THE PANTHEON ON THE MANTELPIECE

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From the agitation that preceded the Reform Bill of 1832 to the repercussions that followed that of 1885, Great Britain was engaged in an especially intense period of reflection on who constituted the nation and what they shared. As entrenched understandings of British society, which had been under pressure at least since the 1790s, began to lose ground, new forms of cultural consensus had to be created. Whether that consensus took the form of an imagined community mediated by print, as Benedict Anderson argues, or a shared opposition to external threat, as Linda Colley suggests, it required a set of common cultural references that was sufficiently cohesive to structure an identity, and yet sufficiently vague to unite diverse individuals under a single flag.[i] Only by promoting forms of cultural consensus that could be shared by both parties and all classes could the 'Two Nations' that Benjamin Disraeli surveyed in *Sybil* (1845) become one Reformed whole.

Creating a shared identity in the present depended on constructing a shared past. A shared set of heroes or a pantheon of great men would provide examples of civic virtue and artistic achievement for emulation. Private pantheons, such as the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe, completed in 1735, constructed lists of the great, but did not necessarily represent public consensus.[ii] From the 1790s on, however, 'plans for national pantheonic structures were rife'.[iii] Pantheons could be discursive, like Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* (1825), sculptural, like those in Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral, or popular, like the waxworks in Madame Tussaud's collection and the busts that decorated the 'pantheon' assembly rooms in Oxford Street (1772-1814).

Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral were the most obvious Pantheonic structures in the early nineteenth century, but both seemed increasingly unfit to serve as a truly national pantheon. There were demands for an alternative, inclusive, and secular pantheon. In an 1838 pamphlet, Henry Austen Driver canvassed Byron's qualifications for admission to Westminster Abbey, and asked 'Is it wise, at all, to pay worldly honours to worldly eminence in edifices consecrated to religious purposes?'[iv] His answer was to call for the construction of a secular edifice for commemorating British achievements. The Bishop of Exeter, speaking in the House of Lords in 1844, echoed Driver's call when he wished for 'some national place, not a church, in which these monuments might be fitly placed'.[v] In 1868, the Dean of Westminster himself lamented 'how extremely unequal and uncertain is the commemoration, or absence of commemoration, of our famous men. It is this which […] makes the Abbey, after all, but an imperfect monument of greatness.'[vi]

Several alternatives were suggested. The founding of the National Gallery (1824), National Portrait Gallery (1856), Scottish National Gallery (1859) and Scottish National Portrait Gallery (1889) offered prominent places to display images of notable individuals, but the galleries had other functions to serve besides that of a pantheon. In fact, no one structure came to serve as a British pantheon. Rather, the pantheon was reconceived as something spread out across the nation. While deprecating Westminster Abbey's claim to be a national pantheon, *The Standard* asserted: 'we object to centralisation in such matters. Let us have many places of pilgrimage, not one only. Let not London devour England's places of sacred interest.'[vii] When the pantheon ceased to be a structure and became an idea, it demanded not to be built in a single structure but to be imagined stretching across the nation. Britain didn't *acquire* a secular pantheon in the nineteenth century: it *became* one.

In my paper at the NAVSA/BAVS/AVSA conference, I will situate the Scott Monument in Edinburgh within this emerging pantheon, suggesting that it makes sense when understood in relation to the memorials that surround it, arranged along an axis from Calton Hill through Waterloo Place to Princes Street Gardens. The Nelson monument was constructed on Calton Hill between 1807 and 1815 (and modified in 1853), where it was joined in 1822 by the National Monument to commemorate the Scottish contribution to the Napoleonic wars, and in 1831 by the monument to Dugald Stewart. The axis was extended westwards by the Scott Monument (1840-46), the equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington outside Register House in Waterloo Place (1852) and the paired statues of John Wilson and Allan Ramsey in Princes Street Gardens (both 1865). In a longer version, I also examine the statue of Lord Byron erected in Hyde Park in 1880, suggesting that it was deliberately 'twinned' with the Scott Monument in an effort to represent Byron and Scott as the poles of a national pantheon extending from Edinburgh to London, and cultivating new forms of cultural consensus around a sense of shared heritage that reinforced emergent conceptions of national and imperial identity.

But while the pantheon moved outwards from Westminster Abbey or St Paul's Cathedral to the parks, streets and squares of Britain's cities, it also moved inwards to the nation's domestic interiors, where it was recreated in miniature. Many of the individuals commemorated in statues, monuments or plaques were also represented in collectable figurines and busts. A number of collectable figures of Byron and Scott were produced in Staffordshire pottery, Parian (a highly finished kind of porcelain developed in the 1840s, which resembled marble) and spelter (an affordable alternative to bronze).[viii] They included busts and full-length figures, both of which were sometimes derived from existing statues of the poets.[ix] These artefacts were often marketed in pairs or groups for display on mantelpieces or in domestic interiors. Byron was often paired

with the 'Maid of Athens', and Scott with Robert Burns, and both appeared alongside non-literary figures such as Wellington and Nelson.[x] Byron and Scott were also routinely paired with each other, and Robert Copeland's catalogue of Parian figures listed several different sized busts of Scott 'to match Byron'.[xi] When T. S. Eliot wrote that 'I have always seen, or imagined that I saw, in busts of [Byron and Scott], a certain resemblance in the shape of the head', he was recalling this convention of pairing authors' busts.[xii]

Displaying Byron and Scott as a pair of poets, including them in a private collection of busts or figurines, or reading their names in a potter's catalogue were ways of reiterating the construction of distributed, secular pantheons in London and Edinburgh. Busts of Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe and Thomas Moore were also produced, as well as older poets like Shakespeare and Dante and modern poets like Tennyson and Browning.[xiii] Female poets, however, tend to be underrepresented. The miniature pantheons constituted by potters' catalogues and materialised in private collections, well-appointed private libraries and tastefully decorated drawing rooms offered what Rohan McWilliam calls 'a form of consensus building' producing 'kinds of cultural integration'.[xiv]

A key rhetorical aim of the sculpted pantheon had been to move its inhabitants beyond the realm of commerce. But when the pantheon was reiterated in the domestic interior, it was also reconciled to commerce. Purchasing a figurine of a canonical individual was a way for citizens to indicate, through consumption, that they concurred in the national consensus: a way to bring one's own desire into conformity with the national self-image and to turn one's private, domestic space into a miniaturized version of public, civic or institutional space. The sense of belonging to a public that could be obtained by contributing to a subscription fund for a public

statue (and seeing one's name in a socially-stratified subscription list) was here transformed into a reason for purchasing a commodity, literally buying into the consensus. Images of Byron and Scott had been placed at either end of Victorian Britain. By also placing them at either end of Victorian mantelpieces, individuals could indicate their membership of a nation with a shared pantheon of heroes.

[i] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996).

[ii] See John Martin Robinson, *Temples of Delight: Stowe Landscape Gardens* (London: National Trust, 1994).

[iii] Alison Yarrington, 'Popular and Imaginary Pantheons in Early Nineteenth-Century England', in *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea,* ed. by Richard Wrigley and Matthew Craske (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 107-21 (p. 107).

[iv] Henry Austen Driver, *Byron and 'The Abbey'* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1838), p. 26.

[v] *Journals of the House of Lords,* 14 June 1844, vol. 75, 3rd Series (London: Hansard, 1844), 886-891 (p. 891).

[vi] Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey* (London: John Murray, 1868), p. 330, cited in Nicola J. Watson, *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 29.

[vii] *The Standard* (London), 26 April 1875, p. 4.

[viii] For the Staffordshire figures of Byron, see P. D. Gordon Pugh, *Staffordshire Portrait Figures*, new and rev. ed. (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1987), figs. 17-21, 27, 28, pp. 492-95; for Scott, see figs. 54, 57, pp. 493, 500-01. For an extremely thorough attempt to use a Staffordshire figurine as a window onto aspects of Victorian culture, see F. S. Schwarzbach, 'Twelve Ways of Looking at a Staffordshire Figurine: An Essay in Cultural Studies', *Victorians Institute Journal*, 29 (2001), 6-60. The three major producers of Parian – Minton, Copeland and Robinson and Leadbeater – all issued figures or busts of Byron and Scott in the nineteenth century. For Byron figures in Parian, see Paul Atterbury et al, *The Parian Phenomenon: A Survey of Victorian Parian Porcelain Statuary and Busts* (Shepton Beauchamp: Richard Dennis, 1989), pp. 93, 135, 186, 228, 230-31; for Scott, see pp. 96, 126, 186, 198, 202, 233, 246. For further information on Parian ware, see Antoinette Faÿ-Hallé and Barbara Mundt, *Nineteenth-Century European Porcelain* (London: Trefoil Books, 1983), pp. 165-67.

[ix] Marsha Manns informs me in private correspondence (30 July 2007) of a Parian figure based on Thorwaldsen's statue, but the date, manufacturer and country of origin of this piece remain uncertain.

[x] Wellington was a popular subject for these kinds of artefact. See Belinda Beaton, 'Materializing the Duke', *Journal of Victorian Culture,* 10.1 (2005), 100-07.

[xi] Robert Copeland, *Parian: Copeland's Statuary Porcelain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2007), p. 225. See also Atterbury et al, p. 186, where a pair of busts of Byron and Scott is shown.

[xii] T. S. Eliot, 'Byron' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 193-206 (p. 194).

[xiii] Keys and Montford made a bust of Wordsworth (Copeland, fig. 827, p. 245); Robinson and Ledbetter made one of Thomas Moore (fig. 752a, p. 230) and one of Shelley (fig. 757, p. 231).

[xiv] Rohan McWilliam, 'The Theatricality of the Staffordshire Figure', *Journal of Victorian Culture,* 10.1 (2005), 107-14 (p. 111).