

An episcopal puzzle: George Richmond's Monument to Bishop Charles James Blomfield
(1859-1867)

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George Richmond's memorial to Charles James Blomfield, Bishop of London between 1828 and 1856, is both important and puzzling. Yet it now attracts little attention. In Blomfield, it commemorates neither a famous hero nor an obviously notorious villain. Its creator, Richmond, was well known in his day, but has hardly retained his *réclame*. Even those who have sought to highlight Richmond's importance are inclined to conclude that this example of his work is merely 'well conceived and competently executed.'¹ Dismissed by one expert guide as nothing more than a 'routine marble figure on a sarcophagus', the memorial's form seems as conventional as its subject.² Despite wholly filling a large niche in the south choir aisle of St Paul's cathedral, the so-called Dean's Aisle, it suffers from the comparison with its near neighbour, the far more striking – and infinitely more famous – effigy of a former Dean, John Donne, standing wrapped in his own shroud. Like so many of the other nineteenth-century statues in St Paul's, the Blomfield memorial can now seem largely 'mute and

¹ Raymond Lister, *George Richmond: A Critical Biography* (London: Robin Garton, 1981), p. 89.

² Simon Bradley and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. London 1: the City of London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 177.

moribund’.³ Attended to more closely, however, it reveals itself to be a rather more interesting object: one that discloses intriguing paradox and real significance – not least for understanding the wider question of the cathedral’s place as a pantheon.

The Blomfield memorial is important, in part, because it was Richmond’s first great funerary monument. Indeed, it was his first major work of sculpture. A noted painter and disciple of William Blake, Richmond had made his name as a portraitist and engraver in the 1830s. His breakthrough piece was a portrait of William Wilberforce, the Tory Evangelical and campaigner against the slave trade. Moving in the circle of other Tories and many significant figures within the Church, Richmond produced notable images of a succession of bishops, becoming an eminently establishment figure: an honorary fellow of University College London and of the Royal Institute of British Architects, as well as an honorary doctor at both Oxford and Cambridge. He was also elected to the Royal Academy. Richmond received the commission for Blomfield’s memorial in 1859 and worked on it solidly for the next eight years. Everything was done by his own hands, from the clay maquette (completed in 1864) to the final marble sculpture (unveiled in 1867).

The memorial is important, too, because it commemorates someone important. Blomfield was not just any bishop. For two decades, he was of critical significance for both Church and state – the Archbishop of Canterbury, as one biographer observes, ‘in all but name.’⁴ A powerful

³ Cora Gilroy-Ware, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 32.

⁴ Malcolm Johnson, *Bustling Intermeddler? The Life and Work of Charles James Blomfield* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), p. 143.

figure in the House of Lords and within his own diocese, he was also, as Bishop of London, responsible for the Anglican Communion beyond the British Isles. Above all, as the prime mover in the Ecclesiastical Commission which transformed the workings of the Church, his significance was such that the Archbishop of York – no less – noted at the start of one meeting that, ‘we never do anything more than nib our pens till the Bishop of London comes’.⁵ His dinner invitations, sneered the Whig and wit Sydney Smith, a canon of St Paul’s, should more properly have said ‘The Church of England and Mrs Blomfield request the pleasure [...]’.⁶ His death was international news and his significance widely– globally – acknowledged.

His monument was also important for St Paul’s. Especially since the reconstruction of the cathedral under Christopher Wren, Bishops of London had tended to be memorialized elsewhere. Some, like his predecessor, William Howley, had been preferred to greater things. As archbishop, Howley’s memorial was properly sited in Canterbury Cathedral. Others had remained Bishop of London, but chosen to be entombed in the churchyard of St Mary’s Fulham, next to their episcopal palace. Blomfield was the first bishop to have a full-scale memorial in the cathedral for hundreds of years, and set a trend that would be taken up by his immediate successors – not least John Jackson, who would also be given a recumbent marble effigy after his death in 1885, fashioned by Pre-Raphaelite sculptor Thomas Woolner. The subtle use of colour in Blomfield’s memorial was also significant, with the yellow slab

⁵ Alfred Blomfield, *A Memoir of Charles James Blomfield DD* (London: John Murray, 1863), vol. 2, p. 184.

⁶ Johnson, *Bustling Intermeddler*, p. 142.

supporting the sculpture introducing new tones into the cathedral that would be embraced with enthusiasm in several subsequent projects.

Yet if this memorial was – and is – indisputably important, then it is also undeniably puzzling. Not least of the puzzles is the question of why it was put up in St Paul's at all. The bishop had, it is fair to say, a difficult relationship with his cathedral. Hearing that Blomfield had been bitten by a dog, indeed, Sydney Smith observed that, 'I should like to hear the dog's version of the story.'⁷ Nor was Blomfield more positive in return. 'I never pass St Paul's', he was said to have commented, 'without thinking how little it has done for Christianity.'⁸

The issue was fundamentally this: that Blomfield was a reformer and, in an odd way, a sort of Tory utilitarian. Not for nothing was his closest political relationship with the perennially improving conservative politician Robert Peel, a man who always sought to reform that he might preserve. He was indeed once called 'an ecclesiastical Peel'.⁹ Blomfield was concerned – deeply concerned – by the growth in London's population and by the sparse provision of churches to cater for it. Needing money to fund this project, he turned to the rich and relatively underemployed cathedral, observing that in contrast to the real need of the poor

⁷ Johnson, *Bustling Intermeddler*, p. 75.

⁸ Andrew Saint, 'The Reputation of St Paul's', *St Paul's: the Cathedral Church of London, 604-2004*, ed. by Derek Keene, Arthur Burns, and Andrew Saint (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 450-63 (p. 456).

⁹ P. J. Welsh, 'Blomfield and Peel: a Study in Co-operation between Church and State, 1841–1846', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 12 (1961), pp. 71 - 84, (p. 74).

for clergy, ‘the only use of Deans was to ask the Canons to dinner and the only use of the Canons was to accept the invitation.’¹⁰

The canons of St Paul’s and their great defender Smith resisted this episcopal threat to their revenues as best they could. Smith attacked Blomfield in the most hostile terms, condemning ‘change, fusion, and confusion’. ‘Such a scene of revolution and commutation’, he went on, ‘has not been since the days of Ireton and Cromwell.’¹¹ Reactionary journalists also fulminated against Blomfield, accusing him of being little more than a ‘Busy meddling treacherous priest’. ‘Look around after a few years’, they went on, ‘and you will behold the desolation you have created [...] choirs will soon cease to be, and Purcell and Tallis will be driven to take refuge elsewhere.’¹² The commissioners overseeing this, Smith declared, should have as the epitaph on their tombs: ‘under their auspices and by their counsels the destruction of the English Church began.’¹³ This included Blomfield, of course; indeed, as the prime mover of the Commission’s work, he was the direct target for Smith’s ire.

But Blomfield was implacable, and powerful, and he got his way. Parliamentary legislation sequestrated many cathedrals’ assets – including St Paul’s – opening them up for the use of the wider Church. Ten churches were built in Bethnal Green using the revenues from ten suppressed prebends at St Paul’s. The retirement of the Dean in 1849 enabled him to appoint

¹⁰ Arthur Burns, ‘From 1830 to the Present’, *St Paul’s*, pp. 84-110 (p. 86).

¹¹ *The Works of the Rev. Sydney Smith* (London: Longman, Browne, Green, Orme, and Longmans, 1840), vol. 3, p. 172.

¹² Johnson, *Bustling Intermeddler*, p. 79.

¹³ *The Works of the Rev. Sydney Smith*, vol. 3, p. 172.

a reformer, Henry Hart Milman, who was charged with turning the cathedral into something that more obviously served the needs of the ordinary Anglicans. (Milman's 1876 monument by John Francis Williamson is discussed elsewhere in this roundtable by Peter Howarth).

Blomfield's memorial, therefore, has an ambiguous status within St Paul's. It commemorates someone who did not much like – and was not much liked within – the cathedral. In some respects, in fact, it is an assertion of episcopal authority in a place that had for many years sought to resist precisely that. Viewed in this light it is not so much a pious tribute as a statement of intent.

Nor is that the only way in which this memorial turns out not to be quite what it seems. Although it looks like one, it is not a tomb. Blomfield – following the example of so many of his predecessors – was in fact interred in Fulham churchyard, where his grave, designed by his son, the architect Arthur Blomfield, takes a typically mid-Victorian, characteristically Gothic form, just like the many churches both men built throughout London. Although the effigy in St Paul's appears strikingly life-like, too, it was not taken from life. The commission was begun two years after Blomfield's death, and Richmond relied on his memories and an earlier piece of sculpture – a bust by William Behnes, produced nearly 30 years before – as his model for Blomfield's face.

Above all, it is worth considering what is being depicted here as well as who and where. This is a recumbent effigy of a bishop whose pastoral staff lies next to him, untouched, and whose hand rests upon a closed book. 'The expression given to the countenance', recorded his son

and first biographer, ‘is that of resignation, and cheerful acceptance’.¹⁴ But it is not the image of a death. Rather, what Richmond sought to depict was the exact moment, several years before Blomfield’s death, when his career was effectively ended by a massive stroke. This, then, is a memorial to sickness and disability – to a career cut short by illness – rather than a conventional *momento mori*.

This is particularly puzzling because his son’s account of Blomfield’s deathbed seems a far more appropriate subject for commemoration than the Bishop’s sudden and catastrophic stroke. ‘No sooner was the death struggle over’, he writes,

Than his fine features seemed to regain the early beauty of which age and sickness had deprived them; his fine forehead so often lately contracted with pain lay smoothed and unwrinkled as an infant’s; all appearance of paralysis passed away; and the lifeless face, in its placid composure, seemed in a moment to have lost twenty years of its age.¹⁵

Why choose the moment of paralysis and pain rather than this scene of release?

In part, the answer must come from the long tradition of figural funerary monuments in England. Rather than static images, these were often designed to capture telling moments in the subject’s life. From the dramatic sculptures of Louis-François Roubiliac in eighteenth-century Westminster Abbey, to more recent memorials by artists like Thomas Banks within St Paul’s, these were not just projects to commemorate the great; they were also attempts to evoke emotion on the part of viewers. The success of Richmond in achieving this can be seen

¹⁴ Blomfield, *Charles James Blomfield*, vol. 2, p. 273.

¹⁵ Blomfield, *Charles James Blomfield*, vol. 2, p. 271.

in the afterlife of this work. Tellingly, a century after its unveiling, one of Blomfield's successors as Bishop used the occasion of his own enthronement to place a wreath before this memorial. The monument was still doing its work of both commemorating a man and connecting with those who followed.

Capturing Blomfield as his career was cut short by a sudden, dramatic, and tragic blow was a way of evoking sympathy for someone for whom many were unsympathetic – especially at St Paul's. It was also a means of signalling what might have been, but for the catastrophe of his stroke. This tells us much about Blomfield and about those who sought to commemorate him. It shows them entering into a tradition of memorial representation, but shaping it to their own ends. It also begs still wider questions about the affective power of these statues: how and whether they work. In that sense, it perfectly illustrates the key themes of this roundtable.