

‘THE EAGLE SLAYER’
by John Bell

*Bethnal Green Museum,
Cambridge Heath Road,
London Borough of Tower Hamlets*

by

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Bethnal Green Museum
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This report was prompted by an inquiry from Mark Hutton, Conservation Officer with LB Tower Hamlets, in early May 2000. English Heritage London Region has delegated authority for determining the Listed Building Consent application, which has been made by Bethnal Green Museum. The proposal is to relocate this 1851 cast iron statue by John Bell in a new display at the Science Museum in South Kensington. The statue has stood outside Bethnal Green Museum since 1927. This being the English Heritage Year of Public Sculpture, it seemed timely to look into the statue’s history in order to ascertain whether any further involvement with this potentially contentious case would be required.

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‘The Eagle Slayer’: description and assessment

This important sculpture, the work of John Bell (see **illustrations 1-2**) was first exhibited (presumably in plaster) at the 1837 Royal Academy exhibition as ‘the eagle shooter’¹, with the accompanying verse:

A Moment more the shaft is sped
With lightening speed and steady aim
A Moment more the feathers red
In the best blood the wretch can claim.²

The figure consists of a heroic nude male, his left arm outstretched upwards holding a bow; the right arm is drawn back, the first two fingers advanced as though having just released the bowstring and let loose an arrow. The legs are widely spaced apart; between them is a tree stump, with a full quiver leaning against it behind the figure; in front of it is a dead lamb, the presumed victim of the eagle which has dropped it from above. A convenient drape covers the archer’s genitals and hangs over the tree stump. The figure stands nearly 100 inches, or 247 cms, high.

The statue is one of the high-points of late English Neoclassical sculpture, and captures perfectly the transition between late Georgian and early Victorian art. Its principal source of inspiration was Greek heroic figure sculpture: the ‘Apollo Belvedere’ supplied the idea of a standing archer figure with an outstretched arm with bow, while the ‘Borghese Gladiator’ influenced the outstretched pose of the taut figure, and inspired its dramatic profile. ‘The Eagle Slayer’ also recalls the all-too-few examples of English ideal sculpture of the Neoclassical period, such as Westmacott’s ‘Achilles’ of 1822 in Hyde Park, the most prominent heroic nude sculpture in London, or Flaxman’s epic ‘St Michael and Satan’ of 1821 at Petworth. The closest parallels are probably to be found with the work of the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1843) who inherited Antonio Canova’s mantle (1757-1822) as the outstanding Neoclassical sculptor in Europe.

Bell’s composition is appropriately dramatic, and takes the form of an arrow head with the two legs forming the barbs, the tree trunk the top of the shaft and the outstretched arm the arrow tip. The smooth modelling of the body is highly comparable to the work of other English Neoclassical sculptors such as Richard Wyatt (1795-1850) and John Gibson (1790-1866), but Bell’s work possesses a vigour and eschewal of classical prototype which marks it out as a figure of real interest.

The narrative aspect of the sculpture anticipates the contemporary appetite for sentiment: the dead lamb incites pathos in the onlooker, while the dramatic stance and keen determination of the archer demonstrate retribution in a highly dramatic way. The figure bore no specific interpretation, but carried different meanings nonetheless. The Good Shepherd theme carries strong Christian associations, while the eagle was forever associated with Napoleonic France, thereby making the shepherd into a David-like victor over an unseen Goliath. This martial connotation is underscored by

¹ Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts a Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904* (1905) I, 174.

² Quoted in Sotheby’s New York, *The Tannenbaum Collection* sale catalogue (26th May 1994), lot 71.

the pronounced muscularity of the figure. The cast iron version under consideration was produced in 1851, at a time of growing concerns over the resurgence of Bonapartism in France following the rise to power of Napoleon III: this is but speculation, but goes some way to explaining the contemporary appeal of the piece.

Variants and Materials

John Bell was exceptionally attuned to contemporary developments in sculpture reproduction. This, together with the fact that the sculpture was well received, resulted in numerous versions of the composition being made. The first model was in plaster: following its successful display at the 1837 Royal Academy, a patron emerged who was willing to underwrite the design's transfer into the altogether more costly material of marble.³ This took place in c1844⁴ and the patron was Charles, 3rd earl of Fitzwilliam (1786-1857), who installed the statue at his Yorkshire seat of Wentworth Woodhouse. This version (see **illustration 3**), once more exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition, was later sold and last appeared at auction in New York in 1994. The plaster was also displayed at an exhibition in 1844 organised by the Art Union (est. 1837) which sought to select sculptors for the new Palace of Westminster. The *Literary Gazette* described it as 'a performance so striking and masterly that it at once fixes the attention, not only by the novelty of its subject, but by the ability of the treatment'.⁵ Bell attracted favourable notice, leading to other public works: 'the Eagle Slayer' was thus a highly significant work in Bell's career.

The second version was a reduced version in bronze, modelled by Edward Wyon, which stood some 61cm high (see **illustration 4**). This was produced for the Art Union Exhibition of 1844, and subsequently published in several editions, thus further enlarging the fame of the composition.⁶ The Art Union also produced versions of other sculptures in Parian ware, or biscuit porcelain, but the delicacy of the extended left arm of 'the Eagle Slayer' may have made this an unwise medium in this case.

The third and fourth versions were produced by the same firm: these were full size versions in bronze and in cast iron, both produced by the Coalbrookdale Company. One of these was exhibited in the 'Industry' section of the 1851 Great Exhibition, displayed within an ornamental cast iron rustic shelter (see **illustration 5**). This earned the scorn of the *Illustrated London News*, which dismissed it as

one of the most pretentious works in the Building... this fantastic and withal remarkably pretty inutility...[it had] many and grave objections to the design... In the midst is a cast of J. Bell's "Eagle Slayer". The eagle transfixed by an arrow at the top inside must be considered an absolutely inexcusable piece of bad taste.⁷

³ Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture* (1982), 27.

⁴ Mark Stocker, 'John Bell' entry in Jane Turner ed., *The Grove Dictionary of Art* (1996) 3, 629.

⁵ Quoted in Read, 27.

⁶ Charles Avery and Madeleine Marsh, 'The Bronze Statuettes of the Art Union of London: the Rise and Decline of Victorian Taste in Sculpture', *Apollo* (May 1985), 331-32.

⁷ *ILN* 9th august 1851, 193.

The canopy was illustrated by the magazine, and this shows the item to have been an utterly characteristic production of the day: a seething web of tendrils and interlaces, organised around the overall design of a *tholos*, or Greek circular temple. Within the dome was installed a piano manufactured by Collard's, used for impromptu recitals; Bell's statue had much to compete against.

Whether it was the iron or the bronze version which was exhibited is unclear. Its presence in the 'Industrial' section would argue that it was the iron cast, as would its location within a structure also of iron. Against this is the fact that it was shown alongside another Bell statue of 'Andromeda', which was subsequently purchased by Queen Victoria for Osborne House, and this is known to be of bronze.⁸ However, the fact that the iron sculpture was soon after sited in South Kensington, close to the exhibition site, suggests that it was indeed the cast iron version which was displayed.

The Bethnal Green 'Eagle Slayer': provenance and recent history

Some doubt surrounds the early history of the statue, and not even the Victoria & Albert Museum's registration file on the piece⁹ tells the whole story. The first record is a photograph in the National Art Library of 1860, showing it on Cromwell Road, in front of the South Kensington Museum. In 1890 it is known to have been outdoors, in the entrance court (subsequently the quadrangle). A search in 1913 into its acquisition drew a blank; the Keeper of Sculpture concluded that it had belonged to the Science Museum and had subsequently passed into the V&A's guardianship. In October 1926 it went to the Bethnal Green Museum, an out-station of the V&A, which also possessed a school of sculpture modelling, in front of which the statue was placed in 1927. What lay behind this translation is unclear, but no doubt the ever lower esteem in which Victorian sculpture was then placed had much to do with it.

Only in 1959 was the work officially registered; it was then repositioned and placed on a new pedestal (the statue having hitherto been standing direct on the ground, according to an earlier photograph: **see illustration 6**). The statue underwent a comprehensive restoration programme in the early 1970s, when the wooden¹⁰ bow (a constant target for vandals) was reinstated and the figure repatinated.

In the later 1990s the idea emerged from the Science Museum that it would be fitting to return the statue to an industrial context within an indoor display context. Concern about the outdoor setting of 'the Eagle Slayer' had been growing, caused by its exposed location close to a busy road, and the frequent assaults on the statue. The Science Museum solution addressed these issues, and promised to restore the work to a more informative context. However, since the sculpture had been added to the Tower Hamlets list in the mid 1970s, consent would be required for removing it back to South Kensington. What is good for the sculpture is not necessarily good for Bethnal Green, however, and there has been some local opposition to the idea of the figure being removed. The museum has stated that a replacement sculpture will be commissioned in order to make good the loss.

⁸ Information from Mike Turner, inspector for Osborne.

⁹ Marjorie Trusted, Keeper of Sculpture, kindly summarised the file's contents for me.

¹⁰ Arthur Byron. *London Statues* (1981), 321 identifies the material.

Considerations of interpretation and conservation are thus set against those of local interest and the desire to retain items of artistic and historical significance in an outdoor setting. This is a debate which has raged for decades over 'Eros' in Picadilly Circus, and one which is likely to be repeated about an increasing number of outdoor monuments.

The Sculptor: John Bell (1812-1895)

The sculptor of 'the Eagle Slayer' was among the foremost statuary of High Victorian England. Suffolk-born, he trained at the RA schools and first showed there in 1832. 'The Eagle Slayer', exhibited in 1837, was the crucial work of his career: from this sprung important public commissions, such as the marble statues for the palace of Westminster of Lucius Carey, Viscount Falkland (1848) and Sir Robert Walpole (exhib. 1854 RA), or the Guildhall monument to the Duke of Wellington of 1856. One of his finest public sculptures is the figure of 'Armed Science' at Woolwich Barracks, carved in 1855. His most prominent Central London work was the Crimean War Memorial to the Guards Brigade in Waterloo Place, unveiled in 1860,¹¹ and his most prestigious commission was probably the group representing the Americas, carved for the north-west plinth of the Albert Memorial.

Bell's relationship with the Coalbrookdale Company was close, and the cast iron version of 'the Eagle Slayer' was not the only one of his works to be cast in this material. His earliest work for the company was 'the deerhound hall table', described by Gunnis as a 'canine monstrosity' which consisted of four life-sized hounds supporting a table groaning with symbols of hunting and wine; it attracted favourable notice at the 1845 Art Union exhibition.¹² His statue of Oliver Cromwell, outside Warrington Town Hall, was based on a plaster model exhibited at the 1862 exhibition, and is also of cast iron; nearby are the highly elaborate, angel-topped Coalbrookdale gates, now in Warrington's Sankey Street, which were also shown at that time. It is possible that Bell's figure of Cursetjee Manockjee Petit in Bombay (1875) is also of this type, judging by a photograph in the Conway Library. Other works in cast iron included a series of animal heads, modelled by Bell, which were incorporated in the railings around the Metropolitan Cattle Market at Pentonville in 1858.¹³

Best known among Bell's ideal subjects was his pathetic group of 'the Babes in the Wood', shown at the 1839 RA and bought by Queen Victoria for Osborne. Other exotic figures included 'the Octoroon', 'Erin', 'the Maid of Saragossa', 'Miranda' and 'Una and the Lion'¹⁴. These fused Bell's classical training with his interest in narrative sculpture, and his taste for the exotic.

'Bell was, to put it mildly, somewhat unusual in what he got up to', remarked Benedict Read.¹⁵ This applied both to his subject matter, and to his exceptional

¹¹ *The Builder* 11th August 1860, 512-13.

¹² Rupert Gunnis, *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851* (rev. ed. 1964), 48-49.

¹³ *Idem*.

¹⁴ Bell's work is surveyed in Richard Barnes's recent biography (no copies in the BL or London Libraries, alas). The Conway Library of the Courtauld Institute has two box files of photographs of his work.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 310.

interest in the possibilities of emerging reprographic techniques, and his desire to break down the barriers between Fine Art and industrial production. Bell was retained as a designer and modeller by the great Birmingham firm of Elkington's, the pioneers of electro-plating and the mass production of small-scale objects in metal: his design for an allegorical case entitled 'the Hours' for Elkington's attracted attention at the 1851 exhibition. Bell's other forays into applied arts included modelling pieces for Minton's, to be reproduced in Parian ware ('Una and the Lion', Dannecker's 'Ariadne riding a Panther', 'Clorinda', 'Dorothea' and 'the Octoroon' were all made by Minton's, and his 'Erin' (or 'Hibernia') was reproduced in terra cotta by the Blashfield Company.

Bell's work did tail off, however, and in his later years he drifted away from the heroic figures of his prime towards more sentimental territory. Gunnis's verdict is a harsh one:

His early works of sculpture had shown vigour and imagination, but his later groups exhibited at the Academy were remarkable for bad taste and sickly sentimentality... They were much admired at the time and are typical of the work which has brought the sculpture of the late Victorian era so deservedly into disrepute.¹⁶

Such accusations could not be made of 'the Eagle Slayer'. It remains a powerful piece, and one that was of pivotal importance to Bell's career.

Conclusion

'The Eagle Slayer' is a notable Victorian sculpture which straddles the Neoclassical movement and High Victorian developments in art manufacture. It has no strong links with its present Bethnal Green setting, beside that of seven decades of presence. Cast iron sounds like a tough and resilient material, but it too has its limitations and is far from impermeable. The statue was first exhibited in iron at the 1851 Great Exhibition in the industry section, and its return to a South Kensington setting, placed in the context of industrial technology of the Science Museum, has much going for it.

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¹⁶ Op. cit., 49.



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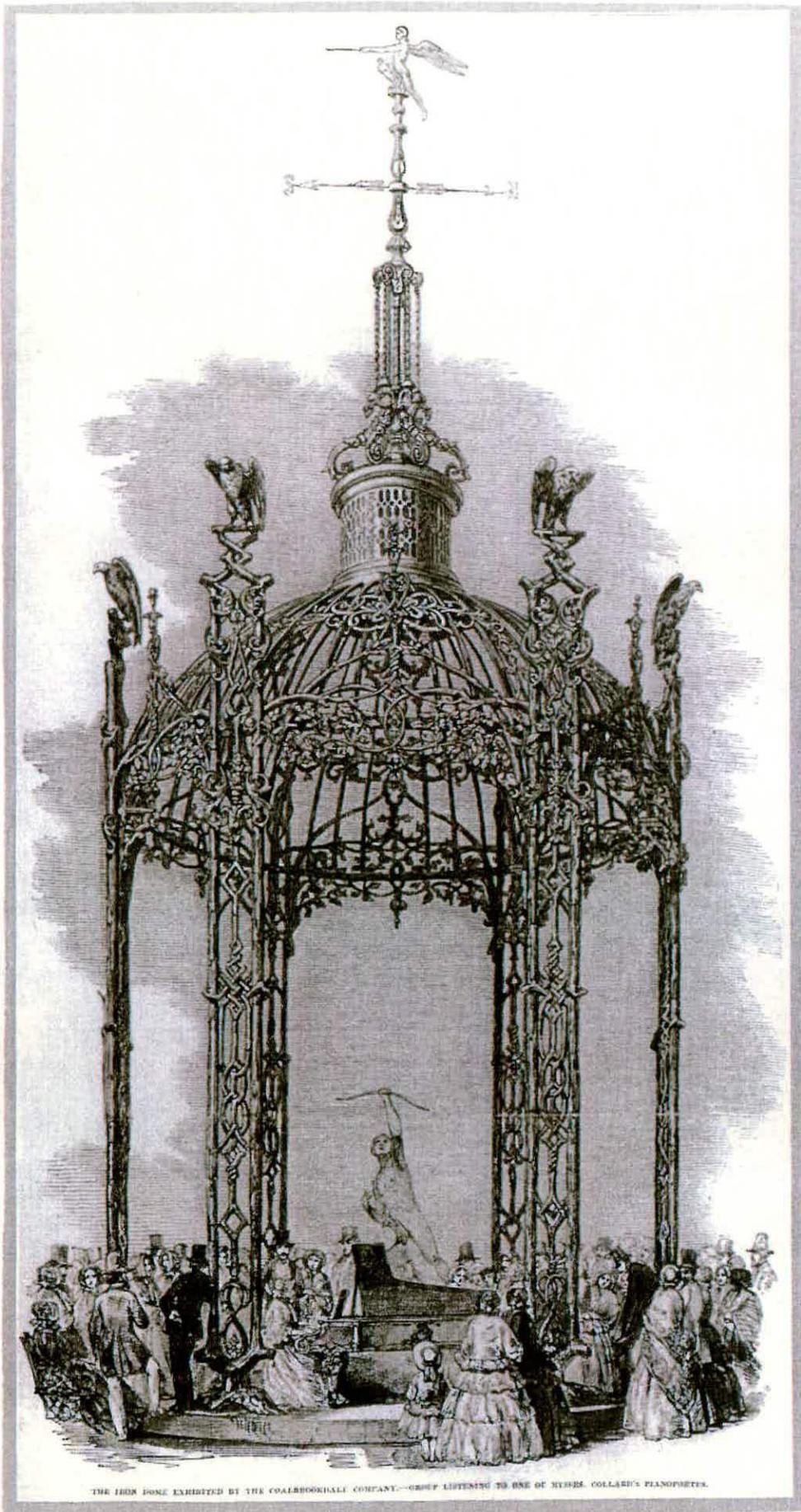
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4 'The Eagle Slayer': reduced bronze version, c1844. 91 cms high. Modelled by E. Wyon for the Art Union (Royal Collection, Osborne House).



THE IRON DOME EXHIBITED BY THE COALBROOKDALE COMPANY.—GROUP LISTENING TO ONE OF MESSRS. COLLARD'S PIANOFORTES.

- 5 The Iron Dome exhibited by the Coalbrookdale Company.- Group listening to one of Messrs Collard's Pianofortes'. *Illustrated London News*, 9th August 1851, p.193.