



PRINCE ALBERT STATUE

Dublin, Ireland

53.3405901, -6.2627363



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Executive Summary

Unveiled in 1871, this statue commemorates Prince Albert – the husband and Prince Consort of Queen Victoria - in the grounds of Leinster House. The statue was moved to its current position in 1923, replaced by a Cenotaph memorial to Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins. In 2018, a petition submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas (Government), for the removal of the statue highlighted the statue's symbolism of British rule over Ireland and its status as the only remaining imperial statue in Dublin. However, the petition was deemed inadmissible after it was revealed that the statue doesn't belong to the Oireachtas.

Introduction

Unveiled in 1871 and relocated in 1923, the statue of Prince Albert is the only remaining imperial statue in Dublin. However, unlike the prominence of statues of significant Irish political figures – such as Daniel O’Connell and Jim Larkin – on main streets around Dublin, the Prince Albert statue in Leinster House is not a major landmark in the city, largely due to its inconspicuous location in the corner of Leinster Gardens. Nonetheless, the existence and location of the Prince Albert statue has become increasingly contentious in recent years, in light of petitions and requests for its removal. A petition in 2018 resulted in the case being brought before the Oireachtas Petitions Committee. However, the lack of clarity on the ownership and jurisdiction over the statue rendered the petition inadmissible. Since then, nationalist politicians have reinvigorated calls for the statue’s removal. This case study explores the complexities of the tangible legacies of British imperial rule and the difficulties that can arise regarding privately-owned sites in public spaces.

Background

Ireland’s Relationship with Britain

Ireland has a long history of contention with British imperial rule. In 1542, King Henry VIII of England declared himself ‘King of Ireland’ with the Crown of Ireland Act. The Tudor conquest of Ireland involved the confiscation of lands, the imposition of English settlers, laws, and language, the proscription of Catholicism, the dissolution of monasteries and the establishment of Anglican Protestantism as the state religion. The failure of the Nine Years’ War – also known as Tyrone’s Rebellion – in 1603 signalled a crucial defeat for Gaelic Ireland and led to the Plantation of Ulster from 1609 to 1690, during which James I of England settled Scottish and English planters and confiscated land from Irish natives. Uprisings and rebellions against English rule were a common occurrence, becoming increasingly revolutionary and republican in nature after the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798. Growing calls for Irish nationalism and independence after the Acts of Union 1800, which merged the kingdoms of Ireland and Great Britain to create the United Kingdom, led the British government to debate the ‘Irish question’. In 1844, Benjamin Disraeli, future British prime minister, defined the Irish question:

That dense population in extreme distress inhabited an island where there was an established church which was not their church; and a territorial aristocracy, the richest of whom lived in distant capitals. Thus they had a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien Church, and, in addition, the weakest executive in the world. That was the Irish Question.¹

The Irish Question dominated the Liberal Party’s platform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and created deep political divisions. The House of Commons introduced four Irish Home Rule bills in an attempt to address the problem of Irish oppression; only two were passed. The Third Bill, enacted as the Government of Ireland Act 1914, was suspended during the First World War, and reenacted as the Government of Ireland Act 1920, establishing two separate

¹ Benjamin Disraeli, “State of Ireland”, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, United Kingdom: House of Commons (2016)

Home Rule territories in Northern and Southern Ireland. However, the twentieth century had seen an increasingly militant society develop across the island of Ireland, with the formation of both the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers in 1913, and this culminated in the 1916 Easter Rising and the proclamation of the Irish Republic. In the 1918 General Election - called immediately after Armistice - republican party Sinn Féin won a landslide victory and, after forming a revolutionary parliament, declared Irish Independence on January 21, 1919. The subsequent Irish War of Independence, fought between 1919 and 1921 by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and British Force, resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the creation of the Irish Free State as a self-governing Dominion in 1922. The war of independence did not mark the end of Irish conflict over British rule; it was followed shortly by the Irish Civil War, waged between the Provisional Government of Ireland and the IRA, who viewed the Anglo-Irish Treaty as a betrayal of the Irish Republic that had been proclaimed during the Easter Rising in 1916. Despite the conclusion of the Civil War in 1923, Irish society remained divided for generations. Throughout the twentieth century, symbols of British imperial rule came under increasing scrutiny, as evidenced by the widespread removal of statues of British figures in Ireland.

Prince Albert and his relationship to Ireland

Whilst Prince Albert is generally regarded as a relatively benign figure with little direct negative involvement in Irish affairs, he nonetheless symbolises the period of British rule over Ireland.² As the husband of Queen Victoria, he is inevitably associated with Victoria's legacy of imperial rule and her image as 'The Famine Queen'.³ This label refers to Victoria's perceived inaction during the Great Famine that Ireland suffered between 1845-52, in which up to one million Irish people perished.⁴ Victoria never took up residence in Ireland and her feelings towards Ireland are well-documented, with William Gladstone writing that Ireland 'holds but a small place in her heart'.⁵ Together with his wife, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert visited Ireland three times during his lifetime. Upon instruction of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Victoria and Albert made a visit to Ireland in 1849, prompting protest and controversy over the notion that the celebrations accompanying the visit were, as a contemporary newspaper editorial described it, 'illuminating a graveyard'.⁶ During this visit, as a patron of the arts and sciences, Albert visited the Botanic Gardens and Leinster House, then home to the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) - founded in 1731 with the aim of sponsoring numerous artistic and scientific endeavours. Prince Albert's second visit to Ireland occurred in 1853, during which he visited the Great Industrial Exhibition in Dublin at Leinster Lawn, now home to his statue.

The Treatment of Other British Monuments

In what has been dubbed the 'Irish tradition for iconoclasm', Irish political protest has frequently

² Cónal Thomas, "'Statues don't embody history': The debate around Ireland's public monuments after Colston," *Journal.ie*, June 14, 2020.

³ Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne dubbed Victoria 'The Famine Queen' in 1900. Mícheál Ó Riain, "Queen Victoria and Her Reign at Leinster House," *Dublin Historical Record* Vol. 52, No. 1 (1999): 82.

⁴ Gavin Stamp, "Neighbours across the sea: A brief history of Anglo-Irish relations," *BBC News*, April 8, 2014.

⁵ Margarita Cappock, "The Royal Visits to Dublin," *Dublin Historical Record* Vol. 52, No. 2 (1999): 95.

⁶ Christine Kinealy and Gerard Max Atasney, *Hidden Famine: Hunger, Poverty and Sectarianism in Belfast*, Pluto Press, 2000: 184.

resulted in the destruction of monuments commemorating figures associated with British Rule.⁷ The timeline below evidences various instances in which statues have been removed through political protest.

- 1928 After numerous earlier attempts, a statue of William of Orange on College Green, erected in 1701, was blown up and destroyed.
- 1937 Large equestrian statue of George II was bombed and destroyed.
- 1946 A statue of King George IV, erected in 1823 to commemorate his visit to Ireland was damaged by a bomb.
- 1957 A monument to Lord Gough was damaged in an explosion. It now sits in Chillingham Castle in Northumberland.
- 1958 A statue of George William Frederick Howard, erected in 1870, was blown off its plinth in an explosion and subsequently moved to Yorkshire.
- 1966 Nelson's Pillar, commemorating Horatio Nelson, was damaged by explosives planted by the IRA.⁸

The specific example of Queen Victoria's statue is notable; Victoria's statue was erected outside Leinster House in 1908, accompanied by a military display. At the time, the statue was hailed by the *Irish Times* - the voice of Irish unionism - as 'a noble addition' to Dublin's monuments, but grew to attract criticism and attention once Ireland gained independence.⁹ In 1943, the Dublin Corporation passed a resolution requesting the government remove the statue on the basis that Victoria's name 'stank in the nostrils of past generations of Irishmen'.¹⁰ That same year, the Old IRA Battalion and other anti-Royalist groups staged protests outside Victoria's statue, demanding that it be removed.¹¹ It took five further years for the statue to be removed, being placed into storage in 1948, and eventually relocated to Sydney to be displayed at their new Queen Victoria Building.¹²

Given this context, the continued existence of the Prince Albert statue - 'last of its kind' in the city - can likely be attributed to its inconspicuous nature.¹³ Cónal Thomas, writing for the *Dublin Inquirer*, asserted that 'Even the guards who stand, metres away, outside the Department of the Taoiseach haven't clocked the memorial'.¹⁴ However, despite its hidden position, the statue has gained increasing public attention in recent years, with many calls from the public for its removal.

The Prince Albert Statue

The Prince Albert statue, depicting the Prince Consort on top of a plinth, was first unveiled in 1871. The plinth is surrounded by four smaller statues of 'four youths - a shepherd, an artist, a tradesman and an explorer', said to symbolise Albert's interests in agriculture, arts, industry, and

⁷ Frank McNally, 'From pillar to post colonialism: An Irishman's Diary about the Irish tradition of iconoclasm', *The Irish Times*, Wednesday 7, 2013

⁸ Cónal Thomas, "Brushing Up: Have You Ever Spotted Dublin's Last Imperial Statue?" *Dublin Inquirer*, January 6, 2016 and Dean Ruxton, "The old lady was glaring about: When Dublin's Queen Victoria statue was removed", *The Irish Times*, 14 June, 2020.

⁹ Dean Ruxton, "The old lady was glaring about: When Dublin's Queen Victoria statue was removed", *The Irish Times*, 14 June, 2020.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Mícheál Ó Riain "Queen Victoria and Her Reign at Leinster House," *Dublin Historical Record* Vol. 52, No. 1 (1999): 82.

¹² Sarah Bardon, "Prince Albert statue to stay on grounds of Leinster House," *Irish Times*, February 6, 2018.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

science.¹⁵ The creation of the statue was part of a wider effort by memorial committees across Ireland and Britain to commemorate Prince Albert after his death in 1861 in what one biographer described as ‘a cult of Albert’.¹⁶ In Dublin’s case, the statue was commissioned by the *Prince Consort Memorial Committee*, which was founded in 1862 and generally composed of members of Anglo-Irish ascendancy.¹⁷ Upon its foundation, the Committee passed a resolution stating that:

In order to perpetuate in Ireland the memory of that great and good man, the late Prince Consort, his eminent public services, his exemplary private virtues, his earnest cultivation of the arts of civilisation and peace, and his entire devotion to her who reigns in the affections of all her people, a memorial be erected in our metropolis by subscriptions for every part of the country.¹⁸

To achieve this aim, the Commission commissioned notable Dublin artist John Henry Foley, described as the most ‘important sculptor of mid-Victorian Britain’.¹⁹ Foley had created sculptures across the United Kingdom, and his work in Dublin already included statues of Daniel O’Connell, Field Marshal Viscount Gough, Edmund Burke, and Henry Grattan - the monument to Gough would subsequently be damaged in an explosion in 1957. The Prince Albert statue was completed in 1872, where it was shown, without any ceremony, to Albert’s son, the Duke of Edinburgh. It had initially been proposed for the statue to reside on St. Stephen’s Green or College Green but both sites had been met with backlash, with A.M. Sullivan, an Irish nationalist politician, asserting that the statue should be ‘raised quietly in Leinster Lawn or some place where people of Dublin would be little inclined to interfere’.²⁰ After much debate, the statue was erected on Leinster Lawn, deemed fitting for Albert’s sponsorship of the arts and sciences due to its position as the headquarters of the RDS and proximity to the National Gallery. In 1923, the statue was moved to a more remote corner of the Gardens to make room for a wooden Cenotaph commemorating the two ‘founding fathers’ of the first Free State government, Arthur Griffith - who founded republican party Sinn Féin - and Michael Collins - a commander of the Irish Republican Army and negotiator of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.²¹ In 1950, this Cenotaph was replaced by a more permanent granite monument, but the Prince Albert statue remained undisturbed, in its remote corner, barely visible from the public street.

History of the Contestation

Early Contestation

Though the Prince Albert statue has remained in place for over a century, it did not avoid all early contestation. Three days after it was first revealed to the Duke of Edinburgh, there was an attempt to blow it up. There is little available information about this incident, with historians largely relying

¹⁵ Cónal Thomas, “Brushing Up: Have You Ever Spotted Dublin’s Last Imperial Statue?” *Dublin Inquirer*, January 6, 2016.

¹⁶ Jules Stewart, *Albert*, London & New York, IB Taurus, 2011: 214.

¹⁷ Charlotte Cousins, “Prince Albert statue on Leinster Lawn”, *Library and Research Services Note*, November 13, 2023: 1.

¹⁸ Larcom Papers NLI, MS 7587, as seen in Cousins, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Judith Hill quoted in Cousins, “Prince Albert statue on Leinster Lawn”: 3.

²¹ Cónal Thomas, “Brushing Up: Have You Ever Spotted Dublin’s Last Imperial Statue?” *Dublin Inquirer*, January 6, 2016.

on a news article by the *Illustrated Police News* in June 1872 which depicts the attempt.²² After this event, the statue appears to have gone unchallenged until recent years, when renewed calls for its removal have proliferated.

The Petition for the Removal of the Prince Albert Statue

In February 2018, an anonymous member of the public began a petition for the removal of the Prince Albert statue on the grounds that it symbolised British rule over Ireland and memorialised a 'monarch whose views are in opposition to that of the Irish Republic'.²³ This petitioner suggested that the statue be auctioned and the proceeds distributed to a homeless charity.²⁴ It is difficult to gauge whether the petition gained much popularity, but the media coverage of the affair suggests that it did. The Oireachtas Petitions Committee, a specialist committee dealing with such requests, was set to discuss the statue's future on February 7, 2018.

Once details of the petition emerged in the media, various prominent figures and politicians offered their opinions on the matter. Most mainstream newspapers covering the issue maintained a neutral stance but published statements by prominent politicians to illustrate diverging viewpoints on the matter. Arguments emerged in defence of the statue, primarily on two grounds: the acceptability of Prince Albert's legacy and the tribute the statue served to John Henry Foley. In the case for the former reason, the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, offered an opinion, stating

I have no objection to Prince Albert being on Leinster lawn, I think it is part of our history [...] I have no problems with the statue quite frankly, it has been there for a hundred years, I don't know what the fuss is about.²⁵

Fine Gael senator Jerry Buttimer offered a similar view, even suggesting that the relocation of the statue to a more prominent position should be considered on the basis that Prince Albert was 'a progressive social reformer', opposing the slave trade and child labour.²⁶ Further arguments were offered on the basis of memorialising the work of John Henry Foley. Buttimer believed that the statue was a fitting tribute to Foley.²⁷ Similarly, Independent Councillor Mannix Flynn asserted that the public should not forget 'that the person who created this piece, Mr Foley, was from Montgomery Street in north inner city Dublin, so he's an Irish artist. It is a worthy work'.²⁸

The petition brought the statue's status into contestation, but was met by opposing opinions from senior politicians, including the Taoiseach himself. The arguments raised in the lead-up to the meetings of the Oireachtas Petitions Committee reflect the reasons cited during the resulting decision-making process, which ultimately deemed the petition inadmissible.

²² 'Attempt to blow up the Albert Statue, Dublin', *Illustrated Police News*, June 1872.

²³ "Petitions Committee to consider petition seeking the removal of statue of Prince Albert from the grounds of Leinster House", Tithe an Oireachtas. February 6, 2018.

²⁴ Wayne O'Connor, 'Petition for statue of Prince Albert to be removed from Leinster House lawn rejected by Oireachtas Committee', *Irish Independent*, February 7, 2018.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ O'Connor, *Irish Times*.

²⁸ Digital Desk, 'Latest: Committee throws out petition to remove Prince Albert statue from Leinster House', *Irish Examiner*, February 7, 2018

Renewed Contestation

After the decision by the Petitions Committee in 2018, the public contestation over the Prince Albert statue seemed to diminish, with news articles on the matter dwindling and no apparent public backlash emerging in light of the decision. However, the coronation of King Charles III in May 2023 renewed focus on Ireland's relationship with the monarchy and produced continued contestation over the statue. On May 9, 2023, Peadar Tóibín - leader of Aontú, a socially-conservative republican party - called for the Prince Albert statue to be decommissioned, having initially attempted to have the statue removed in 2016:

The reign of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert over Ireland was an unmitigated humanitarian disaster, from which Ireland has not recovered from yet in terms of population – yet we have a statue at the rear of Leinster House in Prince Albert's honour... I can't imagine any other mature democratic nation doing as we are in keeping Albert, with his history...²⁹

In a podcast with *The Hard Shoulder*, Tóibín asserted that it was 'quite incredible' that the statue was still standing given Albert had been the head of state – as Queen Victoria's husband – during the 'worst disaster that Ireland had ever experienced', and argued that the statue should be replaced with a figure who had contributed positively to Irish History.³⁰ However, the podcast also heard the opinion of Dermot Lacey, a Labour Party Councillor for Dublin City Council, who staunchly disagreed with Tóibín's position. He asserted that, as the statue is largely hidden by a hedge, it did not cause any offence to the average passer-by, and that Tóibín was simply seeking to stoke nationalist sentiments by calling for the statue's removal.³¹ The divergent opinions of Tóibín and Lacey demonstrate how questions pertaining to the contested legacies of statues are inexorably tied up with contemporary political debates. As of 2024, no further action has been taken despite Tóibín's renewed calls for the statue's removal.

Decision-Making Processes

The Oireachtas Petitions Committee

During the meeting of the Oireachtas Petitions Committee, which took only a few hours, the petition was rejected on three grounds. Firstly, the Petitions Committee asserted that the artistic work should be appreciated despite its subject, alluding to the importance of John Henry Foley in Dublin's history. Secondly, the Committee seemed to concur with the view that Prince Albert's statue did not serve as a problem based on historical legacy, with Committee Chair Seán Sherlock asserting that 'a civilised people does not tear out the pages of history but turns them over'.³² Sherlock concluded the meeting with the statement that the committee had decided 'the statue should absolutely and utterly remain'.³³

²⁹ Sean Molony, "Albert has to go" - Peadar Tóibín calls for removal of statue of King Charles III ancestor from Leinster House', *Irish Independent*, May 9, 2023.

³⁰ "Quite incredible' that Prince Albert statue remains at Leinster House - Tóibín", *News Talks*, May 9, 2023.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² O'Connor, *Irish Times*.

³³ *Ibid.*

However, there were also more practical considerations influencing the final decision of the Committee. In addition to arguments regarding the value of Foley's work and the acceptability of Prince Albert as a figure to memorialise, it was discovered during the meeting that the House of Oireachtas did not actually own the statue, and therefore did not have the jurisdiction to remove it. This rendered the petition inadmissible and contributed to the decision for the statue to remain in its current position on Leinster Lawn.³⁴ The Petition Committee called on the Office of Public Works, who has authority over the preservation of Ireland's national monuments and heritage sites, to determine who the statue belonged to.

Responses to Renewed Contestation

There does not appear to be any clear consensus surrounding what should be done with the Prince Albert statue. Many observers have focused on the statue as a piece of Dublin's history, largely due to its status as a representation of internationally renowned John Henry Foley. Simultaneously, some advance the view that Prince Albert was a relatively progressive figure, and that he does not represent an offensive historical legacy, whilst others, such as Sherlock, asserted that the removal of the monument is not necessary to recontextualise British rule. This case is illustrative of the wider debates regarding statues of divisive figures across the world. Whilst many have called for the removal of such statues, others assert the need to recontextualise their placement instead, rather than removing them.

The specific issue of the Prince Albert statue remains unresolved; no action has been taken towards the statue and there is no current indication of future consideration by the government. Tóibín's recent calls for its removal have gone unheeded, and it is likely that any future consideration would face the same problems of ownership and jurisdiction that were uncovered in 2018. This case is therefore indicative of the hindrance that issues of ownership can serve to a decision-making process, as well as the influence of contemporary political views on contested histories.

Summary and Conclusions

The continued contestation over Prince Albert's statue and the inability of the Oireachtas Petitions Committee to take action in 2018 demonstrates the difficulties that can arise in dealing with privately-owned works that have a complicated historical legacy. The issue of monuments memorialising British imperial figures has gained widespread attention from prominent politicians, demonstrating that opinions on these legacies are inexorably bound up with contemporary Irish politics.

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³⁴ Sarah Bardon, "Prince Albert statue to stay on grounds of Leinster House," *Irish Times*, February 6, 2018.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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