

VIII

John Collingwood Bruce and the Bayeux Tapestry

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THE Bayeux Tapestry must be among the half-dozen antiquities in foreign lands which are the best known, at least by name, to the British public. J. C. Bruce was among the first who helped to build that fame.

The tapestry had been known to British scholars since 1730 from poor engravings in Bernard de Montfaucon's *Monuments de la monarchie française*. The Society of Antiquaries of London recognized its importance to English history by commissioning Charles Stothard to copy it in 1816–17 and his drawing is the most careful ever published, being engraved at about 30 per cent. It was issued, hand coloured, as 17 loose plates in 1821–3, as the first parts of *Vetusta monumenta*, 6 (1821–83), but the impact of this expensive publication, intended only for the Society's Fellows, was reduced by the absence of the explanatory text, commissioned from J. R. Planché (1796–1880) in about 1850, which was thought too bad to issue.¹ Access to the tapestry itself was greatly enhanced in 1842 when the town of Bayeux mounted it on permanent display behind glass in the Hôtel de Ville, and was further improved in the following decade which saw railway lines opening to the north French coast and the railway companies promoting through travel across the Channel, thereby bringing more tourists to the tapestry.

The Rev. Dr John Collingwood Bruce (1805–92) is best remembered for his research on the Roman Wall. His living came from continuing the Percy Street Academy for boys which his father had established in Newcastle upon Tyne, and it was from that calling, according to Thomas Hodgkin, in his obituary of Bruce, that his interest in archaeology evolved:²

We come to his labours in the field of archaeology, and we note with interest that it was through his enthusiasm as an educationalist that he caught the enthusiasm of the antiquarian. His desire to give his lads a vivid insight into early English history led him to take up the subject of Saxon architecture. To bring home to their imagination the scenes of the Norman conquest, he studied, described, and copied the Bayeux Tapestry.... When he had passed on from giving lessons to his boys to giving lectures to his fellow-townsmen, he learned—in order that he may explain—the principles of the castellated architecture of the middle ages, and thus at length he was led back from feudal castles to Roman “chesters,” from the donjon keep of Henry Plantagenet to that great monument, the study of which was to be the crowning glory and happiness of his life, “The Mural Barrier of the Lower Isthmus.”

Attractive though this sequence of discovery may be, alas it is mistaken, as Bruce's lectures to the Literary & Philosophical Society of Newcastle (the “Lit. & Phil.”) on castellated architecture were delivered in 1847 and on the Roman Wall in 1848.³ The latter led to his first book on the Wall being published in 1851, and it was in July of that year, during a short trip to Normandy (probably combined with a visit to the Great Exhibition in London), that Bruce conceived the idea of giving one or two lectures on the Bayeux Tapestry to the Lit. & Phil.⁴

He also soon decided that the lectures should be illustrated by a full-size coloured facsimile and the labour of making this fell to Bruce's pupils. One of them recalled, at an old boys' dinner in 1900, that the chief draughtsman had been John Moffat, working from a small representation of the tapestry, while he and others filled in the details and coloured

them; the small representation must have been Stothard's engraving.⁵ John Smith Moffat was the son of Robert Moffat (1795–1883), a missionary to South Africa, whose speaking tours, particularly through northern England in 1839–41, and whose *Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa* (1843), laid some of the foundations of “missionary propaganda”. He visited Newcastle in 1841, formed a close friendship with Bruce and sent John to Percy Street as a pupil for two years from May 1850.⁶

The boys' work was sufficiently advanced by 23 July 1852 for part at least of the facsimile to be displayed in Newcastle at the Lit. & Phil.'s *conversazione* held on the occasion of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain's annual meeting. One newspaper judged it “by far the most interesting archaeological contribution” on display that evening.⁷

The facsimile survives in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.⁸ It was drawn with pen and ink and coloured with watercolours on sheets of paper 650 mm high by 975 mm wide. The height of the image is typically 565 mm, which is greater than the actual height of the original at its deepest (536 mm), so the scaling up was a little too much. As the original is 68.4 m long, the number of sheets probably totalled between 75 and 80. The sheets, cut if necessary, were then laid out as panels depicting scenes in the narrative, and mounted on fine linen. There are probably 25 to 30 panels; the longest seen is 3.7 m. The edges of the panels were bound with green ribbon, with hanging loops sewn at the top.

Bruce delivered what had grown to five lectures to the Lit. & Phil. in the ten days beginning 31 January 1853. These were mainly a narrative of the events depicted, so presumably different panels were displayed each evening. One of the boys held the pointer as Bruce spoke.⁹ He determined to publish the lectures, hoping to fill the gap left by Stothard's plates appearing without explanatory text and this volume appeared in November 1855, with 17 coloured plates reduced by Mr. Morsman from Stothard and a dedication to the Duchess of Northumberland. Bruce was

invited to take the facsimile to the ducal seat at Alnwick.¹⁰

The facsimile had, however, already travelled further afield. The British Archaeological Association, founded in 1843, and the Archaeological Institute, formed when the Association split in 1845, served an important role in making contacts amongst antiquaries who lived outside London. It may have been through one or other that Bruce met Mark Antony Lower (1813–76), a Lewes schoolmaster, lecturer and enthusiastic antiquarian. The discovery in 1845 of the cists of William and Gundrada de Warrenne, the founders of Lewes Priory prompted him and others to found the Sussex Archaeological Society (S.A.S.) in the following year. It also stirred Lower's interest in the events surrounding the Norman Conquest, and in 1849 he had visited Normandy. He may have stimulated Bruce's interest in the period. Certainly in January 1853, shortly before the Newcastle lectures, he guided Bruce over the battlefield, “the spot”, in Bruce's words, “where the deed was done on which the modern history of the world has turned.”¹¹

At the Archaeological Institute's 1852 meeting in Newcastle, the S.A.S. invited it to hold its 1853 meeting at Chichester. W. H. Blaauw, Honorary Secretary of the S.A.S. and active in the Institute, bore the invitation to Newcastle and, on the last day of the meeting, was elected an honorary member of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. Three months later Lower was awarded the same distinction.¹²

At the end of the June following, Bruce was writing from Herne Bay, Kent, to ask Mr. Ventress in Newcastle to secure the box containing the tapestry and the one containing the wall pictures and to direct them by luggage train to the Institute in Pall Mall, London. A week later he wrote anxiously from London that the boxes had not arrived, saying that they should be sent immediately to the museum at Chichester. Happily they arrived and on 14 July 1853 Bruce read to the Institute a memoir on the Bayeux Tapestry—which attracted special mention in the report, for being “received

with gratification, scarcely exceeded on any former occasion".¹³

Four years later, on 22 June 1857 Bruce left London and travelled via Le Havre to Rouen to join an excursion to Normandy organized by the S.A.S. At Le Havre he was met by l'Abbé Cochet, Inspecteur des Monuments Historiques de la Seine Inférieure. "The people of Newcastle would have been much amused could they have seen me [a Scottish Presbyterian preacher] and the Abbé, in his distinctive dress, walking arm-in-arm through the streets." He left Caen at Friday noon and was back in London late on the Saturday. "The whole excursion has been a very agreeable one. The tapestry was a decided attraction. I discoursed upon it for more than an hour".¹⁴ Bruce became a member of the S.A.S. in that year and was immediately added to the roll of Vice-Presidents and, though ceasing membership in 1870 (the year in which Lower resigned as the S.A.S.'s salaried secretary and editor), continued as a Vice-President until his death.¹⁵

It must have been the excursion of 1857 and Bruce's lectures (now published) which inspired Lower to borrow the facsimile and deliver his own lectures to the Lewes Mechanics Institute. Entitled "The Bayeux Tapestry with facsimile illustrations", they were read on Thursdays 24 September and 8 October 1857.¹⁶ He made special mention of John Moffat's role in drawing it, for his father's "exertions in conveying the gospel to the degraded African are beyond all human praise. Let me remind you, too, that this clever delineator is the brother-in-law of the yet more illustrious missionary & geographical explorer, Dr. Livingstone." David Livingstone, who in 1845 had married Moffat's daughter Mary, was at that very time on his first visit home and lately launched on lectures to great public acclaim. The Moffat connection was the only point picked up in the local newspaper's report.¹⁷

The facsimile had at least one other journey. In March 1858 David Mackinlay described to Lower how he had exhibited it to the Glasgow Archaeological Society and read a short paper based on Bruce's book. "The Society's room

not being large enough to show [the drawings] to advantage they were exhibited a second time in one of the halls of the Glasgow Gallery of Art. Unfortunately neither of the rooms was well adapted for having them suspended by their loops—the one from want of size—the other from its walls being covered with pictures. In hanging them therefore I was obliged to have recourse to nails and needles more frequently than I would have liked."¹⁸

Bruce's and Lower's lectures are notable for the interpretation they placed on the Norman Conquest. Lower's interpretation is emphatically stated:

[I]t cannot be denied that the Norman Conquest was an event which resulted in the advancement of civilisation & human progress. I have strong opinions on this subject, & in spite of Sharon Turner, Thierry, Palgrave & many others, I must affirm my conviction that William, Duke of Normandy & King of England, was an instrument under Divine Providence of bringing into this country a great & imperishable blessing.

Bruce was more reasoned. "Notwithstanding the heavy pressure of evils [consequent on the Conquest] good ensued. The political tempest resulted in the increased purity, health, and peace, of the national atmosphere." William established a strong government. The Norman invasion hastened and perfected the establishment of the feudal system in England—which subjugated the great barons to the sovereign, promoted national unity by defining obligations and prepared a way for the elevation of the lower classes. Learning and civilization were greatly advanced through intercourse with Rome. The Saxons had wasted their substance in drink; Normans and French lived with frugality. "By the introduction of the refinements of life the condition of the people was improved and . . . a check was given to the grosser sensualities of our nature". The Conquest gave the gigantic evil of slavery its death blow. From the thanes and aldermen, reduced to being inferior tenants of Norman barons sprang the yeomanry of England and the formation of a middle class between the two extremes of Saxon society.

The conquest brought to England a host of men renowned in their own persons, and those of their descendants, for all that is great in art and arms.

The tapestry gives of course the victor's version of events. Bruce and Lower may have felt the need to justify studying it because there was a strong received tradition that deplored the Norman Conquest. The main outlines of this tradition of the "Norman Yoke" were that

before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of this country lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman Conquest deprived them of this liberty, and established the tyranny of an alien King and landlords. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost. They fought continuously to recover them, with varying success. Concessions (Magna Carta, for instance) were from time to time extorted from their rulers, and always the tradition of lost Anglo-Saxon freedom was a stimulus to ever more insistent demands upon the successors of the Norman usurpers.¹⁹

This theory played a significant role in radical political thinking and rhetoric in the mid-17th century and, diminishingly, into the early 19th century. It then gained a new life in the literary enthusiasm for the Saxons in the period bracketed by Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Tennyson's *Harold* (1877). Christopher Hill has noted a pro-Norman counter attack only from the late 1860s—though serious historians (including some named by Lower) were in the first half of the century noting feudal tendencies in late Saxon society and seeing some benefits in the Conquest. Bruce and Lower were evidently in the vanguard in popularizing a pro-Norman view, though not sufficiently to prevent the 800th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings passing almost without mark, even by the S.A.S.²⁰ The British Archaeological Association did hold its annual congress at Hastings, but the battle received little attention.²¹

Soon after, however, a new orthodoxy was being established by William Stubbs, that placed 1066 as the real beginning of English institutions as the Victorians knew them.²² At the same time, Bruce's facsimile became less

of a novelty. In 1871 the British Government had a set of photographs made, and full scale enlargements were coloured in exact imitation of the original and displayed in London. In 1885–6 the ladies of the Leek Embroidery Society made a full-size replica and this toured Britain and abroad until 1895, when Reading Town Council purchased it.²³ Before this rival appeared, Bruce in 1884 had donated his facsimile to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, with the suggestion that it should be displayed in the museum which the Society was then setting up in the Black Gate. The early descriptions of the museum do not mention it, but it seems not to have languished in store continuously since then.²⁴ The panels bear the marks of having been mounted on wooden frames, with a second batten on the front along the top; and, after the frames had been removed, of hanging loops glued on. One panel carries graffiti dated 1949 and 1954.

NOTES

¹ Manuscript note on Planché's printed text kept with the volume in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Planché did publish "On the Bayeux Tapestry", *J. Brit. Archaeol. Ass.*, 23 (1867), pp. 136–56, in which he implied that the invitation to write the text had been made in about 1850 and that he had declined it.

² Thomas Hodgkin, *AA*, n.s., 15 (1892), p. 366.

³ For his study of the Wall, see R. Miket, "John Collingwood Bruce and the Roman Wall Controversy: The Formative Years, 1848–1858", in R. Miket and C. Burgess (eds), *Between and Beyond the Walls: Essays on the Prehistory and History of North Britain in Honour of George Jobey* (Edinburgh: Donald, 1984).

⁴ Sir Gainsford Bruce, *The Life and Letters of John Collingwood Bruce, LL.D., D.C.L., F.S.A., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Edinburgh & London: Blackwood, 1905), pp. 50, 198–9.

⁵ A. Reed, *Bruce's School, with A Peep at Newcastle in the 'Fifties* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Walter Scott, 1903), pp. 61–2.

⁶ C. Northcott, *Robert Moffat: Pioneer in Africa 1817–1870* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), p. 169, R. U. Moffat, *John Smith Moffat, C.M.G., Missionary. A Memoir* (London: J. Murray, 1921), pp. 30–3.

⁷ *Gateshead Observer*, 28 August 1852.

⁸ I am grateful to Mr. Denis Peel, the Honorary Librarian, for access to the facsimile. I have examined only a sample of panels.

⁹ *Newcastle Courant*, 4 February 1853. *Newcastle Journal*, 5 February 1853. Reed, pp. 61–2.

¹⁰ J. C. Bruce, *The Bayeux Tapestry Elucidated* (London: J. R. Smith, 1856 on the title-page; repr. London: Bracken Books, 1987). Bruce's bound volume of reviews, etc., following the book's publication is at Tyne and Wear Museums, Arbeia Roman Fort and Museum, South Shields. Bruce, *Life*, pp. 200–1.

¹¹ Bruce, *Tapestry*, pp. 118, 138. *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, 6 (1853), p. 16n; (for Lower traversing the Roman Wall under Bruce's guidance) 19 (1867), p. 83. Lower dedicated to Bruce his *Contributions to Literature* (London: J. R. Smith, 1854) which includes "An Antiquarian Pilgrimage to Normandy".

¹² *Archaeol. J.*, 9 (1852), p. 377. *AA*, n.s., 1 (1857), p. xiii. On Blaauw and Lower, see my entries in the *New DNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹³ Letters pasted into copy of Bruce, *Tapestry*, in Library of Soc. Ant. Newcastle, BK77. *Report of the Transactions at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland held at Chichester, July 12th to 19th, 1853* (London: J. R. Smith, 1856), pp. 1, 39, iv.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Life*, pp. 291–2; the excursion is also referred to in *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, 10 (1858), p. xiv, and 85 (1946), p. 25.

¹⁵ *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, 9 (1857), pp. xiii, xiv; 22 (1870), pp. xi, xiv; and 37 (1890), p. vii.

¹⁶ East Sussex Record Office, AMS 6006/7/3/1, programme of lectures 1857/58. Lower's manuscript of the lectures is in Mount Holyoke College Library

(South Hadley, MA), NK3049.B3 L69 Treasure Room, with a facsimile of the tapestry, in a single 68 ft roll, to the same scale as Stothard's engravings. Both were bought in December 1938 at a sale in Winchester of effects of the Yonge family of Otterbourne, Hants.

¹⁷ G. Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters* (London: Lutterworth, 1957), pp. 284–95. *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 26 September 1857.

¹⁸ Sussex Archaeological Society Library, Lower papers GC/117.

¹⁹ C. Hill, "The Norman Yoke", in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994 edn), p. 52.

²⁰ Hill, pp. 101, 109, J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent. Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–2, 118, 127, 143. A. Briggs, "Saxon, Normans and Victorians", in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, 2 (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), pp. 223–6.

²¹ *Hastings and St Leonards News*, 24 Aug. 1866, p. 4. "Proceedings of the Congress. Twenty-third Annual Meeting, Hastings, 1866, August 20th to 25th inclusive", *J. Brit. Archaeol. Ass.*, 23 (1867), p. 184—when Planché delivered the paper cited above, "illustrated by a full-sized drawing of nearly the whole roll, made by J. C. Savery, Esq." (John Charles Savery, M.R.C.S. (Eng.), 1830/1–73). I have not been able to substantiate that this was indeed another full-size facsimile.

²² Briggs, pp. 227–8.

²³ E. Maclagan, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943), p. 6. J. Rhodes, *Britain's Bayeux Tapestry* (Reading: Museum of Reading, 1993).

²⁴ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, n.s., 1 (16), (1884), pp. 111–12.

