Contemplating the Ruins of London: Macaulay's New Zealander and Others

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1> On the 7 January 1865 Mr Punch issued a Proclamation banning the use of ‘certain persons, objects, and things, part of the stock-in-trade of sundry literary chapmen’, as ‘used up, exhausted, threadbare, stale and hackneyed’. Henceforth ‘it shall not be lawful for any journalist, essayist, magazine-writer, penny-a-liner, poetaster, criticaster, public speaker, lecturer, Lord Rector, Member of Parliament, novelist, or dramatist’ to use any of the list, which includes ‘The Bull that is always being taken by the horns . . . The British Lion . . . the Black Sheep . . . The Dodo . . . the Thin End of the Wedge’, and many others. Top of the list comes ‘Macaulay’s New Zealander’, and Mr Punch remarks

The retirement of this veteran is indispensable. He can no longer be suffered to impede the traffic over London Bridge. Much wanted at the present time in his own country. May return when London is in ruins.[1]

2> Who was this New Zealander, what was he doing there, and why was he so obtrusive? The question is easily answered in part. He would one day, Macaulay predicted, visit the future ruins of London, and take his seat on the remains of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s. Macaulay put him on London Bridge in 1840, as a sonorous conclusion to his notice in the Edinburgh Review of von Ranke’s History of the Popes, in an inadequate English translation by Mrs S. Austin. Having run through a quick summary of the Whig view of the history of the English Reformation, Civil War and Glorious and Bloodless Revolution, he warns the reader not to be complacent about the apparent triumph of the English Protestant settlement, on the grounds that the Church of Rome has endured for ages, and will endure for ages more. Adam Smith may have predicted the collapse of Roman Catholicism in The Wealth of Nations, under the weight of its own contradictions, and Madame de Staël may have made Corinne imagine the future ruin of St Peter’s, while Carlyle was in the habit of referring to the Roman Catholic Church as a galvanised corpse; but Macaulay concluded his review with a salutary reminder of its strength and antiquity, and the prediction that it ‘may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s).[2]

3> The probable origin of the idea was pointed out in a letter to The Times as long ago as 1860, when a note of weariness can already be detected in the correspondent’s voice at the frequent repetition of what had by now become a cliché[3]. The prediction of the future ruin of London was anticipated by Walpole, Goldsmith, Barbauld, Shelley and others, while the New Zealander himself ultimately derived from a comment in Gibbon’s Decline and Fall on the Picts who were reported once to have roamed Strathclyde:

when London shall be an habitation of bitterns; when St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey shall stand, shapeless and nameless ruins, in the midst of an unpeopled marsh; when the piers of Waterloo Bridge shall become the nuclei of islets of reeds and osiers, and cast the jagged shadows of their broken arches on the solitary stream . . .[5]

4> Macaulay himself had used the image of London in ruins on two occasions in the 1820s, and it may be that he was prompted to revisit this future archaeological site by the posthumous publication in the previous year of Shelley’s Peter Bell III. In his ironic dedication to Tom Moore, in the guise of his satirical alter ego, Tom Brown, Shelley’s mouthpiece, Miching Mallecho, adapting the imagery of the Old Testament prophets, foresees a time when London shall be an habitation of bitterns; when St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey shall stand, shapeless and nameless ruins, in the midst of an unpeopled marsh; when the piers of Waterloo Bridge shall become the nuclei of islets of reeds and osiers, and cast the jagged shadows of their broken arches on the solitary stream . . .[5]

It had always been known that great cities were all doomed to fall. Old Testament prophets relished the prospective destruction of their enemies, Ezekiel, for example, predicting that Tyre would be ‘like the top of a rock: thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more’ (26:14). When Hector is arming for battle in Book 6 of The Iliad he tells Andromache that ‘the day shall come when sacred Ilios shall be laid low’. His words are appropriated for use by future generations and future civilisations, and Gibbon reports of Scipio Africanus the Younger, who famously wrought on the city of Carthage the most utter destruction ever witnessed before the invention of high explosives, that

[w]hile Carthage was in flames, Scipio repeated two lines of the Iliad, which express the destruction of Troy, acknowledging to Polybius, his friend and preceptor . . . that while he recollected the vicissitudes of human affairs, he inwardly applied them to the future calamities of Rome . . .[7]

5> Almost immediately after Macaulay summoned him into existence, the New Zealander seems to have lost his religious significance, and to have become a purely rhetorical device for drawing attention to the future consequences of any proposed course of action – a perhaps solitary exception being the use made of him by the British monarch in his ironic dedication to Tom Moore, in the guise of his satirical alter ego, Tom Brown, Shelley’s mouthpiece, Micching Mallecho, adapting the imagery of the Old Testament prophets, foresees a time

[j]there were many distinguished English Protestants present . . . there was nothing in the discourse that could reasonably shock or offend any of them . . . for assuredly there is nothing offensive in the assertion of a bishop of one persuasion that his faith is likely to endure longer than the faith of any other.[8]

--- an example of tolerance which only the daughter of an old-fashioned Church of England clergyman could command, who was secure enough to report in polite but unwavering terms on the social awkwardness of an audience with the Pope.

6> When fifteen years later, her son, Anthony, attempted to publish a work of Carlylean social criticism with Longman -- unsuccessfully as it turned out -- he called it ‘The New Zealander’. By 1860 we learn that ‘the New Zealander . . . at one time was the subject of allusion, two or three times a week, in speeches and leading articles’. [9] Despite Mr Punch’s efforts the New Zealander was still sitting there when Gustav Doré published his engravings of the city in London: a Pilgrimage in 1872. And he remained in situ until the end of the century, with sightings in the journal The Builder and in the speeches of Joseph Chamberlain, among others, and a significant secondary literature to accompany them.[10]

7> A striking feature of most of the occurrences I have seen is that there is little sense of an immediate threat that London would fall, and empire of the world be transferred to another power. For example, in 1859 George Sala uses the figure simply to mean ‘the future’, reminding us how well-known Covent Garden is: ‘Lord Macaulay’s New Zealander will come to meditate among the mossgrown arcades, when he makes that celebrated sketching excursion we have so long been promised.’[11] Then again, a dozen years later, Blanchard Jerrold describes the moment when he and Gustav Doré first thought of the project which was to become London: A Pilgrimage, as ‘in the happier days of France, when war seemed nearly as far off from Paris as the New Zealander appears to be from the ruins of London Bridge’.

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reports on his state of mind after the outbreak of the First World War, when visions of ruin contributed to a modernist vision of the unreality of the world:

In 1771, Horace Walpole predicted that there would 'be a Thucydides at Boston, a Xenophon at New York, and in time a Virgil at Mexico, and a Newton at Peru. At last some curious traveller from Lima will visit England and give a description of the ruins of St. Paul's, like the editions of Balbec and Palmyra . . .'; then again in 1775, he proposes that an 'American' from the banks of the Oronooko will revive knowledge of the English language and English gardening; and in 1776 that New York or Philadelphia will be giving laws to Europe[14] In the late 1770s Thomas Lyttelton, also known as 'the wicked Lord Lyttelton', composed 'a Letter from an American Traveller. Dated from the Ruinous Portico of St. Paul's, in the Year 2199, to a friend settled in Boston, the Metropolis of the Western Empire', in which the ruin of London is attributed to the destruction of British liberty and the failure of public credit. This poem was not a very accomplished work, and published posthumously in 1780, in the same year as there appeared an anonymous work of even less poetic distinction entitled The Deserted City[15] In this, too, a visitor asks how London fell into ruin, and the answer is similar. Both these poems are in effect responses to a poem, Regatta, addressed to Lyttelton in 1775 at the beginning of the American war, wishing that Britain may not fall like Rome before her, through loss of native virtue.[16]

During the Napoleonic War, in the dark days of 1810-1812, Thomas Love Peacock (like the writer of The Deserted City, 1780) foresaw the time when the Thames would be silted up and filled with sedge, and is followed in this by Anna Barbauld in her Eighty and Eleven, in which she predicts that the 'ingenious youth' of Ontario and beyond the Blue Mountains would visit London

With fond adoring steps to press the sod
By statesmen, sages, poets, heroes trod . . .[131-2]-[17]

In her answering poem, Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen, Ann McCivars Grant felt able to assert in that more hopeful year that defeat was no longer to be thought of, and that, in any case, if anywhere was to be celebrated in decay, Glasgow would make as good a ruin as London.[18] Mrs Grant, who had been in the North American colonies as a young child, longed for the reunification of the empire, and might have imagined Britain retaining the upper hand, but it is usually American tourists who will contemplate London's remains, although some authors, such as the Scottish writer of Britain Preserved of 1800, see a place for a prosperous Britain in an American empire based on the British ideals of Free Trade and individual liberty, and on the universal use of the English (or as he put it) the British language. Empire will have crossed the Atlantic westwards, fulfilling Berkeley's famous prediction, and in a futuristic story of 1853, H. C. Andersen envisages groups of American tourists flying the Atlantic in the other direction in steam ships of the air in order to see the sights of Europe in a week: "There's a lot to see in Europe!" says the young American; "and we have seen it in a week, and that can be done, as the great traveller" -- a name is named which belongs to their age -- "has shown in his famous work: Seeing Europe in a Week."[19]

Most of these examples remind us that London's greatness was based on commerce, and that the empire, in Horace Walpole's words, was supposed to work by the co-operation not the coercion of its white, British citizens:

perhaps it is no paradox to say, that the reason why Taste in Gardening was never discovered before the beginning of the present Century, is, that It was the result of all the happy combinations of an Empire of Freemen, an Empire formed by Trade, not by a military & conquering Spirit, maintained by the valour of independent Property, enjoying long tranquility after virtuous struggles, & employing its opulence & good Sense on the refinements of rational Pleasure[20]

To evoke the image of world trade, a poet only needs to mention the river with its bridges -- 'the river of the ten thousand masts' -- and the Thames continues to be used in the 1820s as a metonym for the city in accounts of anticipated ruins, such as Shelley's Dedication of Peter Bell the Third, , and Macaulay's reviews of Mitford's Greece and James Mill's Essays on Government, not to mention Joseph Bounden's The Deserted City of 1824.[21] We find, too, that the bridges are made to carry a great burden of metaphor: the only structures apart from St Paul's likely to impress the coming tourist. Lady Holland records in her journal for 1800 that "[t]he bridges alone would strike the eye as fine remains; they are magnificent", while in his History, Macaulay contrasts them with old London Bridge as it was in the seventeenth century, celebrating them as 'several bridges, not inferior in magnificence and solidity to the noblest works of the Caesars'.[22]

The extraordinary currency of the New Zealander for many years, and the self-conscious discussion of him, suggest that the future ruin of the metropolis was quite generally accepted, as it is, for example, in 1849 or fifty, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem, 'The Burden of Nineveh', which envisages future travellers from Australia digging up the massive Assyrian bull-god sculpture from the British Museum and assuming it to be an object of worship by native Britons. More subtly, an aura of decline and future ruin may also be evoked by use of imagery of the city and the river which is associated with references to Macaulay's prediction. I have in mind Lavengro's repeated view of the city from the centre of old London Bridge (denuded of its houses); or, at the end of the century, Victor Padro's anti-semitic vision of the city of the future dominated by Jewish financiers in Chapter One of Meredith's One of Our Conquerors (1891).[23] More interesting still is a picture which Henry James evokes of the Thames in 1877, which generates far richer (and more disturbing) meanings when read in the context of the prior history of its imagery. It is one of his magazine articles which were collected as English Hours, where this most sensitive of New World tourists uses this imagery as introduction to a speculation about the decline of British influence in the world, not naming the symptoms -- the rise of Prussian power, and the unwillingness or inability of Britain (without a large standing army) to intervene in Continental affairs, such as the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein and the Franco-Prussian War. Of the view of the Thames, he says, though it is ugly it is anything but trivial. Like so many of the aspects of English civilisation that are untouched by elegance or grace, it has the merit of expressing something very serious. Viewed in this intellectual light the polluted river, the sprawling barges, the dead-faced warehouses, the frowsy people, the atmospheric impurities become richly suggestive . . . I don't exactly understand the association, but I know that when I look off to the left at the East India Docks, or pass under the dark hugely piled bridges, where the railway trains and the human processions are for ever moving, I feel a kind of imaginative thrill. The tremendous piers of the bridges, in especial, seem the very pillars of the Empire aforesaid.[24]

This evocative passage, being juxtaposed with speculation about Britain's declining power, prompts us to recognise ambivalence in the image of the River, and, potentially, in any other description of the River, including, of course, the opening of Conrad's London Bridge'. This remark is double-edged, of course, but Jerrold's letter-press is not noted for its subtlety, making the power of Doré's images all the more impressive in contrast. Later Jerrold refers simply to 'watching the great city, upon the ruins of which Lord Macaulay's New Zealander is to gaze'[25] No immediate alarm in these examples, then.

But it had not always been so. Earlier predictions of a future visitor of the city of London, whether tourist, historian, archaeologist or antiquarian, are more often than not associated with the loss of the American colonies, or gloomy prospects of the darkest days of the Napoleonic Wars, around 1811. I survey a number of examples of these occurrences in a forthcoming paper in the e-journal, Circles, and shall only refer briefly to one or two here.[13]

Chicago from two dozen years from Waterloo. I used to have strange visions of London as a place of unreality. I used in imagination to see the bridges

19 London Bridge continued to fail, of course, even when the New Zealander was not there to seat himself upon its remains. In his autobiography, Bertrand Russell reports on his state of mind after the outbreak of the First World War, when visions of ruin contributed to a modernist vision of the unreality of the world:

After spending two years, dejectedly, in Switzerland, I used to have strange visions of London as a place of unreality. I used in imagination to see the bridges

After visiting two dozen years from Waterloo. I used to have strange visions of London as a place of unreality. I used in imagination to see the bridges

At 

At
After seeing troop trains departing from Waterloo, I used to have strange visions of London as a place of unreality. I used in imagination to see the bridges collapse and sink, and the whole great city vanish like a morning mist. Its inhabitants began to seem like hallucinations, and I would wonder whether the world in which I thought I had lived was a mere product of my own febrile nightmares.

Russell adds a footnote: ‘I spoke of this to T.S.Eliot, who put it into The Waste Land’.

Endnotes

[1] ‘A Proclamation’, Punch 48, 7 January 1865, p. 9. I am grateful to the generosity of the following in contributing information and advice on the topic of this paper: Jackie Belanger, Karen O'Brien, Claire Connolly, Tom Dawkes, James Evans, Malcolm Kelsall, Anthony Mandal, Jane Moore, Hugh Osborne, and Christopher Woodward.


[18] Anne Grant, Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen (Edinburgh, 1814).


Gustave Doré) picturing a future visitor from New Zealand drawn by the wreckage of St. Paul’s Cathedral to contemplate the end of empires. A vanished post-war social-democratic consensus, in much contemporary art the ruins of St Paul’s, contemplating a lost civilisation. Perhaps this is part of the Garden Bridges appeal too as a post apocalyptic eco-fantasy. The bridge as a psychopathic form of city making that encodes total destruction as a type of urban infrastructure. Could we read into the image of the Garden Bridge a desire for the destruction of the city itself, channeling the tradition of British ruin lust that runs through the picturesque all the way to

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The articles Contemplating the Ruins of London: Macaulay's New Zealander and Others and "Tourists at the Ruins of London" (Cercles 17, 2007), both by David Skilton, explore possible reasons. PS Further to discussion with Dr C in the comments, see for comparison John Ames Mitchell's 1889 The Last American (Gutenberg EText-No. 27307). “A Fragment from The Journal of KHAN-LI, Prince of Dimph-Yoo-Chur and Admiral in the Persian Navy” it takes a Persian visitor to the ruins of New York in 2951.Â Dr. C 3 October 2009 at 19:32. Two poems in the Skilton text are interesting in that one could substitute New York for London. It is hard to contemplate the demise of your own civilization. It may be even harder than contemplating your own demise. ReplyDelete. was borrowed from an essay by Macaulay, who imagined a New Zealander visiting London in the future, and surveying the ruins of our civilisation. If Trollope could be that man, I fancy his former disapprobation of The Times would turn first to incredulity and then to apoplexy were he confronted by our newspapers.1.Â Thomas Babington Macaulay, Essays and Lays of Ancient Rome (London: Longmans, 1889), p. 548.Google Scholar. 4. Braddon, Aurora Floyd, ed. P. D. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 27.Google Scholar. 5. Hawley Smart, Bound to Win: a Tale of the Turf (London: Chapman and Hall, 1877), vol. 3, pp. 235â€“6.Google Scholar. 6. Anthony Trollope, The New Zealander, ed. N. John Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 211.Google Scholar. 8. Macaulayâ€™s New Zealander. It little profits that, an idle man, On this worn arch, in sight of wasted hallsÂ Here three-and-thirty years Iâ€™ve stood estranged, A dream of ruin all around me stretching; And centuries shall see me yet unchanged, Ever in act to sketch, but nothing sketchingÂ As in the marble waits the future statue. I hate you, London-bridge! And if Saint Paul is. A name I loathe, the fault is Lord Macaulayâ€™s.