

## Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

## NEWSLETTER

## SPECIAL EDITION FEATURING IRELAND



I am delighted to introduce the Autumn 2023 edition of the Friends' Newsletter, focussed as it is on the Irish who are interred in the Cemetery. I am particularly honoured because Ireland is the most recent member of the Association responsible for the Cemetery, having joined in 2015. Moreover, in 2021 the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, visited while on official business in Rome.

Given the relative youth of Ireland as a state, many of those buried here would not have known an independent Ireland. The history of Ireland is far more ancient, both culturally and politically, than our statehood. Last year, as we celebrated 100 years of the founding of the Irish State, we also recognised the importance of remembering and reflecting on the significant events that shaped our nation on the path to independence.

Our approach to these milestones was informed by a full acknowl-

edgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy; of the multiple readings of history; and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience. Ireland is a diverse society, and we respect the importance of open, reflective debate. A key aspect in achieving peace and reconciliation on our shared island has been the recognition of the legitimacy of all traditions with an approach of mutual respect and historical authenticity. This Newsletter highlights just a very few of the Irish who came to Rome and contributed to Irish and Italian culture through their activities and friendships.

As Ambassador, I am honoured to represent Ireland and to share with my colleagues here in Rome the responsibility for supporting the Director and her team in the stewardship of this important burial ground.

H.E. Patricia O'Brien, Ambassador of Ireland to Italy



## The Synnots and the cypress trees in 1821

The cypress trees planted around the graves of an Irish father and daughter in 1821 contributed to a controversy that led to the Old Cemetery being closed. The Synnots were an old Irish family which had had its lands in the County of Wexford confiscated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Sir Walter Synnot (1742-1821) married his first wife, Jane Seton, while spending time in Italy in the 1770s. This stay also led to the birth of their first child and to the dedication to Jane of a plate in Piranesi's *Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi* (1778). Returning to Ireland, Synnot built himself a large house (now demolished) at Ballymoyer in Co. Armagh and was credited with improving local living standards through agriculture, road-building and forestry (the family wealth came from the linen trade). Knighted in 1783, he was a magistrate of Armagh for thirty years.

His three children with Jane were painted by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797), in a portrait acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria from a Synnot descendant in Australia. Soon after Jane's death in 1803, Sir Walter married Anne Elizabeth Martin, whose deceased father was vicar of Newtown Hamilton, a village near Ballymoyer. They too had three children. In her *Narrative of a three years' residence in Italy, 1819-1822* (1828), Selina Martin, Anne's sister, described the deaths in Rome of Sir Walter and his daughter, the 13-year-old Anny.

Sir Walter Synnot died eight months after Anny and was buried beside her on 11 August. The family had arrived in October 1820 with Anny already 'alarmingly ill'. They called in Dr James Clark, who a month later treated the newly arrived John Keats, and the English chaplain, the Rev. Richard Wolfe, who officiated at Keats's funeral. Anny died on 5 January 1821. The city authorities accepted a plea, citing Sir Walter's poor health, to have a daylight funeral and provided a troop of cavalry who 'stood near the grave with their muskets lowered, looking on in solemn silence'. Her monument, a copy of the Scipio Barbatus sarcophagus in the Vatican Museum, was installed by 20 February. The stonemason must have had in stock the copy, to which in only six weeks he added the many inscriptions, in English and Italian, on all four faces of the monument. They include Petrarch's '*Non come fiamma che per forza è spenta, Ma che per sé medesima si consume, Se n'andò in pace*



Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Synnot children*, 1781  
(National Gallery of Victoria)

*'l'anima contenta'*. Around the monument the family had six cypress trees planted.

In response to the foreign ambassadors' wish to enclose the cemetery with a wall, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, made a personal inspection. He was not pleased. Seeing cypress trees

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The sarcophagus on Anny Synnot's grave



The two Synnot tombs, with cypress tree stump

around some of the tombs, he ordered them to be immediately dug up. The custodian, Francesco Trucchi, feigned illness to avoid doing what he knew would further upset Anne Synnot. After meeting the Prussian diplomat, C.C.J. Bunsen, whose own child was buried near-

by, Consalvi allowed the existing trees to remain but forbade any future plantings. This became a written stipulation in all burial permits. A year later, Consalvi conceded the ground for the New Cemetery and the Old Cemetery was closed.



## TWO PAINTERS AND A SCULPTOR FROM IRELAND

### The painter James Atkins (1799-1833)

James Atkins, born in Belfast the son of a coach painter, was one of those artists, like Henry Timbrell (see below), whom a premature death robbed of their due fame. Studying at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, he won a prize for oil portrait painting and funding from three sponsors to study abroad. From 1818 he settled in Rome to study the Old Masters in Italy. In Venice he made a copy, seven metres high, of Titian's *The Death of St Peter the Martyr* which was later destroyed in a fire (other copies exist). At her family's request after Rosa Bathurst drowned (see *Newsletter* 19), he reportedly made a convincing portrait of her inspired by his vivid memories of her appearance. He sent paintings to the Royal Academy in 1831 and 1833.



*Girl with a platter of fruit* (after Titian), oil on canvas, Ulster Museum



*The Death of St Peter the Martyr* (after Titian), Great Hall, Lanyon Building, Queen's University Belfast  
(photo: Felix O'Hare, with permission)

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In 1832, in what seems to have started as a joke amongst his friends such as John Gibson, he set off for Constantinople to paint a portrait of the Sultan (Mahmud II). Writing to John Gibson from Smyrna in February 1833, he reported that he had left Constantinople to escape the plague, was earning good money by painting portraits of British residents and naval officers in Smyrna, and would return to Constantinople to paint the Sultan's portrait (no such painting is known.) On the voyage back to Italy he landed at Malta and had to undergo quarantine. There he died of tuberculosis (the burial register of St Paul's Anglican Church in Valletta lists his death in November 1833).

His friends and other artists in Rome, distraught at the loss of their talented colleague, paid for a memorial to him (Zone V.12.25). The contents of his studio were returned to Belfast and auctioned in 1835. The Ulster Museum holds examples of his work.

*My thanks to Paolo Ferrelli in Malta for his help with local records.*



## The painter Richard Rothwell (1800-1868)

Born in Athlone, Richard Rothwell was a gifted portrait painter, best known for his portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Trained at the School of the Royal Dublin Society, at only 24 he was elected to the Royal Hibernian Academy. Moving to London, he studied with the famous painter Sir Thomas Lawrence, finishing some of Lawrence's paintings after the latter's death. Rothwell exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and the Royal Hibernian Academy, establishing a successful practice as a portrait painter.



The memorial to Atkins erected by his friends



Charles-Louis Bagniet, *Richard Rothwell*, 1840, lithograph



*Mary Shelley*, oil on canvas, c. 1831-1840  
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

In 1831 he decided to study art in Italy, a move that proved unhelpful for his career. He was an independent spirit – for instance, provided with letters of introduction to leading figures in Rome, he never presented them. His fellow-artist Joseph Severn helped him settle in. In May 1833 they visited Venice together. Severn's letters to his wife reveal his high opinion of Rothwell as a 'real gentlemanlike fellow' despite his friend's disapproval of Severn's 'heresies in Painting'. Back in England, he found his previous reputation much diminished. He had some success with portraits and other subject-painting but never fulfilled his earlier promise. He travelled restlessly, moving between Dublin and London and visiting the United States in 1854. In 1856 he returned to Italy with his wife Rosa Marshall, married in 1842, and their children, staying until 1858. Back in England, he produced the painting *Calisto* which he considered his supreme achieve-

ment. But he objected strenuously to the way it was hung in the 1862 National Exhibition, criticising publicly the Exhibition's president. It is now in the National Gallery of Ireland.

Back again in Rome in 1868, he succumbed to fever. His old friend Joseph Severn, now the British consul, arranged his burial. The gravestone has misled art historians. Rothwell died on 12 September according to Cemetery records and the All Saints' Anglican church registry. His gravestone is recognisable in an early photo by Marcello Piermattei (see *Newsletter* 50) but was removed in the 1970s. A replacement stone, the one visible today (Zone 2.16.20), wrongly dates his death to 8 September. It stands above the gravestone of a direct descendant, Richard Rothwell Bolton, who died in 1985.



## The sculptor Henry Timbrell (1806-1849)

Born in Dublin and six years younger, Timbrell like Rothwell moved from Dublin to London. He studied sculpture at the School of the Royal Dublin Society and soon won prizes. After exhibiting at the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1827–1829, he joined the studio of E.H. Bailey, R.A. in London and studied at the Royal Academy. Successes in exhibiting there and at the Society of British Artists led in 1835 to his winning the R.A.'s Gold Medal for his group *Mezentius tying the Living to the Dead* – Mezentius was an Etruscan king exiled for his cruelty.

In 1843, he won the Academy's travelling studentship for study in Italy. In Rome he executed two bas-reliefs for the temple at Buckingham Palace, and produced *Instruction*, a life-size group of three figures which was almost completely destroyed when the ship carrying it to the R.A. exhibition was wrecked. Before his death from pleurisy in April 1849, he was working on a life-size marble sculpture of Queen Victoria and two statues for the new Houses of Parliament in London. Prompted by his fellow-sculptor John Gibson who recognised his great talent, he had sent to the Queen *Indian Girl* which was displayed at Osborne House, the residence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on the Isle of Wight.

Smaller works by Timbrell appear on the art market: in the marble plaque illustrated here, Venus gently prods Cupid with an arrow, watched by one of her attendants. It is signed *H. TIMBRELL, Sc, Rome* and dated 1847.

An obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted that the sculptors Gibson, Richard Wyatt, Joseph Gott and John Hogan all thought highly of him. About twenty artists attended his burial. His grave was exhumed long ago to Ossuary 1. He left a widow, Susan Flather.



*Venus and Cupid*, 1847, marble, diameter 27 cm. (Bonham's, London, 2008)

## Francis Blake Woodward, chaplain of All Saints' Anglican Church

The sarcophagus-tomb of Francis Woodward (1801-1866) is one of the treasures of the Cemetery for its mosaic inlay decoration (Zone 1.12.32). Inscriptions in Latin and English commemorate his fifteen years' service as 'chaplain to the English congregation at Rome', starting in 1850. The Anglican chapel was then in the 'Granary building' outside the Porta del Popolo. Lacking the funds to build a new church, Woodward, a native of Cavan in northern Ireland, wished to make this room more 'ecclesiastical' by adding to it a chancel. The church committee rejected as too expensive a project by the noted architect George Gilbert Scott. Another English church architect, William Slater, designed the chancel and an ornamental marble reredos for it. Completed shortly after Woodward's death, the reredos was dedicated to his memory.

When All Saints' Church inaugurated its own building in Via del Babuino in the 1880s, the 'Woodward reredos' was moved to the new building's entrance corridor. (One of the stained-glass windows in the chancel is also dedicated to Woodward.) He was a popular chaplain – English visitors praised his sermons and he and his wife (who lived until 1908) entertained at home. One frequent guest, the artist and author Edward Lear, who regularly attended the church, witnessed an evening at their house which degenerated into a dispute about Presbyterians and Dissenters attending the Anglican services. Lear defended them but was shocked at Mrs Woodward's ferocious denunciation of them.

The marble reredos and Woodward's tomb, both rich in mosaic decoration of similar style, were executed by the sculptor Shakspeare Wood, another member of the congregation (see *Newsletter* 44). We owe this information to Leveson Scarfe, a retired Army major who knew distant cousins of the

Woodwards and who in 1923 spoke to Piermattei about having the tomb conserved. Scarfe raised sufficient money from the cousins to guarantee its permanent upkeep.

The sculptor John Gibson died one week before Woodward. Robert Macpherson's fine photo of Gibson's tomb (see *Newsletter* 50) shows us Woodward's sarcophagus as new, a rare image for a tomb of the 1860s.



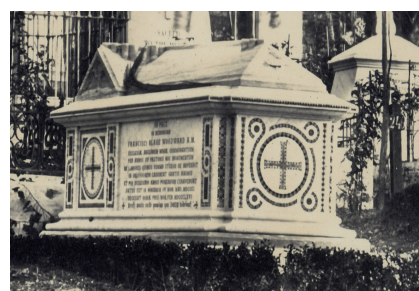
Tomb of F.B. Woodward



Mosaic decoration on the tomb



The Woodward reredos in All Saints' Church today



Robert Macpherson, *View of the Cimitero Acattolico*, 1867 (detail)

All texts by the Editor. For Ireland's membership, see *Newsletter* no. 30 and, for two others of the many Irish burials, see 'the Errant Bard', Lewis Geoghegan from Dublin (no. 33) and Mary Balzani born in Cobh of Cork (no. 52).

### HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

[www.cemeteryrome.it](http://www.cemeteryrome.it)

### THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

via Caio Cestio, 6, 00153, Roma

Director: Yvonne Mazurek

#### OPENING HOURS

Monday to Saturday 9:00am - 5:00pm  
(last entrance 4.30pm)

Sunday & Public Holidays: 9:00am - 1.00pm  
(last entrance 12.30pm)

### NEWSLETTER of the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

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ROME, 2023

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