

Thomas Mewburn Crook, Sculptor

Katharine Harris

Thomas Mewburn Crook was a talented sculptor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but his work is relatively unknown except to his immediate family. He was responsible for a number of war memorials around the country and for a considerable amount of artistic work in St Mary's church, Standishgate, Wigan, and in the former St Mark's church, North Audley Street, Mayfair, London. With the latter closed for some time, St Mary's, Wigan, is the only remaining church in the country where a collection of his work remains intact and available.¹

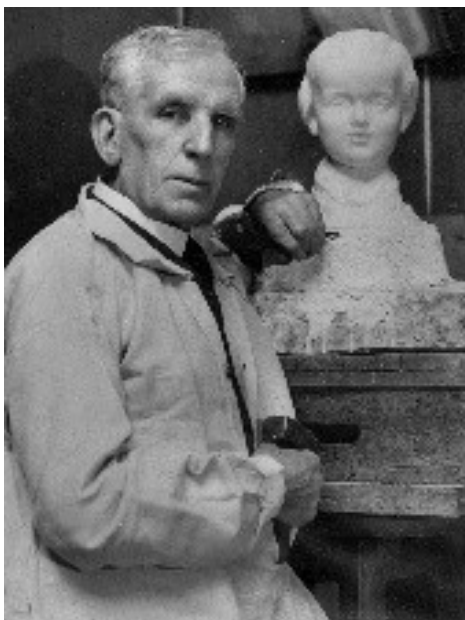


Fig. 4a: Thomas Mewburn Crook with a bust of his daughter Cecilia
(Katharine Harris)

As one of his grand-daughters, growing up with Thomas's work much discussed, the visits over the years to see my grandmother, his widow, Winifred Mewburn Crook who died in 1980,² left me in no doubt about his career. Most of his work, both in relief and in the round, included human figures. His expertise at carving the most delicate features out of Carrara marble, one of the hardest stones available, and almost breathing life into them was astounding. This quality in his work was remarked upon in 1917, '... he infuses flesh and blood and joyous life into his marble...'³

He was a conscientious man, who would study the background of the figure for his next commission, make a clay model of his intended sculpture, followed by a plaster one, before embarking on the marble sculpture.⁴ Though some of his work was secular in theme, a considerable amount of his work had a religious element to it, a reflection of his strict Catholic upbringing in Bolton, Lancashire.

However, things could easily have been so different. Thomas was the third child of James and Dinah Crook; Dinah was a Catholic, whereas James was an Anglican. They were married in October 1865 in St James's church, Brightmet, Bolton, where James's parents were later buried.⁵

Two sons arrived within two years, Joseph, then Charles, to be followed fifteen months later by Thomas.⁶ When Joseph and Charles were small boys, it seems that James became very ill and Dinah, worried for her husband's life, begged him to allow her to call the vicar of St James's. James agreed, but the vicar refused to come; in desperation she asked to be allowed to call the Catholic priest. Reluctantly James gave his consent and the priest visited. James was so impressed by this that he promised that if he recovered he would become a Catholic. He was as good as his word and had his two sons baptised. This was from a man, who only a short while before had often denied his wife the only means of transport available, the horse and trap, to attend weekly Mass.⁷

It was into this newly Catholic household that Thomas arrived on 4 December 1869. Yet another son, Francis, arrived eighteen months later, only to die aged eleven months.⁸ Four years later, a daughter, Frances, was born.⁹ For these five children, their first home, and where they spent their early years, was in Scope o'th Lane, Tonge

Moor. It would have been quite a rural region of Bolton. Scope o'th Lane still exists with its original housing; there is no information as to which building housed the Crook family, and was therefore the one in which he was born. Thomas's father, James and his grandfather, John, were living in Scope o'th Lane in 1851. At the time, both John and James were in the paper-making industry, John as a manager of a paper mill on Bradshaw Brook with James as an apprentice paper maker.¹⁰

Thomas and his older brothers were educated in a local convent infants school.¹¹ However, in 1881, Thomas and one of his older brothers were boarding at the Xaverian Catholic Institute, near Chorlton.¹² By this time the family had moved to St Mark's Street, Bolton, which was largely residential, and two more children had arrived, Annie in 1877 and Theresa in 1880. Unfortunately, Annie died when eleven months old.¹³

As the time came for Thomas to leave school, the question inevitably arose as to what he was going to do for a living. With some misgiving Thomas mentioned his thoughts of becoming a painter. James promptly apprenticed him to a decorator. Undeterred, Thomas worked during the day at his paid employment and attended evening classes, initially at the local art school in Bolton, and then at evening art classes in Manchester. Such a timetable was physically demanding, but he and his older brothers had been brought up to work hard. Indeed, their father had ensured that each in turn had worked in his mill, so that they knew the trade and what was entailed.¹⁴

Thomas persevered with his evening art studies and in due course his father agreed to his enrolling in full-time study at the Manchester School of Art under the headship of Richard Glazier. His two older brothers, Joseph and Charles had, by this time, already entered the cotton industry.¹⁵

In 1890, he completed his art master's certificate, which allowed him to study design, drawing, painting and modelling under Professor Lanteri at South Kensington for five years. This was a rigorous and demanding course, which provided new opportunities, both in terms of the many museums and art galleries, and also the ability to travel widely in Europe on a travel scholarship.¹⁶

Another milestone was achieved in 1896 when Thomas won an open competition for modelling master and anatomy lecturer at Manchester School of Art. Thus he returned to his native Lancashire. He settled-in well and became a well-respected colleague. In 1899 he rented a house with John Shields, the painting master at the School of Art, at 79, Clarendon Road, Chorlton-on-Medlock. He had a studio built in the garden of the property and from there he started sculpting in earnest. His career was launched with a statuette of a fisher boy.¹⁷

Crook gave lectures on art, met other artists of the time, and was very much part of the Catholic scene in Manchester. He also worked extensively alongside Monsignor Casartelli (later Bishop Casartelli), who at the time was rector of St Bede's College, on charitable trusts and committees connected with the missions. Thomas often accompanied Casartelli in his open carriage around Manchester, each appreciating the company and talents of the other. On these trips Bishop Casartelli would indicate the various business areas of the city and the cultures of the people who worked there. Such an extensive knowledge of different cultures and languages made a big impression on Thomas.¹⁸ Although Thomas was not a linguist, he had travelled extensively in Italy, studying Italian sculpture in the Classical style and how Italian artists had portrayed the human form in marble, so there was a common interest in addition to the Catholic connection. Bishop Casartelli was well known too, for his encouragement of the education of young Catholic men and considered it important that they had the opportunity to meet up with others of a similar background. Seventeen years older than Thomas, no doubt he took a keen interest in him and his developing sculptural career. It was this concern for the well-being of professional Catholic men, that led to Casartelli playing a significant role in the formation of the Catenian Association in 1908.¹⁹

Following the appointment of Monsignor Casartelli as Bishop of Salford in 1904, Thomas was approached about making a sculpture to mark the occasion. The result was a bronze portrait bust of the bishop. This was bought in 1965 by Canon O'Leary, of St Cuthbert's, Withington, Manchester, who, in his will, left it to the Catenian Association. Initially the bust was in its offices in London,

but is now in their head office in Coventry. When arranging purchase of the bust, Fr George Tarvel of St Joseph's, Darwen, wrote to Thomas's widow: '...I think that it is important that the late Mr Crook's talents be recognised by those who see the bust...'.²⁰ Unfortunately, photographs of this bust are currently used without any acknowledgement of the sculptor.²¹



Fig. 4b: Bust of Bishop Casartelli (Katharine Harris)

Bishop Casartelli was also a founder member of the Dante Society in Manchester in 1906, a group formed to celebrate Italian culture, from their food to their music and art and culture. Such a group, of which Thomas was part, was meeting on an informal basis even before 1906. There is a sketch portrait in the archive department

of the National Portrait Gallery by Fred Roe of Thomas Mewburn Crook which is entitled 'Dante'.

A commission for the decoration of the council chamber of the Manchester Municipal School of Technology (later UMIST - the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) followed. Other works were a frieze for Bury art gallery, a fountain figure for Duckinfield Park, Duckinfield, near Manchester, and a marble life size kneeling figure of 'Prayer'. The latter was Thomas's first work to be shown at the Royal Academy. During his tenure in Manchester his artistic talents were also employed in the execution of twelve feet high relief figures for Music, Sculpture, Architecture and Patriotism, on the occasion of the royal visit by the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1902, the same year in which he was awarded the honorary Associateship of the Royal College of Art (ARCA). The themes of his work therefore, were quite different, but all included figures.²²

Sculpted at this time, and probably Thomas's first religious work, was a figure of St Patrick, in plaster, (1904) for the newly-built church of the Sacred Heart in Thornton-le-Fylde. By the late 1890s, James had retired from the cotton industry as an engine cleaning waste maker in Bolton and moved to 40, East Beach, Lytham, with Dinah and their two daughters. Well-known locally and regular attenders at the Catholic church in Lytham, they would have known the Very Reverend Canon James Taylor, the parish priest, and his curate the Reverend Dr Daniel O'Donoghue. Canon Taylor instigated the building of the Sacred Heart church in Thornton-le-Fylde using the architects Pugin and Pugin. It was therefore fitting that in 1898 Dr O'Donoghue was given his first appointment as a parish priest at the Sacred Heart. Aware of the artistic skill of the son of one of his former parishioners, it seemed only natural to ask for a statue specifically made for his first parish church.²³

Shortly after receiving the statue, Dr O'Donoghue was moved to become parish priest of St Mary's church, Standishgate, Wigan, where he remained until his death in 1923. Around the same time, in 1905, Thomas's father died,²⁴ and having decided that his future lay in London, Thomas moved his mother and two sisters with him to Chiswick. Even though he had left Lancashire, he kept in touch

with Dr O'Donoghue and Bishop Casartelli.²⁵ Thomas was asked to help decorate the then rather spartan church of St Mary. The first request in 1908, was for the Old and New Testament saints in plaster

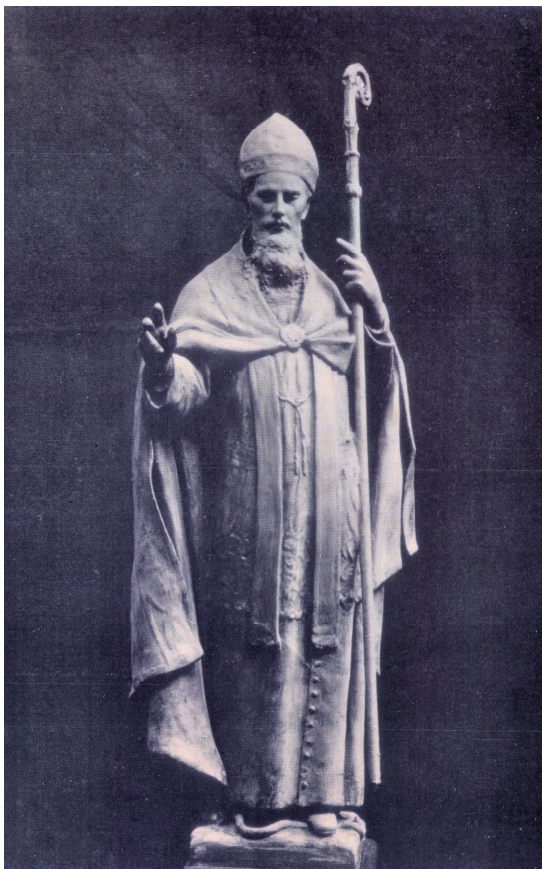


Fig. 4c: St Patrick, Sacred Heart church, Thornton-le-Fylde
(Katharine Harris)

relief which are on either side of the sanctuary (they have since been coloured). Also on the east wall of the sanctuary and done at approximately the same time, are the Angel and Virgin panels of the Annunciation. With their slightly elongated figures and flowing drapery, these panels evince the influence of the Art Nouveau style. Not long after these panels were finished, Thomas was asked to consider decorating the Lady altar. This work took Thomas to the beginning of the First World War. It comprised a life size Madonna (1911) in Serravezza marble for the Lady altar as well as two side panels in relief, also in Serravezza marble; the Visitation looking to the (liturgical) north of the altar and the Coronation of Mary by Christ on the (liturgical) south. In 1913, Dr O'Donoghue was in touch with Thomas again, this time asking for a pulpit in marble. As Thomas was more familiar with sculpting figures, though he knew how marble behaved when being carved, he planned and designed the pulpit, but he did not do the carving. Another commission for St Mary's followed, this time for the Stations of the Cross which were done as paintings, demonstrating Thomas's versatility and skill as an artist. Ever conscientious, he even had some Roman soldier costumes made by a family friend, so that his paintings portrayed the Roman soldiers as realistically as possible. One of these costumes remains with the family.²⁶

With Thomas's help, by the outbreak of the First World War, St Mary's looked a very different church to the one which Dr O'Donoghue had taken on in 1904. There was, however, one final request from Dr O'Donoghue in the aftermath of the war, a war memorial for the church. This took the form of a life size marble figure of St Anthony with the Christ Child, the 'Vision of Chateaufort'. All of the above mentioned works remain in St Mary's church, Wigan. Unfortunately, though Thomas completed work for this church over a period of fourteen years, from 1906 to 1920, there is no mention in the church of the extent of his work there.²⁷

At the same time as helping to decorate St Mary's, he was also carving life size sculptures in marble, some of which were shown in the Royal Academy. He carved portrait busts too, of friends and family. In 1913, a coat of arms in bronze and enamel was made for the Bank of New South Wales in Sydney, which was shipped out. At



Fig. 4d: ‘The Vision of Chateauneuf’, St Mary’s church, Wigan
(Katharine Harris)

the outset of the First World War, he submitted a design for a competition held for a series of statues to commemorate Welsh heroes; his statue was of Sir Thomas Picton. Thomas’s design was one of those chosen and this ten feet tall statue in marble of Sir Thomas Picton remains in Cardiff City Hall today. As can be appreciated, in common with other sculptors of the time, much of his time in the years immediately after the war were taken with designing and sculpting war memorials. In total he was responsible for eight First World War memorials around the country, including the one mentioned above in Wigan, six of which can be seen today.²⁸

The rigorous training in anatomy that Thomas had had at South Kensington was much in demand in 1914-1918. Too old for active service, he worked as a volunteer for the Red Cross, Hammersmith 5. During the daytime, he was an orderly in the operating theatres at Lancaster Gate Hospital for Officers and at Ducane Road; in the evenings, he assisted with unloading the wounded from the trains. His sculptural and anatomical expertise even extended to being called upon to make prostheses for those who had lost a limb. Perhaps mindful of the psychological impact of some of the horrific injuries suffered by the soldiers, he went out of his way to arrange some form of entertainment on a regular basis in order to maintain their morale.²⁹

As the war memorial work was coming to an end, his friend, the architect Arthur Blomfield, approached him about decorating St Marks's church, North Audley Street, London. Thomas carved a marble altar panel, with a Calvary in the centre, a war memorial in bronze and gold mosaic, and then some years later, in 1939, an angel lectern in bronze on a wooden pedestal. (St Mark's is closed, and the lectern has been stolen.) The inter-war years saw the carving of relief panels, busts of Pope Pius XII, General Monash, King George VI, and of his own two elder children, amongst many others. A relief panel in satinwood of Caxton and his printing press together with nine cast stone plaques were completed for New Malden library in 1939. He was also on many committees; he was the honorary Treasurer of the Royal Society of British Sculptors, an honorary Associate of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, a member of the committee of the War Relief Exhibition at the Royal Academy 1915, a representative of the Royal Society of British Sculptors on the Council of the British School in Rome 1939, served on the Council of the British Artists General Benevolent Society for nineteen years and a trustee of the Francis Reckitts Artists Convalescent Home, Rickmansworth for eight years.

Though his career continued after the First World War, it was interrupted by the death of his mother in 1924³⁰ and then at the end of the 1920s, by marriage and a young family.³¹ Their home was in Chiswick to where Thomas had moved in 1905. The Second World War, however, saw the family with five young children evacuated to

the safety of Buckinghamshire, whilst Thomas remained in Chiswick working. My mother is the youngest of those five, all of whom are alive and active today.³²

Thomas's last sculpture was done during these war years. This was at the request of the United States which wanted a replica of the statue of Edmund Burke in St Stephen's Hall, Westminster, in case it was destroyed in the bombing. Therefore time was of the essence. He started in May 1941, travelling daily from Chiswick to Westminster carrying his tools and, some days, wet clay too, amidst all the bombing. As it was, four bays of the roof of the Hall were bomb damaged, so he was regularly working twelve-hour days in bitterly cold and damp conditions for over four years. Although he got a quotation for having the statue cast shortly after the end of the war, nothing ever came of it. The Americans no longer wanted the statue, so payment was never forthcoming. Whilst he was not a young man in 1939, all the work in such inhospitable and nerve-wracking conditions for such a prolonged period broke his health. By the time his family returned to London at the end of the war, he was a sick man.³³ He died in January 1949 and is buried in Chiswick Old Cemetery. His wife, Winifred joined him in 1980.³⁴

In the course of his life, Thomas sculpted many statues, some of which have been mentioned, but there were many others. It has been a privilege to go to see some of his work in the various locations around the country. Standing inside St Mary's, Wigan, in 2015, seeing Thomas's work there for the first time and being surrounded by it was a very emotional experience. I always find it very hard, on seeing his work, to leave it behind as there is always something of him in it. He was certainly a talented sculptor to be able to carve such delicate features from marble; the plaster sculptures, though working models, are no less skilled in their execution. He achieved a huge amount, not only in his sculpture, but also in his private and personal life. He was a quiet unassuming man, who gave of himself through many lectures on art, working tirelessly for the Artists General Benevolent Society for almost twenty years, and in the First World War, applying his anatomical skills to the terrible injuries suffered in the situation which prevailed at the time. Though quiet, he took a full part in the artistic groups and societies with which he

was associated in Manchester and London. In both places, he was well respected, maintaining contact with friends over many years. He was a Catholic throughout his life, attending Mass at Our Lady and St Edmund's, Chiswick, for over forty-five years. It was there that each of his five children were baptised in due course and from there that three were married. No account would be complete without commenting on the artistic legacy he has left his children: an iconographer, a sculptor, a carver in wood, and the two others are also artistic; all this after approximately sixty-five years between them as teachers in Catholic education. It is indeed quite an achievement.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Thomas's five children, Theresa, Cecilia, Genevieve, Tony and Gabrielle for supplying information and photographs relating to my grandfather.

² <https://billiongraves.com/grave/Thomas-Mewburn-Crook/574359#/>; General Register Office (GRO), Register of Deaths, Westminster, September, 1980, vol. 15, p. 1770.

³ *The Hippodrome*, XVII, (154), (1917), Fine Arts Supplement, p. 6.

⁴ Information from Gabrielle Mewburn Mercer.

⁵ GRO, Register of Marriages, Bolton, December quarter, 1865, vol. 8c, p. 409.

⁶ GRO, Register of Births, Bolton, March quarter, 1866, vol. 8c, p. 281; December quarter, 1867, vol. 8c, p. 268; December quarter, 1869, vol. 8c, p. 278.

⁷ Information from Winifred Mewburn Crook.

⁸ GRO, Register of Births, Bolton, June quarter, 1871, vol. 8c, p. 302; GRO, Register of Deaths, Bolton, June quarter, 1866, vol. 8c, p. 191.

⁹ GRO, Register of Births, Bolton, December quarter, 1874, vol. 8c, p. 321.

¹⁰ Census Return, 1851, Bolton, HO 107, piece 2208, folio 271, p. 40.

¹¹ Information from Winifred Mewburn Crook.

¹² Census Return, 1881, Manchester, RG 11, piece 3920, folio 54, p. 7.

¹³ GRO, Register of Births, Bolton, June quarter, 1880, vol. 8c, p. 483.; Crook Family Papers (CFP), Malvern, Burial Records, Annie Elizabeth Crook (1877-1878). These are burial records held by the Crook family. Annie is buried in the Catholic section of Tonge Moor Cemetery.

¹⁴ Information from Cecilia Crook; Census Return, 1891, Bolton, RG 12, piece 3120, folio 111, p. 22, RG 12, piece 3120, folio 114, p. 31.

¹⁵ Mother Bernadette Mewburn Crook, [Cecilia Mewburn Crook] 'The Life and Work of Thomas Mewburn Crook', (unpublished MA Thesis, the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1963).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Martin John Broadley, *Louis Charles Casartelli: A Bishop in Peace and War* (Manchester, 2006), *passim*.

²⁰ CFP, George Tarvel to Winifred M Crook, 15 October, 1965.

²¹ Broadley, frontispiece;

http://www.nordendesign.co.uk/province1/html/bishop_casartelli.html;

<http://diplomatist2.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/bishop-casartelli-of-salford.html>.

²² Crook; *The Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 13 March, 1902.

²³ Crook, Brian Plumb, *Found Worthy: A Biographical Dictionary of the Secular Clergy of the Archdiocese of Liverpool (deceased) since 1850-2000* (Warrington, 2005), pp. 126 and 154.

²⁴ GRO, Register of Deaths, Fylde, June quarter, 1905, vol. 8e, p. 394.

²⁵ CFP, postcards from Bishop Cassartelli to T. M. Crook.

²⁶ Crook; the costume of the Roman soldier is in the possession of Gabrielle Mewburn Mercer.

²⁷ Crook.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ GRO, Register of Deaths, Brentford, March quarter, 1924, vol. 3a, p. 270.

³¹ GRO, Register of Marriages, Richmond South, December quarter, 1929, vol. 2a, p. 1317; Register of Births, Brentford, March quarter, 1931, vol. 3a, p. 365, December quarter, 1932, vol. 3a, p. 365, June quarter, 1934, vol. 3a, p. 465, March quarter, 1936, vol. 3a, p. 451, March quarter, 1938, vol.3a, p. 533.

³² Information from Gabrielle Mewburn Mercer.

³³ CFP, T. M. Crook, letters.

³⁴ GRO, Register of Deaths, St Marylebone, March quarter, 1949, vol. 5d,

p. 418; Register of Deaths, Westminster, September, 1980, vol. 15, p. 1770;
<https://billiongraves.com/grave/Thomas-Mewburn-Crook/574359#/>.