

John Bell's Last Tour

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JOHN BELL'S LAST TOUR*

by

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THIS paper deals with the last three years of John Bell's life, three years which he spent as an invalid in Italy. Paucity of real biographical material makes it practically impossible to get a full appreciation of Bell as a personality, but we get illuminating glimpses of him through some of the notes and descriptions that he made during his travels abroad, which were later collected by his wife and posthumously published.

The *London Medical and Physical Journal* in 1817,¹ contained the following notice:

We have received from a publisher an account of Mr. J. Bell's health, and of his future intentions. If that gentleman will favour us with the history of his illness, we have no doubt, that, coming from an experienced physiologist, it will afford improvement to our readers and advantage to the public.

John Bell did not oblige. It was true, however, that he was a sick man. Early

* Osler Club Meeting 27 March 1963, commemorating John Bell, F.R.C.S.E., 1763–1820.

in the previous year, 1816, he had been thrown from his horse and being still ill—whether as the result of the accident, or from some other cause I have not been able to discover—he decided on a trip to Italy in the hope of regaining his health.

Samuel Rogers, in his essay on *Foreign Travel*² writes: 'Ours is a nation of travellers. . . . None want an excuse. If rich, they go to enjoy; if poor, to retrench; if sick to recover; if studious to learn; if learned, to relax from their studies.' Bell, being sick, went to recover, and being studious went to learn. His health he unfortunately did not recover, but he studied the art treasures of Italy, diligently making notes whilst sitting at the foot of a statue, on a stair, or on the top of a tower. Mrs. Bell, who accompanied her husband to Italy, sorted out these notes and published them in 1825, five years after his death, under the title *Observations on Italy*.*

Bell appears to have kept no journal or diary so it is difficult to obtain a full record of his travels or his impressions of the contemporary background. He has nothing to say of the political situation in the Italian peninsula; of the seething discontent which was soon to break out as bloody revolutions. His *Observations* are confined entirely to personal impressions of scenes, buildings, statues and paintings. But sufficient of his inner feelings come out in his descriptions of landscape and scenes to show an unexpected sensitiveness. His language is often poetic and romantic, as when he describes his first view of Milan Cathedral, a midnight walk in Florence, or the chanting of the *Miserere* during Holy Week, in St. Peter's, Rome. But when he turns to statuary, he views it with the keen eye of the expert anatomist, and shows a cold independent judgement. Arriving in Milan, for example, he goes for a walk and catches his first sight of the Cathedral:

. . . I suddenly and unexpectedly turned upon this noble edifice . . . its pure white marble, its dazzling spiry fretwork, rising high and bright in light, elegant, and indistinct forms.

In the shade of night the effect was superb, and for a moment I was indeed astonished. The vivid and powerful sensations arising from first impressions, on beholding a building so beautiful and singular, cannot return a second time. . . . I stood long gazing on this splendid edifice, which, as night closed in, I distinguished only by the lustre of its own white marble.

* *Observations on Italy*, Edinburgh, Wm. Blackwood, and London, T. Cadell, 1825. In spite of a constant flow from the printing presses of travel books on Italy, the *Observations* was a great success and became a sort of tourist's guide to the Italian art treasures. Garrison (*An Introduction to the History of Medicine*, Philadelphia & London, Saunders, 1913, p. 420) considered it the best travel book ever written by a doctor.

The book contained nine engraved illustrations, two from Bell's own drawings and seven by an Italian artist named Gherardi. The plates were engraved by William Home Lizars, the famous Edinburgh artist, brother of the surgeon John Lizars, pupil of Bell and colleague of Liston. John Lizar's *A System of Anatomical Plates of the Human Body* (Edinburgh, W. H. Lizars, 1822-6) had also been beautifully engraved by William Lizars in 1822.

An Italian translation of the *Observations*, unillustrated, was published in Siena in 1828 by Pandolfo Rossi, and a second English edition, in two volumes, was printed in 1835 by Fibreno of Naples for John Rodwell of London. Chapters on Naples and its surroundings were added.

A particular interest of this second edition lies in its illustrations. The 1830s saw a great change in the art of illustration—engraving was superseded by lithography. In the 1835 edition, Lizar's engraved plates were reproduced as lithographs by Fergola, but all the drawings are now ascribed to Bell. It is this, together with the fact that John Bell drew the illustrations for his own and his brother's books, that has led to the belief that Bell was the sole illustrator of the *Observations*.

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But once inside he becomes the anatomist:

In the Sanctuary of the Cathedral is a much admired statue of the flayed *St. Bartholomew*. . . . I declare, on the faith of one not unacquainted with art, nor with anatomy, that there is nothing of real anatomy, no not the slightest representation of it, in this grotesque figure. . . .

There is little indication anywhere in the *Observations* of Bell's mode of travel; of the state of his health or of dates. But some idea of what Bell's journey was like can be gained from the records left by other English travellers to Italy at that time.

First, the channel crossing by sailing packet, which left Dover, Brighton or Southampton every afternoon after the arrival of the London coach. Bell, being an invalid, probably took the shortest of the three—Dover to Calais. The crossing, at a guinea a head and six guineas for a carriage, took from three to twelve hours, depending on the weather. The landing at Calais, if the tide were missed, could be most uncomfortable: Dr. William Roots,³ describing his own experience, wrote:

After a five hours sail we got into Calais Roads, but not in time to save our tide; the consequence was we got into a French row-boat, and had to row about three miles to the shore, and then we could not get near enough to land without being carried on men's backs a quarter of a mile. This is really a frightful and unpleasant consequence of losing the tide, for they come in shoals round the vessel up to their middles in the water, and without asking permission seize hold of you, and by main force drag you off on their backs or shoulders, or any how, half in the water and half out, and gallop off with you to the shore where down they set you over your ankles in the mud.

From his channel port Bell journeyed to Italy by way of Paris, and the old Mt. Cenis route.

There were three ways of travelling—by private coach, hired coach, or by diligence; the last being the cheapest form, costing £5 from Paris to Turin. We do not know which Bell chose, though he occasionally mentions mules. These sure-footed animals were usually only attached when crossing mountain passes.

Tourists in France found, as we do today, notices going up on shops and inns—'English spoken here'; and bills of fare, on the main routes, were written in both French and English. Harriet Beaujolois Campbell,⁴ who crossed in 1817, at the age of thirteen years, wrote in her diary: ' . . . this civility to the English . . . is a mark how many of our country men and particularly how many ignorant ones . . . [were in France] since the inhabitants find it necessary to translate their language.'

Passport and customs regulations, especially in Italy, were always a cause of annoyance to the English tourist. Though not necessary in France, passports were needed for a journey to Italy and had to be obtained from the British Embassy in Paris and *visé* by the Ministry of the Interior and by the Prefecture; in addition, the signatures of the Austrian ambassador and the Sardinian minister were needed. On a trip from Paris to Bologna passport and customs formalities took place on the frontiers of every little state, and also at every posting station south of Lombardy. Bell voices his complaint only once—when descending from the

Mt. Cenis Pass into Suza: 'Your passport is required, and your baggage searched, regulations by which the traveller is continuously tormented.'

English visitors usually left home in September and returned to England early the following summer. Italy was considered dangerous in the summer, and to remain in Rome after the third week of July was definitely risky. Forsyth,⁵ talking of the bad air—the malaria—warned that 'last autumn four thousand persons died victim to it in the Roman hospitals. It is a battle renewed every spring, and lost every fall.' October and November were the most crowded months in Florence; it was customary to spend Christmas in Rome; then go on to Naples, and return to Rome for Holy Week.

John Bell probably crossed from England some time towards the end of May 1817. He left Paris early in June of that year in a state of debility, after a considerable haemorrhage. Among his notes written in Paris was found a partly torn sheet of paper on which he had written:

I have seen much of the disappointments of life. I shall not feel them long. Sickness in an awful and sudden form; loss of blood, in which I lay sinking for many hours, with the feeling of death long protracted, when I felt how painful it was not to come quite to life, yet not to die, a clamorous dream! tell that in no long time that must happen, which was lately so near.

Sickness in an awful form—did he mean vomiting? Was the loss of blood a haematemesis? There is no evidence, but I believe it likely that Larrey was called in to see Bell, and probably advised him to hurry on to the better climate of Italy. Bell certainly saw Larrey for, when describing his own crossing of the Mt. Cenis Pass, Bell states: 'To pass this mountain in snow, or in a winter storm, must be attended with great danger. My excellent and scientific friend, Baron Larrey, crossed this mountain, in eight hours, during winter, in severe and stormy weather.'

Before crossing into Italy, Bell stayed at Lyons, where he visited the Hôtel-Dieu, the hospital where, says Bell, Rabelais had been a physician for five years.* This hospital Bell considered to be one of the most magnificent in Europe.

'... in all the parts and offices of this institution—in its chemical hall, laboratory, apothecary's shop, baths, washing-houses, and refectories—in its correct division of wards for fresh wounds—in the attention and skill displayed by its surgeons and physicians—it excels everything I have ever seen. . . . An order of nuns, 150 in number, perform the duty of nurses . . . ten surgeons and the physicians attend the hospital, accompanied by their pupils. The space and arrangements are sufficient to receive 3,000 patients; their number now exceeds 1,000.'

Note the remark on the 'correct division of wards for fresh wounds', for Bell was a pioneer in the movement for separation of fresh wounds from the ordinary run of hospital patients, for keeping wounds clean and for encouraging healing by first intention. He was one of the first to denounce the belief that pus was laudable.

Crossing the Mt. Cenis Pass a few days after a violent storm which had

* 'En novembre 1532, fut nommé le plus illustre des médecins de l'Hôtel-Dieu, François Rabelais qui ne conserva son poste que peu de temps puisque le 15 février 1534, les administrateurs durent constater l'illégalité de son absence et désigner, le 5 mars suivant, pour le remplacer, Pierre de Castel. . . .'⁶

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occurred 'on the previous Friday, 10th June 1817' (one of the only two dates given in the three years he spent in Italy), Bell's route took him through Turin, Milan, Pavia, Parma, Bologna and so to Florence.

In Turin, says Bell, 'there is nothing from which the traveller can derive much interest or pleasure'. But he gives a vivid and moving description of a condemned murderer being carted to execution:

Half naked, pale as death, agonised with terror, every limb strained in anguish, his hands clenched convulsively, the sweat breaking on his bent and contracted brow . . . an agony of wildness and despair, of which nothing ever exhibited on the stage can give the slightest conception.

In Milan, in addition to his visit to the cathedral, already described, Bell went, of course, to see da Vinci's *Last Supper*, and says of it:

. . . the picture is now nearly lost, and all its beauty gone; and this is principally owing to the whimsical theories Leonardo has conceived in the composition, and manner of laying on his colours. . . . In little more than fifty years after this painting was finished, it was found to be almost wholly destroyed.

In spite, however, of frequent restoration, this picture is still, today, a wonderful piece of work.

Leaving Milan on 5 July, Bell stopped in Pavia to call on Scarpa, the most famous of Italian surgeons and anatomists, a pupil of William Hunter and Percival Pott. 'This venerable and distinguished man', says Bell, had 'claims to admiration, not only from his brethren of the same profession, but from all who value science; nor shall I easily forget the feelings of gratification which my interview with him left on my mind.'

At Parma, Bell studied the paintings of Correggio, and at Bologna, those of the Caracci family. Of the famous Neptune Fountain by Gian di Bologna, he remarks: 'Neptune, who presides over the fountain, is a colossal heavy figure in the attitude of preaching, and wondering at, rather than commanding, the waves of the ocean.'

From Bologna he went on to Florence, where he must have spent a considerable time, judging by the copious notes he wrote. The town, that year, was crowded with English travellers, who at the Uffizi and the other galleries regularly surrounded Bell, seeking information from the famous Edinburgh anatomist. He spent many a night walking through the streets of the city, the midsummer heat being too oppressive during the day for a man in his poor state of health. He gives his impressions in the following words:

I would not give one solitary midnight hour in Florence in which I can wander through her deserted streets . . . for whole weeks of idle sights.

My first impressions of Florence have all been by moonlight, in solitary evening walks. . . . How beautiful it is to gaze on the splendour of the moonbeams reflected on the Arno, showing its bridges in grand perspective, the city, and its huge masses of ancient buildings, lying in deep full shadow before you, while the (rays) glitter on the tops of towers and buildings. . . .

Of the Cathedral of Florence, Bell says:

. . . its imposing bulk, gives grandeur to the city in every distant prospect. . . . It is more majestic than the Cathedral of Milan . . . with a magnificence arising chiefly from imposing

bulk . . . (it) does not possess the beauty of lightness, or of elegance, in which respect it differs greatly from the Cathedral of Milan. [He enters the Cathedral.] Behind the altar stands the Pietà of Michael Angelo, a heroic group, large, but not colossal, and bearing every mark of the independent spirit and grand style of this great master. . . . The melancholy of the scene is beautifully represented. . . .

We might *almost* say of this work that its charm is in some degree diminished by the very *excellence* of the artist. The representation is but *too* faithful. It is hardly imagination; it seems reality. . . . Our Saviour's body, even in death, *should*, if possible, appear immortal.

Reading through the *Observations* one finds that Bell admired the old buildings of Florence without reserve but, however much he admired the paintings and statues in the City and galleries, as an anatomist, he frequently found some point to criticize. Let us go with him to the Piazza della Signoria and get his opinions on the various monuments in that great square—the Loggia dei Lanzi with its statues; the Neptune Fountain with its marble Neptune and bronze tritons; the figures in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.

The arcade styled Loggia dei Lanzi is an object of peculiar interest from its beauty and magnificence. . . . In front, under each arch of the colonnade, stand three separate groups by celebrated masters of the thirteenth century. The first is the Rape of the Sabines by John of Bologna. . . . The figures are not well balanced, but rise perpendicularly, one over the other, in a manner that reminds you of an exhibition of strength in a circus; so that you can hardly conceive how such a group can stand. . . .

The second, a beautiful statue in bronze, with the Medusa, is the Perseus of Benvenuto Cellini. . . . The head noble, and the countenance princely. The posture is fine, the action full of animation and life, the forms powerful, and free from all affectation of science, in knobs, joints, and muscles. . . . So truly do I admire the Perseus, that I feel unwilling to point out any of its faults: it must, however, be remarked, that the head and body of Medusa are represented streaming with blood, with a revolting exaggeration, which is neither true to nature or good taste. . . .

The third group is that of Judith and Holofernes, by Donatello. . . . The work is almost contemptible. Judith is a diminutive creature, represented as cutting off the head of Holofernes, which he lays as coolly and quietly on her lap, as if the story told had been that of Samson and Delilah.

Of the Fountain of Neptune his opinion is:

The Neptune is a colossal statue of nearly eighteen feet in height, a vast and bulky figure, with a grim and surly face, presenting no visible action, except a strong look of jealousy at the rival size of his surrounding attendants. . . . This vast colossal statue, from its bulk, becomes almost architectural, while its brilliancy assimilates ill with the antique grandeur of the square.

Before the gate of the Palazzo Vecchio stand two statues, Hercules, by Donatello, and David, by Michael Angelo. . . . The Statues are bulky, ill-formed, tame, upright figures: but the names of the sculptors bear a high authority; and we find them accordingly honoured with corresponding distinction . . . in the common guide books, where they are mentioned with high praise.

In the art galleries of Florence, and later in Rome, Bell found much to admire in the paintings and statuary, many of which were already well known in England from reproductions. As a lover of art, an anatomist and a surgeon, it is strange to find evidence of prudery coming to the fore at times, as when he describes the Hermaphrodite in Florence. Though he praises it as 'a most exquisite statue', he adds, 'Yet I know not if any beauty, any skill, however



Fig. 1 The Medici Venus, Florence
 ‘A tranquil dignity that leads the mind to forget her situation.’
 ‘If such nude figures are to be permitted, nothing can be conceived more exquisite.’

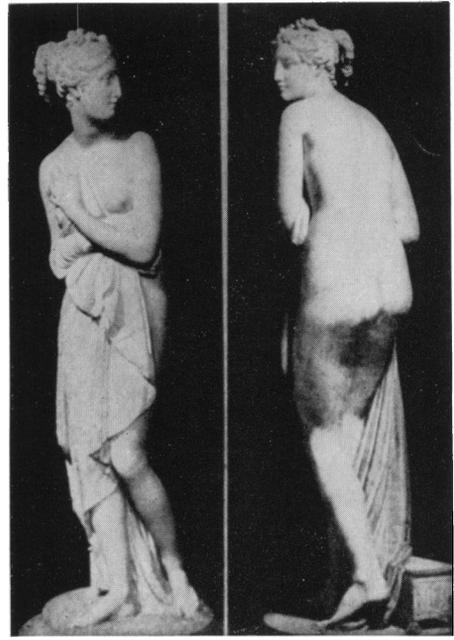


Fig. 2 The Canova Venus, Florence
 ‘Watchful and apprehensive timidity . . . you share her alarm.’



Fig. 3 Cellini's Perseus, Florence
 ‘Gracefully simple . . . beauty of proportion . . . the head . . . represented as streaming with blood . . . is neither true to nature or good taste.’

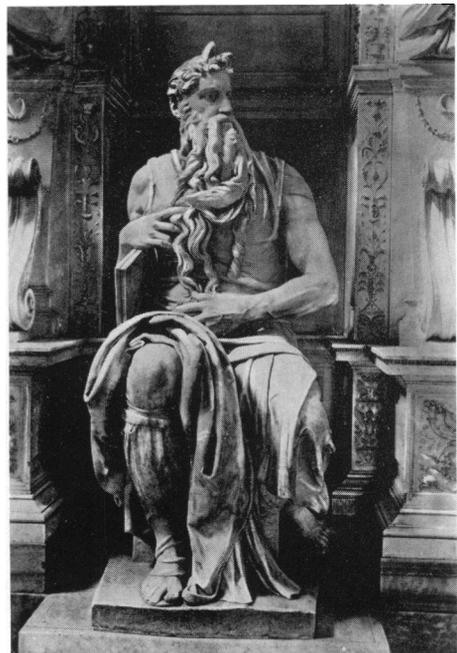


Fig. 4 Michelangelo's Moses, Rome
 ‘A noble work . . . too colossal . . . the largeness of the limbs and length of the body hardly correspond with the size of the head.’

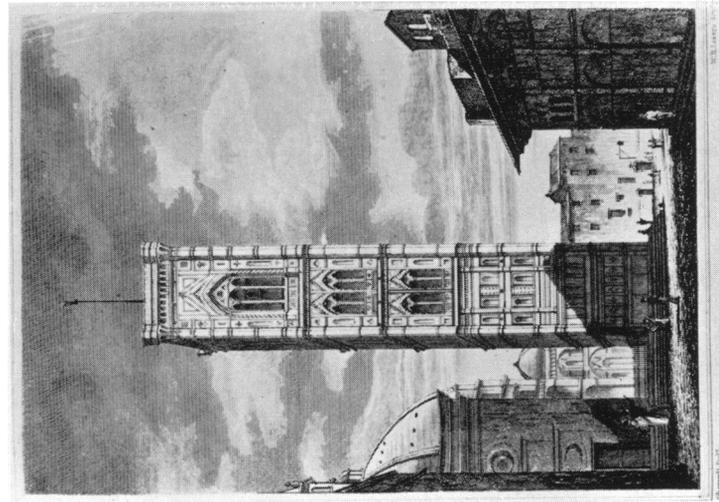


Fig. 5
Lizar's engraving from Gherardi's drawing of the Campanello del Duomo, Florence, in the first edition of *Observations on Italy*, 1825

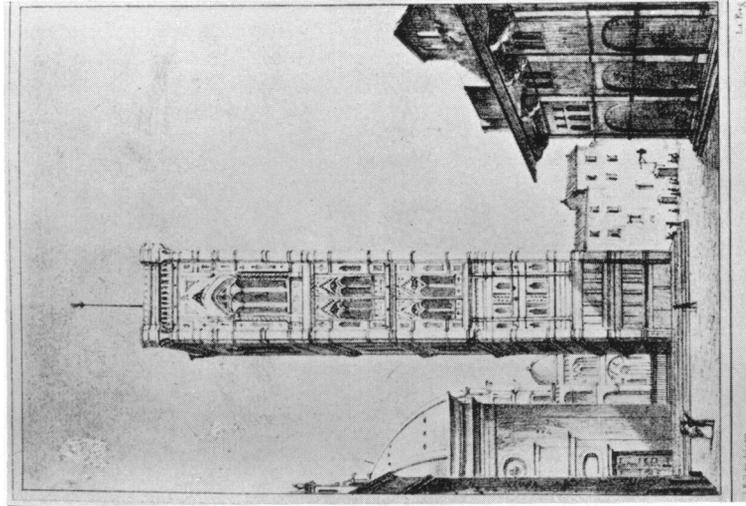


Fig. 6
In 1835 Naples edition of the *Observations* Lizar's engraved plates were reproduced as lithographs by Fergola, but all the drawings were now ascribed to Bell (Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)

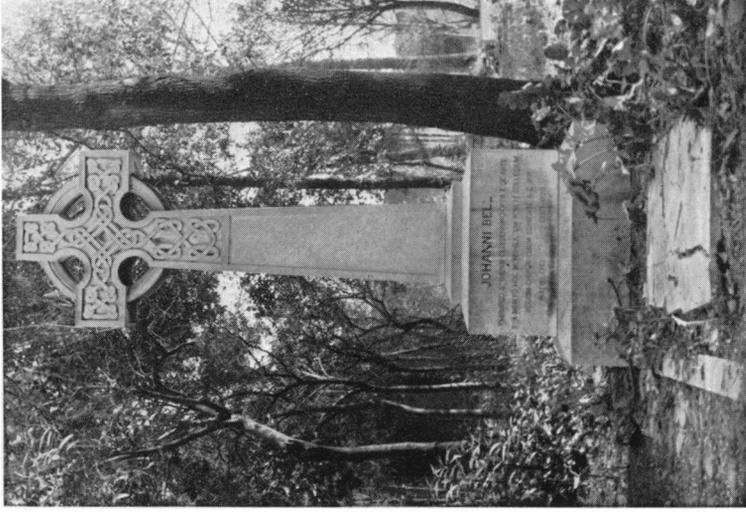


Fig. 7
Celtic Cross marking John Bell's grave in the Protestant Cemetery, Rome. The inscription reads: *Johanni Bell chirurgo Edinensi celeberrimo optime de arte sua merito hoc monumentum posuit collegium regum chirurgorum Edinense. A.D. 1891. Natus 1762 | Obiit, 1820*
(John Bell was born in 1763.)

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admirable, can compensate for an exhibition so little consonant with delicacy. . . . Such subjects are unsuitable either to statuary or painting.' He displays this trait of prudishness again when he looks upon the nude figure of the Venus di Medici and compares it with Canova's Venus, which is partly draped in front (he appears to have been unaware that Napoleon's sister, Pauline, was the model).

The Venus di Medici . . . is exquisite in all its forms and proportions, in symmetry, in slender, round, finely tapered limbs, in the joining of the haunch-bone, in the loins—all perfect. . . . The whole work is most beautiful; and if such nude figures are to be permitted, nothing can be conceived more exquisite. . . .

Canova's Venus . . . designed with admirable simplicity, presents a tall, elegant, bending figure, shrinking with timidity . . . in watchful and apprehensive timidity. The whole front view of this statue is exquisitely fine . . . the artist himself takes his chief pride . . . the spectators the greatest delight, . . . in the back. I lament this opinion . . . the back represents a tame flat line . . . with a slight degree of too great length in the left leg . . . injuring this exquisitely beautiful work of art. . . . The Medicean Venus displays . . . a mild repose, a tranquil dignity, that leads the mind to forget her situation; while the modest . . . captivating timidity betrayed by Canova's Venus . . . excites something of uneasiness, by compelling you to share her alarm. . . . I should have . . . rendered it an incomparable work of art by placing the back close to the wall.

From Florence, Bell went on via Perugia to Rome, where, except for a visit to Naples and its surroundings, he stayed until his death in 1820.

Rome was even more crowded than Florence according to Byron, who wrote from Venice to Thomas Moore, on 25 March 1817:⁷ 'I wished to have gone to Rome; but at present it is pestilent with English—a parcel of staring boobies. . . . In two or three years the first rush will be over, and the Continent will be roomy and agreeable.' But in the winter of 1818, John and Rosine Bell were only two of two thousand English in Rome, and in the following year, 1819, Moore⁸ wrote:

And is there then no earthly place,
Where we can rest, in dream Elysian,
Without some curst, round English face,
Popping up near, to break the vision?
'Mid northern lakes, 'mid southern views,
Unholy cites we're doom'd to meet;

In Rome, the fashionable English quarter was around the Piazza di Spagna which became known as the 'Ghetto degli Inglesi'. Henry Matthews⁹ described it as 'a little less nasty than the other piazzas in Rome, because the habits of the people are in some measure restrained by the presence of the English'. The best known house was No. 26, now the Keats-Shelley Museum. When Bell was there a suite of five or six rooms with a servant's wages cost £15 a month, and that was double what it had been two years before, in 1815.

In Rome, Bell was a regular visitor at the studios of Canova and the young Danish sculptor, Thorwaldsen, whose classical style he so admired. With Canova he could discuss anatomical dissections and Canova's own anatomical drawings.¹⁰

It is when writing his observations on Michelangelo's Moses that Bell

expresses his opinion of the effect of the new anatomical studies upon the work of the Renaissance artists:

With models such as [the ancient classical statues] it seems wonderful that John of Bologna, and other great artists, should have fallen into the error of so constantly seeking to display their knowledge of anatomy; frequently injuring their finest productions, by forcing the features of that science into notice. Because the moderns, among their other philosophical discoveries, found that the human body was composed of bones, muscles, tendons, and ligaments, is the statuary called upon perpetually to remind us of this circumstance? Why was it so beautifully clothed with skin, but to hide the interior mechanism, and render the form active? Anatomy is useful as a corrector, but no more . . . like perspective, it is a good rule to assist the eye, in what a good eye could do without a guide. With the ancient statues, the forms are simple, pure, natural, and free from every affectation of science. I have hardly ever seen in the statues of the ancients . . . a muscle caricatured. . . . Even the great Michael Angelo himself was not exempt from entertaining too great a fondness for a doctrine, new, as applied to statuary, and in his zeal to render it effective, we sometimes find him, in pursuit of his object, while aiming at expression, only producing coarseness. Something of this may be traced in his celebrated Mosè, in San Pietro in Vincolo. It is a noble work, and one in which the artist evidently meant to display his acquaintance with anatomy; but in searching too curiously after science, the grand general result has partly escaped him. . . . Nor is the general detail faultless. The right arm, full, muscular, and nervous, is fine, especially in the anatomy, and well proportioned to the size of the figure, but seems too large, contrasted with the left, which is mean, scraggy, and altogether in a different tone of composition, as also defective in the very art in which he sought to shine, having mistaken the origins of the pronator, and the biceps . . . the largeness of the limbs and length of the body hardly correspond with the size of the head. . . . The beard is fine and beautifully flowing; but . . . it is a little caricatured.* The effect, upon the whole, is grand and imposing, and it is perhaps adventurous to have criticised so freely a work held in such high estimation; but my object is, simply to give notices of such points as, perhaps, the course of my studies may have enabled me to detect with a precision that might escape a less practised eye.

With hundreds of English in Rome, it was not surprising that many consulted Bell professionally, but his health continued to deteriorate. Feeling his end approaching, he sat in St. Peter's during the Maundy Thursday service, listening to the *Miserere* and thinking of 'the dreary solitude of the tomb'. His sensitive and poetic description of that prayer may have been the last lines he wrote:

. . . all was silent, when the solemn pause was broken by the commencing of the *Miserere*, in low, rich, exquisite strains, rising softly on the ear, and gently swelling into powerful sounds of seraphic harmony.

The effect produced by this music is finer and greater than that of any admired art; no painting, statue, or poem, no imagination of man, can equal its wonderful power on the mind. The silent solemnity of the scene, the touching import of the words, 'take pity on me, O God', passes through to the inmost soul, with a thrill of the deepest sensation, unconsciously moistening the eye, and paling the cheek. The music is composed of two choruses of four voices; the strain begins low and solemn, rising gradually to the clear tones of the first soprano, which at times are heard alone; at the conclusion of the verse, the second chorus joins, and then by degrees the voices fade and die away. The soft and almost imperceptible accumulation of sound, swelling in mournful tones of rich harmony, into powerful effect, and then receding, as if in the distant sky, like the lamenting song of angels and spirits, conveys, beyond conception to those who have heard it, the idea of darkness, of desolation, and of the dreary solitude of the tomb. A solemn silence ensues, and not a breath is heard. . . . The effect of those slow, prolonged, varied, and truly heavenly strains, will not easily pass from the memory.

* *Caricare* (Italian) = to load, overload or exaggerate.

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On 15 April 1820, two weeks after Easter, John Bell died of dropsy, at the age of fifty-six, and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. Ten months later, another English doctor, who had also arrived in Rome in an effort to recover his health, the poet John Keats, was laid to rest in the grave next to Bell's.

The stone that marked Bell's grave 'was repaired following a visit of homage paid by Sir James Simpson in 1869, Edinburgh had not forgotten one of her sons',¹¹ and in 1891, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh erected a Celtic cross on Bell's grave 'in honour of his great services'. But the inscription is erroneous in giving his date of birth as 1762 instead of 1763.

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