“Antiquity Smith”

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Rowlandson’s companion and onetime teacher, John Thomas Smith, has, in his writings and engravings, provided us with one of the most entertaining accounts of life in eighteenth-century London. Today known principally for his biography of Joseph Nollekens, the eccentric English neoclassic sculptor, Smith’s reputation during his lifetime was based mainly on his topographical publications of the antiquities of the city. His great passion, first fostered in his childhood by Nollekens during their walks together throughout the city, was the interest in “the curious vestiges of the past and changes.”

Smith spent his life collecting and recording endless anecdotes, facts, gossip, and trivia about the life, the inhabitants, and the buildings of London. He was forever questioning some elderly person about an incident of former times, copying an illustration of a no longer existent building, or sketching a ruin. Blessed with a prodigious memory, and an insatiable curiosity fortunately matched by wit, he was constantly in search of any curious and interesting bit of information. With magpie persistence, Smith continued the task throughout his life.

_Nollekens and His Times_, the most digressive of
Smith’s books, is as much about the city as it is about Nollekens. Smith rambles along, as he must often have wandered the streets of London, never hesitating to depart from the principal subject or to take the circuitous route to include almost anything else that interested him. The book is as much autobiographical as biographical, for Smith’s life was inextricably bound up with that of the sculptor. Smith’s father, Nathaniel, had been a fellow pupil of Nollekens and later was for a period his studio assistant. As a child Smith knew the sculptor, and he was from the age of thirteen to fifteen an apprentice in his studio. He frequently stood as a model for the sculptor and even posed for the arms that Nollekens modeled for the restoration of Charles Townley’s Venus, now in the British Museum. After leaving the sculptor to study engraving with John Keyse Sherwin, Smith continued to see his former master and lifelong friend.

For all the work he did for Nollekens, Smith’s only reward was a box of chalk, rotten beyond use. He fared no better as a beneficiary than he had as a student. Despite many promises of generosity, Nollekens virtually forgot Smith in his will, leaving him only £100 from an estate of £200,000. Smith’s book, called “the frankest and most unsympathetic” of biographies, is a bitter invective against Nollekens’s parsimony. Though Smith had at one time expressed a repugnance for caricatures, his depiction of Nollekens is practically the counterpart of Rowlandson’s treatment of Nollekens in his etching The Sculptor (Figure 3). Rowlandson also depicted Nollekens as a gouty old lecher enjoying the flying skirts of the upended ladies of Exhibition Stare Case (see Figure 18, page 201). Smith’s avowed purpose in writing the biography was to “amuse my readers by my master’s weaknesses.”

The book certainly is amusing, for Nollekens was one of the most colorful and eccentric characters of the period. The most fashionable English portrait sculptor of his time, Nollekens, uncouth, ill-mannered, dirty, and ugly, sharply contrasted with the cultured sitters whose busts were his major production. Despite Smith’s rancor the picture that he paints of Nollekens is not entirely unfavorable, and even when he is censoring Nollekens it is difficult not to feel a certain affection for him. The acquaintance of the sculptor “never known to expatiate on Art” who, when at a fashionable party, passed out his recipes for his cures, written “on little ragged strips of paper, which he cut off the margins of his prints,” must have been eminently preferable to that of the pompous Flaxman who chose to discourse “with a select circle upon the exquisite productions of Greece.”

Smith himself surely was no less interesting an acquaintance than Nollekens. Though he did not equal the sculptor in eccentricity, he must have been one of the most delightful raconteurs of his day, for he was in the habit of entertaining with his mimicry of Mr. and Mrs. Nollekens and hoped, at one time, to become an actor. He loved to walk along the streets diverting his friends “by trying to look like lion-headed-
knockers” though he sadly admitted that he “couldn’t manage the dolphin-knockers.” The synopsis of the principal happenings in his life is one of the most amusing autobiographical statements ever written. “I can boast of seven events, some of which great men would be proud of. I received a kiss when a boy from the beautiful Mrs. Robinson,—was patted on the head by Dr. Johnson,—have frequently held Sir Joshua Reynolds’ spectacles,—partook of a pot of porter with an elephant,—saved Lady Hamilton from falling when the melancholy news arrived of Lord Nelson’s death,—three times conversed with King George the Third,—and was shut up in a room with Mr. Kean’s lion.” (One of the conversations with the king consisted of the king’s shout, “Shut your book, sir; shut your book!” It occurred when a horse drawing the king’s chaise shied at Smith’s open drawing pad when he was sketching a tree in St. James’s Park.)

Smith’s entertaining spirit is as evident in his other works as it is in his life of Nollekens. The first of his books to be published, Remarks on Rural Scenery, in 1797, is a slim volume with twenty etchings of “fast ruinating cottages” (see Figure 6), mostly in the neighborhood of Edmonton where Smith was drawing master and portraitist between 1788 and 1793. The book’s purpose was to make the “modern tourist” aware of the picturesque nature of the English cottage. The etchings are somewhat fussy and reveal Smith’s familiarity with the prints of the seventeenth century Dutch, especially (as he even mentions in his text) Rembrandt, Ruisdael, Swanevelt, Both, and Everdingen. They do, however, have a certain freshness and charm, and are particularly interesting as Smith’s only treatment of a rural theme. Wisely, Smith anticipated the extravagances of the romantic landscape artists of the following decades when he remarked that he was “by no means cottage-mad.” Smith’s etchings played a part in the influence that he exerted on the youthful Constable, who had made...
his acquaintance during this period, for the younger artist did a number of drawings in the manner of the etchings.

Smith signed the plates in the book “Engraver of the Antiquities of London” for though Antiquities of London was not published until 1800, he had begun the work in 1791. This book of ninety-six etchings, consisting of “views of houses, monuments, statues and other curious remains of antiquities,” was Smith’s favorite. With no text except that which appeared on the plates, it was, more or less, an illustrated supplement to Thomas Pennant’s Account of London of 1795.

Smith’s second “antiquities” book, The Antiquities of Westminster, was the most elaborate and most troublesome of his publications. Smith called it one of the “most anxious and unfortunate tasks of my life.” Publication of the newly uncovered fourteenth century frescoes in St. Stephen’s chapel was the initial reason for it. The dramatic discovery of the paintings took place on August 11, 1800, when St. Stephen’s chapel, then serving as the House of Commons, had to be enlarged to accommodate additional Members due to the union with Ireland. Smith was called in three days later to make drawings, and for the next six weeks he spent the time drawing, carefully matching the colors of the frescoes, which the workmen removed as soon as he finished his copy. Smith planned to publish the book with a detailed historical text by John Sidney Hawkins. A series of disagreements soon interrupted the project. The Royal Society of Antiquarians decided to publish the fragments themselves, and Robert Smirke was hired to do sketches of the remaining ones. Hawkins at first stood by Smith and his prior rights for publication, but, not willing to accept Smith’s corrections of his text, he withdrew from the project and disclaimed any responsibility for the text.

The book finally appeared in 1807. The long time in preparation was due to the extreme care which Smith took to make his copies of the fragments as accurate as possible. The plates showing the frescoes were carefully hand-colored and gilded by Smith and his wife. The book appeared with an elaborate apology explaining all the circumstances of the many disagreements. Fortunately a further misfortune occurred after its publication: four hundred copies of the already laboriously colored book were destroyed in a fire; as a result, Smith lost any profit he had hoped to gain from the thankless undertaking. A distinction which the book can claim is that it contains one of the earliest English lithographs, perhaps the first to be used as a book illustration. The attempt to utilize the new method of reproduction was unsuccessful. After only three hundred impressions had been taken from the stone, it was allowed to dry, and it was ruined in the
process of re-inking. Considering the attempt a
failure, Smith never again attempted to use
lithography.

The last of Smith’s topographical publications,
his Antient Topography of London, published in
1815 with a voluminous text, contained thirty-
two plates etched in a somewhat domesticated,
Anglicized version of Piranesi, illustrating sacred,
public, and domestic architecture previous to
the Great Fire of 1666 (see Figures 5, 7). Smith’s
anecdotal text, in his inimitable manner, deals
with “customs either unknown, or overlooked by
the London historians.”

In 1817 Smith published Vagabondiana, one of
his several small books on beggars, itinerants,
and other local characters. The book, “a playful
relaxation” from his “more serious applica-
tions,” was an immense success and provided
him with more money than he had earned from
all his “antiquarian labours” combined. The
illustrations in these books are Smith’s most in-
teresting, for he had an eye for the most colorful
of these types (see Figures 8, 9, 10).

Smith, sculptor’s assistant, engraver, drawing
master, and portraitist, was in 1817 appointed
Keeper of Prints in the British Museum. He held
this post for sixteen years until his death in 1833.
His wide range of interests and extensive knowl-
edge of prints, his sense of humor, and his per-
sonality made him eminently suited to the posi-
tion. His books on beggars, his topographical
publications, his biography of Nollekens, and the
posthumously edited autobiography A Book for
a Rainy Day all together give us a delightful,
complete, and well-rounded picture of the man
and his times.

Fig. 5. Ruins of the convent of St. Clare after the fire of March 23, 1797,
Etching. 11 3/8 x 9 3/4 inches

“Trifling as the remains are, they still are interesting . . . Though we gain little from
these ruins but fragments, yet they give us some idea of the unsettled construction of the
arches, and confused number of openings and recesses, some being nearly flat, others
almost round, and the rest variously and rudely pointed.” Antient Topography of
London, p. 8

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Fig. 6. Cottage, by John Thomas Smith, from Remarks on Rural Scenery, London, 1797. Etching. 8 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches

Whittemey Fund, 54.610.7

"The weather-beaten thatch, bunchy and varied with moss—the roof of various angles and inclinations—the tiles of different hues—the fence of bungling workmanship—the wild unrestrained vine, whose 'gadding' branches nearly deprive the chambers of their wonted light—the paper-pasted casement, with here and there a wisp of straw stuffed through a broken pane—the decayed beehive and the broken basket—the fragment of a chair or bench—the slatternry of tubs and dishes scattered about the door—the mischievous pranks of ragged children—the intrusion of pigs—and the unrepaired accidents of wind and rain—offer far greater allurements to the painter's eye, than more neat, regular or formal arrangements could possibly have done:

"On these ideas, such as they are, I have endeavored to exhibit, in the following etchings, as much variety of subject and effect as the extent of my design, and of my humble abilities, admitted: They are all from Nature, and indeed some of them were etched on the spot; though, notwithstanding the pains I have taken with them, I must beg leave to repeat that I am well aware they may still be charged with many faults." Remarks on Rural Scenery, pp. 9-10

Fig. 7. House with foliated front on the west side of Little Moorfields, by John Thomas Smith, from Antient Topography of London. Etching. 11 3/8 x 9 1/2 inches

"The figures introduced into this print represent Thames fishermen. It has long been a custom among this class of people to saunter through the streets during a severe frost, with oars or boat-hooks, from which nets and any sort of fish are suspended. They implore the assistance of the Londoners with the following cry: 'Pray remember the poor fishermen, the poor frozen-out fishermen.'" Antient Topography of London, p. 66
The woman is "of a class that must insure attention from the gaping multitude . . . commonly termed industrious beggars."

She "is often to be seen in the summer, seated against the wall of the Reservoir of the New River water-works, Spa-fields, and employed in the making of patchwork quilts. She threads her own needle, cuts her own patches, and fits them entirely herself."

"But novelty, the grand secret of all exhibitions, from the Magic Lantern to the Panorama, induced Black Joe to build a model of the ship Nelson; to which, when placed on his cap, he can by a bow of thanks, or a suppliant inclination to a drawing-room window give the appearance of sea-motion."

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