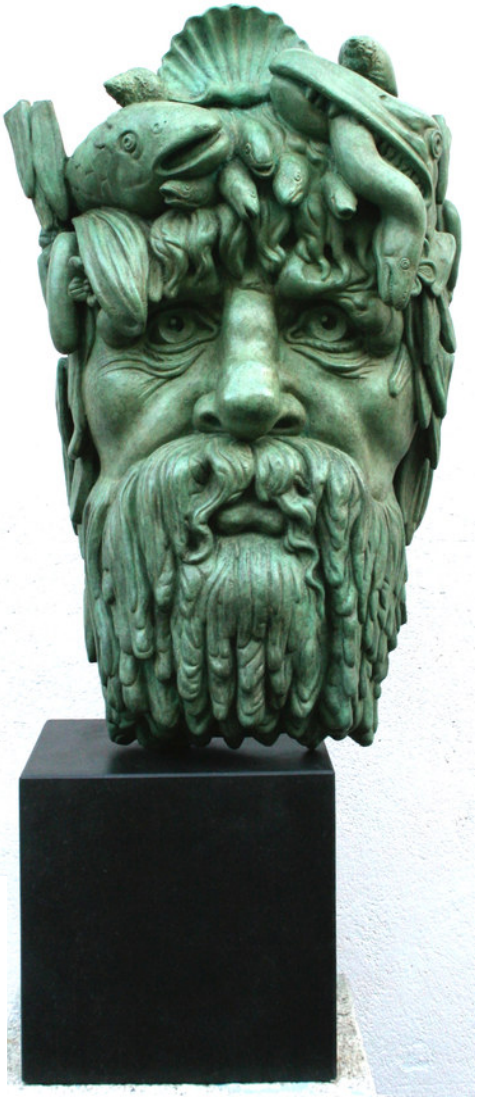


Clockwise from left...

Wax miniature. *Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Bronze mask

Bronze detail







ERNE

Bearing fishy life in abundance, salmon, a pike with an eel in its jaws, shells and some of the flora of the Erne's banks, bullrushes, wildflowers etc., the River God's moustache and beard are rendered in a fashion which suggests the Erne's slow flowing waters. The Erne keystone, one of fourteen emblematic renditions of the larger rivers of Ireland, is positioned to the left of the Doric tetra-style portico facing the Liffey. The River-Gods have survived the fires of 1789 and 1883 and the most devastating fire of May 25th 1921.



The visage of the Foyle is stubborn, ill-humoured and fierce. The prows of three ships link the castles, symbols of the Derry Walls built by The Honourable The Irish Society as defences for early 17th century settlers from England and Scotland. A broken cable of chain traverses the ornamentation while the rendition of the beard echoes the eddies, swirls and ripples of the fastest-flowing river in Europe for its size.

When Smyth was approached in 1789 by Irish architect Henry Aaron Baker, to add sculpted elements to the triumphal arch planned for the Derry Walls, he revisited the designs he had made for the Dublin Custom House finished a few years earlier, to illustrate the River Gods of the Foyle and Boyne. They closely match two of the sculpted heads around the Custom House, though in the case of the Foyle head, there is less detail and the countenance a little less fierce.

FOYLE





Clockwise from above...

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Bronze mask

Bronze detail







Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Wax mask detail

Bronze detail



Oysters, scallops, whelks, clams and a huge crab adorn the crown and the sides of the Slaney indicative of the abundance of shell-fish in Wexford harbour. Besides the crustaceans, ears of corn and other vegetation narrate a river, which for a great part of its length has been notable for its corn crops. The lively and undulating waves of the hair of the beard suggest a river of rapid flow.

With its course roughly parallel to those of the Barrow and the Nore, the Slaney rises under Lugnaquilla and flows through Bunclody and Enniscorthy eventually flowing vigorously through the narrow gorge at Ferrycarrig.



SLANEY



NORE

The Nore bears a strong featured but reflective face surmounted by a seine net, a dragnet that was usually hung vertically in the water by the use of weights and buoyancy devices. Complete with ropes and floats, the head depicts salmon, trout and eels issuing from the net as an evocation of the abundance of such fish. The Nore was characterised by its net fisheries, particularly below its confluence with the Barrow. The river has a fairly steep gradient but the flow is checked by innumerable weirs, thus its slow flow is modelled in the beard reflecting the shallow glides that are the pre-dominant feature. The only Custom House head with its eyes lowered indicates a powerful and unpredictable force of nature.

Clockwise from right...

Bronze mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Clay in studio

Bronze detail

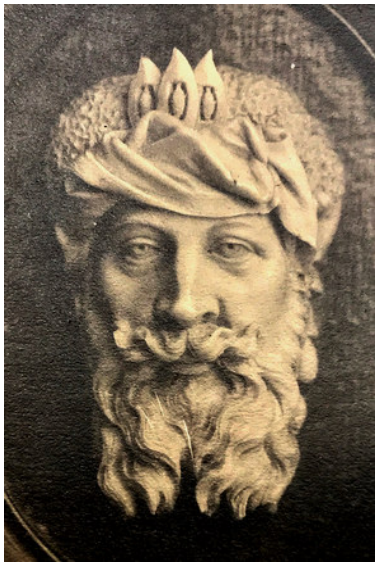












Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Bronze detail from left

Bronze detail from right







SUIR

In the Suir, the ornamentation and the beard represent wool and symbolise its subsequent manufacture. The moustache and beard have the characteristics of fine spun wool, the face is open eyed and energetic. Over the head from side to side is draped the fell of a sheep which has symmetrically balanced at either end, the depiction of an icon of the processing of wool... to the left a single bow shears and to the right Alder cones to denote the use of the tree, its cones and bark in the wool tanneries along the river. Below the sheep three weavers bobbins rise from a turban, whose folds have the broad creases of wool. Notable for its woollen mills at the end of the eighteenth century, Arthur Young in his Tour of Ireland (1780) speaks of Carrick-on-Suir as a centre of the woollen industry. In John Payne's Universal Geography (1797), he distinguishes Tipperary as rich in sheep.



LAGAN

The Lagan presents a youthful and quite mischievous countenance, that is quite impish in terms of expression. The comparative youth of the face indicates the relatively young city of Belfast in the 1780s. The lightly bearded face is framed with folds of linen beneath the jaw and chin. It is crowned by two swans whose necks are intertwined, and some flowers and bullrushes complete with what appear to be some ornamental depictions of possibly water-lilies. The assumption is that the three heads adorning this section of the Custom House are emblematical of the rivers on which lie the major cities outside Dublin; those of Cork, Limerick and Belfast. Aside from the relative youth of the head, the depiction of linen underlines the identification of this piece as that of the River Lagan.

There is speculation that the depiction of the swans has a connection with the legend of the Children of Lir and the time the children as swans spent in the North Channel or the Straits of Moyle. Some commentators believe this might be problematical as the story may not have been popularised as early as the 1780s, but the essence of the story goes back many centuries, and there is good reason to believe that Smyth would have been aware of the legend, given his diligent research into the different characteristics of the other rivers depicted on the Custom House.







Clockwise from above...

Wax mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Bronze in foundry pre patina

Wax detail







Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Clay in studio

Bronze detail





LEE

Over the central position of the Northern entrance of the Custom House, this head, on the same architectural axis as Anna Liffey stresses Cork's importance as second city to Dublin. It has the features of a patrician, with wavy hair redolent of strong bow waves, with the moustache and beard undulating and rippling in harmony, suggestive of ocean waves. From the forehead rises a large upturned anchor, bound around its stock with a ships rope that is draped across the prows of two mastless ships with truncated bowsprits which are laden with barrels and bales. The anchor symbolises an important harbour and the ships and their cargoes to a sea-going trade of some importance.



SHANNON

Positioned on the Northern entrance of the Custom House as part of the central group of three, the Shannon presents a youthful visage, dignified though perhaps slightly pensive in terms of expression. The forehead, cheeks and beard of the Shannon are framed with oak leaves, acorns and the intertwining boughs of the oak. Classical cornucopias, 'horns of plenty', over-flowing with grains and fruit such as corn, plums, damsons and pine-cones rise on each side of the trident at the apex of the head. The speculation is that the trident represents Limerick's sovereignty over the estuary and/or Athlone's jurisdiction of the grain and fruits of the central plain. In John Payne's *Universal Geography* (1797), he describes the river as flowing through a fruitful and fertile land.

The depiction of the emblems of the oak are believed to be a reference to Cratloe Woods in County Clare, an important relic of Irelands primeval forests. It is said that the beams for the roof of Westminster Hall were from these woods.





Clockwise from above...

Bronze mask

Bronze detail

Wax miniature. ***Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland***







Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Clay detail



The Bann is the most jovial of all the River-God series situated at the eastern end of the north-facade of the building. The moustache and beard hair droop in silky folds. A turban of linen-like folds envelope the head and it is crowned by what looks like flax.

Redolent of the Bann's well known fresh water pearl fisheries, two loops of pearls are draped across the turban while beneath it clusters of flax seed pods frame the temples, cheeks and the engaging visage. The Bann's basin was famous for the growing of flax and the weaving of linen and all the iconography that adorns the mask is evocative the industry.



BANN



ATLANTIC

Intertwined with the Atlantic's beard and hair, redolent of the undulating wave surges and breakers of the ocean, are dolphins and other sea creatures vigorously modelled with considerable energy. The resolute and classical visage has above it a diadem of pearls and many maritime references. Posiden's trident supports a crescent moon, symbol of the lunar influence on the tides. Navigational references complete the symmetry... to the left a binnacle with the word 'Atlantic' inscribed and to the right a compass card which can also be construed as a solar symbol with rays in this keystone, the only Ocean among the Irish river-heads.





Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask detail

Bronze mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*





This keystone has a rather sad visage with deeply shadowed eyes. Over the brows are dripping river weeds and a multitude of small fishes while crowning the whole is a basket piled high with round fruits, dimpled on one face, apparently apples. No part of Ireland was so notable for apple culture in the eighteen century as the upper valley of the Munster Blackwater. In Charles Smith's History of Waterford (1746) he states that..." in the west of this county...our eider has of later years been brought to great perfection; and besides enough for our own consumption, some hundred hogsheads are yearly, in good fruit seasons, sent by sea to Dublin and other places."

BLACKWATER





Clockwise from above...

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Bronze mask

Wax mask detail









Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Clay in studio

Bronze mask detail





BARROW

The inherent symbolism presented in the work conjures the characteristics of the Barrow. Its visage presents an ill-humoured and almost sullen face suggestive of a slow-flowing river. The mouth is drawn down at the corners and exudes many small fish and water weeds which mingle with the beard. Above its broad and blunt nose, the top of the head is adorned by the fell of a sheep, whose fore-legs hang down in front of two inverted vases, typical classical symbols of springs of water. The Barrow was renowned for its fisheries and there is the possibility that there were many sheep walks on it's banks. The twin vases, with the evocative water flowing from their mouths suggest that it is in it's lower course after it has received the waters of the Nore.



BOYNE

The face is fine and perhaps expresses a pensive and perhaps worried countenance. The head is crowned by leaves of laurel intermixed with ears of wheat. Notable for cattle today, it would appear that the banks of the Boyne in Meath were abundant in grain in the eighteenth century. The presentation of the beard is redolent of the meandering of the Boyne as winds its way in a north easterly direction for seventy miles through counties Offaly, Meath and Louth before entering the Irish Sea below the historic town of Drogheda. A version of this keystone, as with the Foyle, is also on the triumphal arch in Derry.





Clockwise from above...

Bronze mask

Wax mask detail

Wax miniature. C*ourtesy of the National Library of Ireland*

Clay in studio







NOTES

Lady Lavery banknotes

Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the enactment of the Currency Act in 1927, Lady Lavery banknotes were issued in a total of seven denominations from ten shillings to one hundred pounds. The obverse of these notes used the depictions of the keystones Blackwater, Lee, Lagan, Boyne, Shannon and Erne as their central focal point. The notes circulated from 1928 until the late 1970s.



