

Captured in Staffordshire

THE STORY OF WILLIAM SMITH O'BRIEN



William Smith O'Brien seating Staffordshire figurine.
Photos: George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

Last year the National Museum of Australia acquired two Staffordshire figurines of the Irish nationalist, parliamentarian and convict, William Smith O'Brien. O'Brien's image was captured by the Alpha factory potters because of the romance surrounding his conviction and his relationship with his loving, loyal and long-suffering wife, Lucy.

The production of Staffordshire ceramic figures reached its peak during the Victorian era, flourishing during the period 1840–1880. The relatively inexpensive, simply-made porcelain facsimiles of the famous or notorious were produced in response to current events, making Staffordshire figures excellent examples of popular culture.

The method of production was simple and cheap, usually requiring only a three-piece mould. They were sold at weekly fairs and market days throughout England and exported to markets in Australia and North America. Little decoration was employed so as to keep prices down, and gold was rarely used except for titles and incidental decoration.

Figurines were produced to satisfy the ever-growing demand for likenesses of persons in the news, including members of the Royal Family, politicians, clerics, war heroes and heroines, theatre performers and famous characters from plays, opera singers, sporting celebrities and notorious criminals.

Over this period more than 500 different subjects were produced as figurines but only a small percentage relate to Australia: Captain James Cook, Elizabeth Fry (English prison reformer), Lady Jane Franklin and Sir John Franklin, William Smith O'Brien, Prince Alfred, then Duke of Edinburgh, bushranger Frank Gardiner, and the Tichborne Claimant, Arthur Orton (otherwise known as Tom Castro). The National Historical Collection has in its collection Staffordshire figurines of Captain James Cook and the Tichborne Claimant, as well as those of William Smith O'Brien.

William Smith O'Brien was born on 17 October 1803 at Dromoland Castle in County Clare, Ireland, the second son of Sir Edward O'Brien and his wife Charlotte. William's father, Sir Edward, was a member of the old Irish House of Commons, and had opposed the 1800 Act of Union which saw Great Britain and Ireland form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

A Protestant, William was educated at Harrow school and Trinity College, Cambridge (B.A., 1826) in London, and spoke several languages including Latin, Greek, French and German. Graduating in 1828, O'Brien was then brought into Parliament by his father and served as the Conservative member for the borough of Ennis from 1828 to 1831, and then for Limerick from 1835 until 1849.

In the autumn of 1832 he married Lucy Caroline Gabbett of County Limerick; together they had seven children, five boys and two girls. The family home was known as Cahermoyle House.

During his time in Parliament O'Brien was prominent in debates on Irish issues, including the establishment of an Irish Poor Law, removing tithes, improving education and encouraging emigration. O'Brien was also active in trying to alleviate the misery of the Irish Famine of 1845–1849 by forwarding 'suggestions for cultivating waste lands, establishing fisheries, adjusting landlord-tenant relations, and providing employment through railway building'.

O'Brien was actually imprisoned twice during his lifetime. A true obstructionist, O'Brien was placed under house arrest by the Sergeant-at-Arms in 1846 for contempt of the House for refusing to serve on non-Irish committees after he had been summonsed to serve on a Scottish railway committee.

O'Brien was placed in prison – an apartment on the ground floor halfway between the entrances to the Commons' and Lords' chambers. The 'cell' was about 14 feet by nine, with only seven feet of headroom; it contained a small deal table, trestle bed, chest of drawers and a few chairs. O'Brien considered his gaol 'small and not cheerful': its worst

feature was an unventilated privy. Although O'Brien was only imprisoned until the end of the Parliamentary session, he was held in high regard and received adulation in Ireland for his defiant stand.

O'Brien was an ardent supporter of Catholic emancipation. Although a political opponent of Daniel O'Connell, 'the Liberator', he joined O'Connell's Repeal Association in 1843. The Association strove for the repeal of the 1801 Act of Union. O'Brien soon became an authority within it, second only to the Liberator himself.

However, disputes over Repeal soon divided the Irish nationalist leaders. O'Brien at first adopted a conciliatory role but, disillusioned by O'Connell, he walked out of the Association with other members of the Young Irelanders, including John Mitchel, Thomas Meagher and other militants in July 1846. In 1847 they formed the Irish Confederates, which sought the independence of the Irish nation.

In May 1848 John Mitchel was arrested for publishing his newspaper, *The United Irishman*, which was a manual on how to attack British troops. Mitchel was convicted of treason and sentenced to 14 years' transportation, first to Bermuda and then to Van Diemen's Land.

From this time O'Brien was the most experienced and respected leader of the Young Irelanders. He sought to build up a network of armed clubs throughout the country, to force Britain to concede Irish self-government without bloodshed. The Catholic Church opposed the rebellion and enthusiasm soon evaporated. Nevertheless, on 29 July 1848 O'Brien, along with Meagher, MacManus and Patrick O'Donoghue, led an uprising against the Royal Irish Constabulary in the Widow McCormack's cabbage garden at Ballingarry in County Tipperary.

The uprising failed, and O'Brien was arrested at Thurles railway station on 6 August 1848 and sent to Dublin. O'Brien, McManus, Meagher, and O'Donoghue were convicted of treason and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered at Clonmel. The sentence was commuted to transportation for life: O'Brien and his principal lieutenants sailed in the *Swift* to Hobart Town, where they arrived on 27 October 1849.

On arrival in Hobart O'Brien refused to give his parole in return for a ticket-of-leave and was, in consequence, denied the privileged treatment afforded to the other Young Ireland leaders. He was sent to the Darlington Penal Station on Maria Island, of which he wrote:

To find a Gaol in one of the loveliest spots formed by the hand of Nature in one of her loneliest solitudes creates a revulsion of feeling which I cannot describe.

At Maria Island, O'Brien was allotted a small cottage and placed under the guardianship of one of the overseers, Mr Miller. O'Brien spent his time observing and exploring all the novelties which surrounded him, describing, in a journal to his wife, the 130 convicts and officers who lived on the island, the flora and fauna and his small cottage.

Determined to leave, William Smith O'Brien attempted to escape from Maria Island on Monday 12 August 1850. He failed, and was transported to the infamous secondary penal settlement at Port Arthur on 24 August 1850. As at Maria Island, O'Brien was placed in solitary confinement in a small two-room cottage next to the Barracks.

In November 1850 he was persuaded to give his parole and was granted a ticket-of-leave. O'Brien settled first at New Norfolk and later at Avoca, where he acted as tutor to the children of Dr Brock, the local doctor.



William Smith O'Brien standing Staffordshire figurine.

On 22 February 1854, in response to representations from Irish politicians and even the American Ambassador, James Buchanan; Lord Palmerston, Home Secretary in the Aberdeen Cabinet, announced a conditional pardon for the three remaining Young Irelanders.

O'Brien sailed for Melbourne on 6 July on board the *Ladybird* from Launceston. The esteem in which O'Brien was held by many Irish Australians prompted large demonstrations in his honour in both Melbourne and Bendigo. At the final demonstration at the Criterion Hotel on 22 July he was presented with a large nine-carat gold vase. The vase, which cost 1000 guineas, was made by emigrant Irish silversmiths, the Hackett brothers and was financed by Irish Australians, including many miners. The vase was later delivered to Ireland after being displayed at the Paris exhibition of 1855. O'Brien was also presented with an address by the Irish settlers of NSW to celebrate his release from detention.

After his tour of Victoria, O'Brien sailed for Europe via India, settling with his family in Brussels where he finished his book *Principles of Government*. In May 1856, following the intercession of 140 British parliamentarians, O'Brien was granted a free pardon which allowed him to return home to Ireland. William Smith O'Brien died in Bangor, Wales, on 18 June 1864.

The story of William Smith O'Brien, the two Staffordshire figurines, his journal and address will be on display with many other wonderful exhibits in the new *Australian Journeys* gallery.

Rebecca Nason is on leave from Gallery Development