When Landseer was in his early twenties, his reputation had already provoked a widely repeated quip of Sydney Smith's. One of the painter's titled patronesses had been urging Smith to sit to Landseer for his portrait. The canon permitted himself a benign smile. "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

Sir Edwin H. Landseer died in 1873, at the height of the Victorian epoch. By that time he had become the most popular painter the English-speaking world had ever known. His name was, literally, a household word. Few middle-class homes, in that great period of middle-class prosperity, were without those well-known animal pictures, rendered in enormous steel engravings. The very names of some of the pictures suffice to recall the period, even to those of us who are just old enough to remember the faint, tangential echoes of it. Dignity and Impudence, The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner, A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society, The Stag at Bay, The Monarch of the Glen—to anyone whose childhood was at all touched by even a shadow of Victorian taste and feeling, they are all familiar beyond criticism.

Since the first World War, the pendulum of taste in art has swung steadily the other way. The story-telling painters who dominated the scene a century ago have been relegated to the attic—from which the next step is oblivion—or rediscovery. Ask any art student today to place Frith, Mulready, Maclise, or Eastlake and, more than likely, you will draw a complete blank. Of them all, Landseer's is the only name that still draws a nod of recognition from a generation which, chary of sentimentality, is inclined to dismiss him as "the man who painted those Christ-like dogs."

The Victorians are particularly disturbing in their refusal to remain docketed. The Great Exhibition of 1851, seen across the expanse of a whole century, appears no longer to be a vast vitreous gallery of horrors, but rather a storehouse of nostalgia and delight. The Crystal Palace, that glass shell which held it, shines to our eyes today with the glow of a fragile milestone of tranquility, a too transitory monument to man's faith in his own progress. Can it be at all possible that the antlered heads of Landseer's stags, and his faithful, liquid-eyed dogs, stacked away in the limbo of critical disfavor, are now ready to be dusted off again?

Ruskin stated the Victorian case for Landseer, defining "greatness in art" for the benefit of his contemporaries (in Modern Painters):
Left, High Life and, right, Low Life, engraved by C. C. Hollyer after paintings by Landseer. Most of the engravings and paintings illustrated in this article may be seen in the special exhibition The Crystal Palace, which recalls London’s Great Exhibition of 1851.
ABOVE: Morning: “In strength and spirit match’d they fought—and died.” Engraved by Thomas Landseer. BELOW: There’s Life in the Old Dog Yet, engraved by H. T. Ryall
"Take, for instance, one of the most perfect poems or pictures (I use the words as synonymous) which modern times have seen:—"The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner'. Here the exquisite execution of the glossy and crisp hair of the dog, the bright sharp touching of the green bough beside it, the clear painting of the wood of the coffin and the folds of the blanket, are language—language clear and expressive in the highest degree. But the close pressure of the dog's breast against the wood, the convulsive clinging of the paws, which has dragged the blanket off the trestle, the total powerlessness of the head laid, close and motionless, upon its folds, the fixed and tearful fall of the eye in its utter hopelessness, the rigidity of repose which marks that there has been no motion nor change in the trance of agony since the last blow was struck on the coffin-lid, the quietness and gloom of the chamber, the spectacles marking the place where the Bible was last closed, indicating how lonely has been the life—how unwatched the departure of him who is now laid solitary in his sleep;—these are all thoughts—thoughts by which the picture is separated at once from hundreds of equal merit, as far as mere painting goes, by which it ranks as a work of high art, and stamps its author, not as the neat imitator of the texture of a skin, or the fold of a drapery, but as the Man of Mind."

It is not unsignificant that The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner was painted in 1837, the year of Victoria's accession to the throne of England. Landseer was then thirty-five, midway in the undeflected course of his career.

He had begun as an infant phenomenon. The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1815 contained two pictures by "An Honorary Exhibitor, Master E. Landseer, at Mr. Landseer's, 33 Foley Street." One was the "Portrait of a mule, the property of W. H. Simpson, Esq., of Beleigh Grange, Essex." The other was listed as "Heads of a pointer bitch and puppy," also the property of his friend W. H. Simpson. Young Landseer's talent and predilection for animals seem to have been his virtually at birth. The Victoria and Albert Museum owns a carefully rendered copy of a dog, made at the age of five. Among the other examples of his childish efforts in the Victoria and Albert collection are a parakeet on its perch, a family of pigs, and a lazy bull, lying down chewing the cud, which according to his father's certification, was drawn when "he was first breeched."

The boy had been fortunate enough to be born into a family of artists. His father, John Landseer, was an engraver whose Lectures on the Art of Engraving appeared in 1807 and was for a long time a standard work. Edwin's brothers, Charles and Thomas, also shared his talents, but in lesser degree. Charles was a competent, anecdotal painter who showed regularly with the Royal Academy. Thomas, more distinguished as an engraver than as a painter, is chiefly remembered for the plates he made after Edwin's paintings. Their sister, Emma, also achieved some distinction as an artist.

"The chief work of John Landseer," according to a contemporary biographer, "was the bringing-up of his sons; in this he was thoroughly successful, and worthy of more honour than is given to one who struggled valiantly towards an unselfish end."

As for Edwin himself, he needed little encouragement. In addition to his other gifts he had an enormous capacity for industry. His life was entirely circumscribed by his work. Quite early in life he seemed to have taken his own measure with astonishing accuracy. He was thoroughly aware of his shortcomings as well as of his abilities.

Recognition came quickly and in a steady stream. His style and scope never changed: they merely intensified. With success came wealth, titled friends, crested invitations, and, eventually, a knighthood. He was the favorite painter, the guest, and in time the friend of Victoria and Albert. He refused the presidency of the Royal Academy. His paintings sold for unprecedented amounts and were declared to be "pictures no gentleman's home should be without." The lions which he was commissioned to model for the Nelson Monument still crouch in Trafalgar Square, and many of his best paintings eventually became the property of the British nation, which received them gratefully. He had all that his time could give him in the way of solid success.
ABOVE: The Honeymoon. BELOW: A Lord and Lady of the Chase. Paintings by Landseer, lent for the exhibition by Mrs. M. Dodge
Most of the elements of this success are easy to trace. For one thing, Landseer lived at a time when the mercantile middle-class came into emergence as collectors. The great houses of the aristocracy were already full to bursting with accumulated works of art. Their days of patronage were over, since there was no more room for acquisition. Landseer's works were ideally suited to the tradesmen who now came to the fore, with their large empty new houses that had to be filled. They were not graduates of the Grand Tour and so had little use for the Italian schools. Nor did they want elegant old master portraits of people to whom they were not related. They preferred their contemporaries. Furthermore, pictures like Landseer's were easy to understand. They told stories, they bore moral messages, they contained pathos, homely sentiment, and character. They faithfully reproduced the textures and scenes which a society lately rural and now turned to manufactures could appreciate.

The wildness of the Scottish landscape and the interpretation of Highland life in which Landseer specialized also made a great appeal to the Victorian sense of the romantic. And, finally, his pictures were respectable.

Respectability was a quality which could not be overestimated. Victoria's was an era when the high moral character of a work of art was a prime consideration of judgment. "Vulgarity" was the one thing above all others to be eschewed.

Landseer avoided the charge of vulgarity by the use of animals in situations which might have been suspect indeed if he had employed human beings. The sensual delights of fur and pelt were a far more admissible source of pleas-
The Otter Hunt, engraved after Landseer by C. G. Lewis
ure than undraped human flesh. Furthermore, when he did handle subjects which his contemporaries might have considered “common,” he made a point of using his animals to illustrate ideas of morality or character. He exemplified High Life by painting Sir Walter Scott’s favorite deerhound, Maida, in a pose of great nobility, surrounded by props suggestive of chivalry and romance. In its companion piece, Low Life, a contrasting portrait of canine cunning, a dog squats beside a butcher’s block with an empty tankard and a clay pipe. How successful the painter was in capturing this extreme of the contrast, and winning approval by it, is attested by Ruskin’s rating the butcher’s dog with Cruikshank’s Noah Claypole (in the illustrations to *Oliver Twist*) as “the intensest rendering of vulgarity absolute and utter with which I am acquainted.”

Considered on these terms, Landseer was the ideal painter for his age. His were pictures which the entire family could safely enjoy.

Still another reason for Landseer’s immense popularity was the increasing importance of steel engraving. About 1840 the new process of electrotyping steel on copper had made it possible for a plate to yield more good impressions than had been feasible before. No Englishman’s home was now complete without steel engravings. Their importance to an artist is readily apparent: they served not only as a means of spreading his fame with the public but also as a steady source of income from publishers’ royalties. They also turned painters from broad effects of light and dark to concentrate their powers on fine details and the minute rendering of textures which could be copied brilliantly on the metal. Landseer came from a family of engravers, and he was quick to realize the importance of the prints which were made after his paintings. The best craftsmen of his time worked on the plates. The engraving process considerably affected the technique of all the popular painters. It was not long before many paintings—Landseer’s notably—were, more or less, merely a stage in the publication of a popular print.

As a result, newly rich business men fought in the auction rooms for the privilege of hanging the originals on their walls. Prices of Landseers were phenomenal, not only for those times but for any time. Few artists have ever been paid as well as he was during their lifetimes. At the sensational Bicknell sale in 1863, three Landseer’s which had been bought from him in 1850 and 1859 for 300 to 400 guineas, fetched from 1,800 to 2,300. At Christie’s in 1874, when the artist’s executors sold off a number of pictures, finished and unfinished, along with a quantity of sketches, they realized the unprecedented aggregate of £69,709 9s. Nearly twenty years later the dealer Agnew bought The Monarch of the Glen from Lord Cheylesmore for over seven thousand pounds.

At his death, on October 1, 1873, the entire British nation mourned Sir Edwin Landseer. He was buried in St. Paul’s, with full honors. It had been a crowded life, full of work and recognition. It had also been a curiously uneventful one. Landseer never married. His sisters kept house for him, and if no breath of public scandal ever touched him, neither, so far as one knows, did any private passion. His self-portrait shows a serene, kindly man at a drawing board. Over his shoulders his dogs, “the connoisseurs,” watch the progress of his pencil. The flowing cravat is the only thing in his dress that might hint at his profession. There is no suggestion anywhere of any dark depths. There is no indication that there might be a reverse of the medal of public approval and middle-class respectability. But we know now that there was a darker side to Landseer’s soul.

The painter Frederic Stephens, his friend and biographer, has given us a description of Sir Edwin as he was in 1860:

“He was constitutionally subject to nervous depression, but these attacks accumulated force as years went on, and threatened the end which came with all its painfulness.

“I remember him during the painting of this picture (Flood in the Highlands). . . . He looked as if about to become old, although his age by no means justified the notion; it was not that he had lost his activity or energy, or that his form had shrunk, for he moved as firmly and swiftly as ever, indeed he was rather demonstrative, stepping on and off the platform in his
studio with needless display, and his form was stout and well-filled. Nevertheless, without seeming to be overworked, he did not look robust, and he had a nervous way remarkable in so distinguished a man, one who was usually by no means unconscious of himself, and yet, to those he liked, full of kindness. The wide green shade which he wore above his eyes, projected straight from his forehead, and cast a large shadow on his plump, somewhat livid features, and in the shadow one saw that his eyes had suffered. The grey 'Tweed' suit, and its sober trim, a little emphatically 'quiet', marked the man; so did his stout, not fat nor robust, figure; rapid movements, and utterances that glistened with prompt remarks, sharp, concise, with quick humour, but not seeking occasions for wit, and imbued throughout with a perfect frankness, distinguished the man. Even in 1867 there was little outward change, although not long after that date the attacks occurred with fewer and briefer intervals. These intervals caused the reports which flew about, 'Sir Edwin is better,' much better,' as some would have it, and, anon, 'much worse,' as many said."

This curious, divided aspect of Landseer's personality is evident in his work. It adds, too, to the realization of him as a Victorian, with the sensibility typical of his time. On the one hand are the studies of animals which are so charged with pathos, so imbued with human character and sympathy that they have earned the label of "sentimentality." There is the almost incredibly touching gentleness of the dogs in A Lord and Lady of the Chase and the pastoral tenderness of the lambs nibbling hay from the
rusting cannon mouths in Time of Peace. And then, on the other hand, there are those meticulous portrayals of nature at its most savage: dogs tearing a young doe's throat, an otter transfixed and wriggling on the hunter's spear while the hounds of the pack clamor to tear it in their jaws, stags with their antlers locked in mortal combat, and the celebrated picture known as The Cat's Paw, in which a monkey holds a screaming cat in its vice-like grip while using its paw to push the chestnuts off a hot stove. These are all rendered with terrible realism. And yet there is something in them that goes beyond realism. They are cruel and merciless to the point of sadism. They are Tennyson's "Nature red in tooth and claw," obsessed with death and pain.

And yet these pictures were as universally popular with Landseer's public as his sentimental subjects. If one group of animals is Christ-like, the others are crucified.

It is a fascinating balance. It runs all through Victorian art and literature. Dickens' novels, which paralleled Landseer's pictures in popularity, are alternately layered with violent brutality and sweetness. Was the delicate thread by which this balance hung the one that snapped in Landseer's mind, plunging it into the darkness which his contemporaries called "nervous depression"? Or did it have little or nothing to do with the case?

Meanwhile, the pendulum of taste continues to swing, from generation to generation. The dust in attics never settles for long.