

III.—
FRESH LIGHT ON WILLIAM LARSON'S STATUE
OF JAMES II AT NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE.

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As the late Mrs. Arundell Esdaile wrote in her article on "Pepys's Plaisterer" published in *The Times Literary Supplement* for 2 October 1943, the loss of William Larson's equestrian statue of James II, erected on the Sandhill at Newcastle upon Tyne in 1688 and pulled down the following year, "is a melancholy thing". The discovery of new evidence concerning that vanished work of art should, therefore, be welcome to students of seventeenth-century sculpture in this country, as also to local historians and antiquaries.

It appears that early in the year 1686 the Common Council of Newcastle decided to set up "His Majesty's Statue". A fine full-length bronze figure of Charles II in Roman dress already adorned the south front of the Magazine Gate of the Tyne Bridge.¹ Moreover, several other bodies had led the way in thus demonstrating loyalty to the new sovereign, and Newcastle was but following their example. In February 1685 the Merchant Taylors Company had resolved to erect a statue of King James on the second Royal Exchange and the work was given to Grinling Gibbons; in October 1685 the Court of Aldermen of the City of London had ordered his effigy for the new town hall at Southwark, the commission

¹ Happily this statue is still extant and may now be seen in a niche at the foot of the staircase in the Guildhall. In 1949 I obtained permission to have it photographed, and I am endeavouring to discover its early history.

ultimately going to John Bushnell; and in April 1686 yet a third statue (by an unknown hand) was placed in the chief market-place of King's Lynn, at the "common charge" of a number of the loyal inhabitants of the borough. Within the next twelve months private donors presented the famous Gibbons statue of the King which now stands outside the National Gallery, and the less well-known figure, again by an unknown sculptor, at University College, Oxford: these last are the only two out of this impressive series of Royal effigies to survive.²

The chief promoter of the scheme at Newcastle would seem to have been the Mayor for the year 1685-6, Sir Henry Brabant (died 1687), a devoted Royalist. The petition which he addressed to James in the autumn of 1686³ sheds a flood of light on the divided state of local political opinion and incidentally reveals that the proposal to erect the King's statue played its part in the strife between the rival factions. Brabant's opponent, Sir William Blackett, one of the two members of Parliament for Newcastle, had succeeded in ousting from the Common Council fourteen members of approved loyalty and substituting for them other fourteen of his own choosing:

"And to show your Majesty that those men put in by Sir Wm. Blacket, can never be true to your Majesty's interest, a small business lately happened demonstrates the same, for the Mayor out of his wonted loyalty, together with all those loyal gentlemen that was left him in Common Council, made a motion that your Majesty's statue on horseback (like to that of your Royal Father at Charing Crosse) should be made and set up on the market place, commonly called the Sandhill in Newcastle, and it was strongly opposed by the other partie, who refused at first signing

² An article by Mrs. Esdaile and the present writer on "The University College Statue of James II", with an appendix on "Lost Statues of James II", is to appear in a forthcoming volume of *Oxoniensia*.

³ "The Case of Sir Henry Brabant, knt., Mayor of Newcastle upon Tyne, most humbly offered to your Majesties Royall consideration", printed in *The Eve of the Revolution in Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (1848, *Reprints of Rare Tracts*, vol. iv). The original petition is stated in the preface to be in the State Paper Office, so it must now be in the Public Record Office. Unfortunately, the Domestic State Papers for the reign of James II have not yet been calendared.

an order for it, and some of them (as by the affidavit of the present Sheriff and Robert Wetwang, Esq.) did not sticke to say the erecting the said statue looked like Popery; so your Majesty may judge what service you may expect from such men. . . . however, the Mayor by threatening to send hither the names of such as refused it, he obtained at last their consent for the said statue, more out of fear than love."

The first mention of the statue in any existing document occurs in the record of the meeting of the Common Council held on 12 April 1686; this refers to an earlier order of 31 March which has perished.⁴ It was now ordered that a preliminary £300 should be paid to the Mayor from the town revenues in connexion with drawing up a contract for the execution of the statue; that the total cost should not exceed £800; and that the statue "be of the like mettall Aire, & forme (if not better) than was mencoed in Mr. William Larsons proposealls". Appended are the signatures of Brabant and twenty-five others, Blackett's name being high on the list.

Most of such scanty information as we possess about Larson is set out in the article by Mrs. Esdaile referred to above. How he came to be given the Newcastle commission we do not know; it is possible, from the various allusions to Sir Christopher Wren in the course of the transaction, that the recommendation came from the latter. Matters moved swiftly, for on 22 April 1686 articles of agreement were drawn up "between William Larson of London Statuary of the one part and Sr. Nathaniell Johnson Knight Alderman

⁴ Common Council Book (1655-1722), f. 176. I am greatly indebted to Miss Joan Fawcett for a transcript of this entry. Miss Fawcett informs me that the Common Council Order Book for the years 1655 to 1699 is missing: it is safe to assume that the untraced order of 31 March 1686 was entered there. John Brand, in his *History and Antiquities of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1789), vol. 1, p. 30, note W, prints an even earlier reference: "Common-council books, March 16th, 1685 [i.e. 1686]. 'A figure of his Majesty, in a Roman habit, on a capering horse, in copper, as big as the figure of his majesty King Charles I at Charing-Crosse, on a pedestal of black or white marble—to be set up for 800 l. sterling.'" As this passage also cannot be traced, it would appear to have been entered in the missing order book. It is quoted by Mrs. Esdaile in "Pepys's Plaisterer", but is there erroneously ascribed to Henry Bourne's *History of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1736).

of Newcastle upon Tyne Sr. William Creagh of the same place knight Robert Jenison Henry Ball and Edward Ridley of London Esqrs. Commissionated by order of the common Councill of the said Towne of Newcastle in behalfe of the said Towne of the other part as followeth . . .”.

The copy of this important document signed by Larson is preserved among the corporation archives in Newcastle Town Hall. It has never been printed⁵ and yields some extremely interesting particulars apparently unknown to Mrs. Esdaile. For the sum of £300 (paid on 14 April),⁶ the receipt for which, dated 22 April and also bearing Larson's signature, is appended, and in consideration of a further £500 to be paid later in two portions, the cost of the freight being borne by the Newcastle authorities:

“William Larson . . . doth covenant promise and agree . . . that the said William Larson shall and will at his owne costs and charges according to such direccion and advice as shall be given him by Sr. Christopher Wren (his Majestyes Surveyour generall) make and cast the ffigure of his Majesty King James the Second in good Cannon Brass in moderne Habitt⁷ on a Capering Horse as large as that of his late Majesty King Charles the First at Charing Cross on a Pedestall of Black or White Marble of equall height and Magnitude to the said ffigure if it shall be thought ffit and in all things relating thereunto conforme himselfe to the direccon approbacon and good likeing of the said Sr. Christopher Wren, after the Modell approved of by his Majesty on Munday the Nineteenth of this instant Aprill, and rayle the same with Iron and pave the same in like manner as that at Charing Cross now is, and to finish the same and see the said statue safely carried to Newcastle aforesaid (the charges of the ffreight and danger of the Sea excepted) and there sett up and fully perfect the same in every perticular and to the good likeing and approbation of the said Sr. Christopher Wren as aforesaid on or before the ffifteenth day of September next ensuing the date above written.”

Not surprisingly, the work took considerably longer than

⁵ I am further indebted to Miss Fawcett for a transcript.

⁶ Chamberlains' Account Books, 1686.

⁷ It may be noted that in Brand's extract a "Roman habit" is specified.

the stipulated five months. The last payment was not made until "Septemb^r ye 4th Week, 1688. P^d Mr. Wm. Larson ye Statue in full ij lxvi v vij¹ $\frac{1}{2}$ ". According to John Brand's *History and Antiquities of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1789),⁸ shortly before this, at a meeting of the Common Council held on 27 August 1688, Wren's certificate stating that "Mr. Larson had very sufficiently performed his work in casting the said statue", was read. This entry also is lost to us.

Larson's statue enjoyed an exceedingly short life, although not quite so short as has been commonly supposed. The statement of Henry Bourne in his *History of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1736)⁹ that it was thrown into the Tyne by a mob led by some drunken soldiers in 1688, the very year of its erection, has been constantly copied. Actually, however, the statue was not pulled down until 11 May 1689. The full story is told in *The Destruction of the Statue of James II at Newcastle*,¹⁰ which seems to have been generally overlooked. Even then, as is well known, the statue did not completely perish. In 1696 "the Metal y^t was left of the Horse part" was granted by the Corporation, on the petition of the churchwardens, to All Saints' church, Newcastle, to be cast into a set of bells.¹¹ What may not be so widely realized is that the remains of the King's figure were purchased and taken to York by a bell-founder, Samuel Smith. Smith's uncle, Henry Gyles, the York glass-painter, wrote in November 1707 that "these relics will be melted down ere long; but I have advised them to save a buste of his head to the paps, etc."¹² Whether this excellent advice was followed, we do not know.

⁸ Vol. I, p. 30, note W.

⁹ p. 131.

¹⁰ 1847, *Reprints of Rare Tracts*, vol. IV. The set of depositions taken before the Mayor of Newcastle on 23 May 1689 are here printed verbatim from the originals now among the Domestic State Papers in the Public Record Office. They had only recently been discovered in 1847 and were still in their envelope bearing the postmark 27 May and addressed to Sir William Blackett in London. Summaries are printed in the *Calendar of Domestic State Papers*, 1689-90, p. 115; see also pp. 111 and 117.

¹¹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*, vol. III (1887-8), p. 189.

¹² *Ibid.*

Hitherto it has been believed that the only extant representations of the Newcastle statue are the large engraving published by Joseph Barber in 1742 and its numerous derivatives. The acquisition of a copy of Barber's print by the Library of this Society was the occasion of the composition of "Some Account of the Bronze Statue of James II, supposed to have formerly stood on the Sandhill, Newcastle, in a Letter from Mr. John Bell, Librarian, to John Adamson, Esq., Sec. 30th December 1826", which was published in *Archæologia Aeliana* in 1832.¹³ The great value of this communication, to which Mrs. Esdaile gives no reference, lies in the fact that in it are printed the almost complete series of payments for the statue from the Chamberlains' Account Books.¹⁴ These prove that the total expenses were not £1700, as stated by Bourne, but definitely less than the £800 stipulated for by the Common Council in 1686. Unfortunately, the Society's copy of Barber's print cannot now be found, and in default of access to any other copy, I have had to content myself with studying a large print in the British Museum based upon Barber (Plate XVI). Mrs. Esdaile states that in the prospectuses of Barber's engraving it was described once as having been "taken from an original painting", and again as being done "from a drawing in the possession of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart." It was, in fact, a second-hand production. Neither the painting nor the drawing has been traced, and there is no means of ascertaining whether they were made direct from the statue or from memory: the brief existence of Larson's work must, however, have rendered opportunities for the accurate recording of it extremely limited. But for nearly half a century there has been preserved in Dublin, unrecognized as such, a record of the Newcastle *James II* which possesses a far more intimate connexion with the original than

¹³ Vol. II, quarto series, pp. 260-4.

¹⁴ It appears that Bell overlooked one small item. Larson's receipt for £300 is endorsed: "Paid on sealing and delivery £300 0s. 0d 14 Feb. 86 [i.e. '87] Peddesell setting up as note £012 0s. 0d." This latter payment is not given by Bell.

Barber's engraving and is, therefore, a much more reliable document.

When consulting the *Catalogue of Pictures and Other Works of Art in the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery of Ireland* recently, I lighted upon the following entry under James II: "Bronze Equestrian Statuette. Inscribed on girth of horse: 'Baxter taught Wyck Drew Larson Embost & cast it (a date illegible).' Purchased in 1902." I obtained a photograph of the statuette (Plate XVII) from the National Gallery of Ireland, by permission of the Director of which I was allowed to reproduce it as an illustration to an article on the subject, "A Statuette of James II", published in *Country Life* for 29 September 1950.¹⁵ The height of the statuette is $18\frac{3}{4}$ inches and the length of the horse from nose to tail is $19\frac{1}{4}$ inches. The identification was made by Sir Walter Armstrong, Director of the Gallery in 1902, who entered the statuette in the register as "modelled after Wyck". The full inscription, or at least that part of it which can be read, runs: "Baxter taught, Wyck Drew Larson Embost & cast it tow—"; the remainder goes under the saddle and figure. There does not appear to be any date.¹⁶

To take first the question of the engraved inscription. The National Gallery of Ireland could throw no light upon the meaning of the mysterious opening words "Baxter taught". After some puzzling, however, I have arrived at what I believe to be a convincing explanation of them. Our knowledge of Larson's capacities is negligible, but it is reasonable to suppose that the production of a figure of the King "on a Capering Horse as large as that of his late Majesty King Charles the First at Charing Cross", according to the ambitious requirements of the Common Council of Newcastle—the only client to commission an equestrian statue of King James—would have been a formidable task for a "plaisterer" and even for a "statuary" of moderate powers.

¹⁵ By kind permission of the Editor, I am allowed to incorporate that article in my present paper.

¹⁶ I owe these particulars to the kindness of Mr. B. MacNamara, Registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland.

The horse in particular, so it seemed to me, might have presented difficulties, and the mention in the inscription of the co-operation of Wyck, renowned for his paintings of equestrian subjects, suggested that Larson might have received assistance with the problem from the unknown Baxter. In the matter of his identification Pepys, whose connexion with Larson Mrs. Esdaile has so convincingly demonstrated, came to my aid. On 29 February 1663/4, the diarist records a visit to the Mews at Charing Cross (the National Gallery now occupies the site):

“At the Mewes Sir W. Pen and Mr. Baxter did shew me several good horses, but Pen, which Sir W. Pen did give the Duke of York, was given away by the Duke the other day to a Frenchman, which Baxter is cruelly vexed at, saying that he was the best horse that he expects a great while to have to do with.”

The Book of the Duke of York's Household gives under 26 August 1662, the “appointment during pleasure of Nicholas Baxter to be escuyer of the great horses to his R.H. the Duke of York”.¹⁷ He is not mentioned by name in the various editions of *Angliæ Notitia*, but in an entry about Royal stable expenses printed in the *Calendar of Treasury Books*, dated 24 June 1684,¹⁸ “Nicho. Baxter” heads the list of four “Yeoman riders to the Great Horse Stables”. What could be more natural than that Larson, himself domiciled at Charing Cross, as Mrs. Esdaile believed,¹⁹ should have applied to this neighbouring expert in *ménage*, so long associated with King James, moreover, for technical instruction in the handling of a “capering horse”? This theory receives support from the procedure proposed with regard to Le Sueur's equestrian Charles I.²⁰

¹⁷ Braybrooke MSS., H.M.C. 8th Report, Appendix Part I, p. 281.

¹⁸ Vol. vii, Part II, 1681-5, p. 1179.

¹⁹ Search through the relevant Rate-Books of the Parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which were not available to Mrs. Esdaile in 1943, has failed to settle the question of Larson's residence.

²⁰ “The saide Sueur is also to make a perfect modell of the saide worcke, . . . in the making whereof he shall take the advice of his Maj. Ridders of grate Horsses, as well for the shaep of the Horsses and action as the gracesfull shaep and action of his Maj. figure one the same” (P.R.O. S.P. 161/158).

The words "Wyck Drew" would seem to imply that John Wyck (1640-1700) supplied Larson with a sketch of the composition which the latter used to help him in making his model. Was this sketch the drawing once in the possession of Sir Hans Sloane? Wyck was knowledgeable in depicting all sorts of horses. Vertue states that he rivalled and "carried away all the business of that kind" from Dirk Stoop, one of whose specialities was "manage horses".²¹ It is quite likely that Wyck had studied from nature in the Royal stables and that he and Nicholas Baxter were well acquainted.

As regards the conclusion of the inscription, it is practically certain from the clue afforded by the three letters "tow—", that the next words should read "town of Newcastle", to be followed by "erected it" or some such expression.

What then is the relation of the Dublin statuette to the lost Newcastle statue? It has been suggested to me that it is a reduction, made either by Larson himself or, possibly from the model, by some later hand: also that the piece may have been given to Baxter or Wyck or to one of their relations, and on that occasion inscribed. The memory of the indebtedness of the sculptor to Baxter and Wyck to which the inscription bears testimony—incidentally in the case of Baxter helping to rescue an obscure figure from oblivion—would soon have faded: the record of Baxter's share in the design is unlikely to have been added to a piece made by a modeller working much later, perhaps from Wyck's sketch. It looks, therefore, as though the statuette if not contemporary is nearly contemporary with the statue.

While the horse of the statuette appears to be finely modelled and the King's face is an excellent likeness,²² his figure is somewhat stiff, not to say rigid, an effect enhanced

²¹ *Notebooks*, vol. IV, p. 152.

²² Charles Townley, writing to Ralph Thoresby on 1 June 1707 after the remains of the King's figure had been brought to York, says: "here is the face very well wrought" (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*, vol. III, 1887-8, p. 189).



STATUE OF JAMES II AT NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE.
From an anonymous engraving (23¼ × 19½) in the British Museum.





SMALL STATUE OF JAMES II IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND.
Reproduced by the courtesy of *Country Life*.



by the absence of bridle and baton which leaves the hands clutching awkwardly at the air. The statuette is, indeed, a much more sober affair than the engraving, with which it has little in common except the "capering horse"; in the print even this appears as a far fierier steed, which the King bestrides rather precariously, with the hands quite differently disposed. There a complete suit of plate armour (which is at variance with the "moderne Habitt" contracted for by Larson and reproduced in the statuette) is incongruously topped by a laurel wreath. To put it mildly, the claim of the engraving to be an "exact representation" is exaggerated: it is to the statuette that we must turn for a faithful record. For while later writers who had not seen the statue ("nor the Picture of it" in the case of Bourne) indulged in extravagant praise, the contemporary Wren was content, as we have seen, with a more measured estimate.