Edward Chose Egypt – But the Greeks Chose Burne-Jones

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Most, not all, of the pointers to this material on Burne-Jones when young are in the early chapters of *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* by his wife, Georgiana. There they lie in wait and some are not obvious to find. Comments by school friends, memories of the time before faithful Georgie knew him, are mixed with her own experience. And the more all these are pondered, the more the supposed shy, dreaming melancholy youth will disappear. The real Edward Burne-Jones was concentrated, tough, knew what he wanted. It was not really for feckless Phil that he cultivated the Gladstones and accepted the baronetcy which embarrassed his friends. He had made a great deal of money, not accidentally; and with ten fingers, like Turner, like Holman Hunt. He was, as was Morris in his different way, a real self-made Victorian.

Dixon, describing the boy who moved from the Commercial to the Classical side of King Edward VI Grammar School, says: ‘He was a tall strong boy, and I remember noticing his appearance as he sat proud and erect at his desk, among the somewhat younger boys of that class ... I soon made him out, and found him a great joker among them, with a peculiar catch of a laugh, which had in it disdain tempered with good nature and amusement ... At school he was high-spirited ... But playing with E B-J, if I may say so, was rather like playing with edged tools. He could give terrible looks of anger.’

When Cormell Price, two years younger, came into the school, he and Burne-Jones became fast friends, sharing many interests: they put together a museum, cataloguing its odd contents – as young boys will do. What was a little different was their joint library, which gave rise to a project for an *Ancient History* with treatises on many topics, all to be illustrated. ‘Edward chose Egypt’, Price wrote to Georgie as she collected memories for her book. Not until many years later did he interest himself in Greek mythology – too close to school work, doubtless. But there were other reasons why Ted chose Egypt.

As he came up to the age of fourteen, he began to spend weeks of the summer vacation with his Aunt and Uncle Catherwood in Camberwell: and they, or sometimes just Uncle James, showed him the sights of London. We are not told what was the successful business which the Catherwoods ran in the City: perhaps by now Uncle James was retired. A clever man, says Georgie, who took young Ted (not ‘Ned’ until Rossetti) to St. Paul’s, the Bank of England, Whitehall, the Museum of Practical Geology, the theatre: not least, the wonderland of the British Museum, whose exotic and ever-growing contents he described in a letter to his father telling how much he tried to see everything – not forgetting the famous Hippopotamus in its special compound in the Zoological Gardens, or the river trip to Gravesend.

An only child need not be solitary, need not be lonely. Burne-Jones was neither, but bold, outgoing: cock of the walk at school, tyrant of the inward-looking, loving
home in Bennett's Hill. Morris, one in a large family, was the solitary one, though not lonely: early years were spent in small rural schools in Walthamstow or Woodford: then at Marlborough, from thirteen to sixteen, in remoter country, with ample scope for 'mooning', solitary explorations of the countryside, old buildings, ancient mysteries. No letters such as Ted Jones wrote to his father could Morris have written to either parent: nor have we any hint of visits to the theatre, to the sights of London – on the contrary, the City businessman takes his eight year old eldest son to the great Cathedral of Canterbury, to Minster-in-Thanet: to visit country churches in Essex – in which, in spite of Morris's disclaimer of any sort of cultural interest on his parents' part, they must have taken, if only the then fashionable interest.

When the two young men came together, each surely astonishing the other, what they found they shared was a passionate love of words, of learning, of the extraordinary: which would last them far longer than the momentary will to become Anglican priests.

Most people probably think of Edward Burne-Jones first as a designer of stained glass: as an illustrator – and stained glass can fairly be seen as illustration in a special medium, its structure the mosaic of colour which Winston so faithfully showed. Like illustration in the ordinary medium of black and white on the printed page, it is conceived two-dimensionally, and it is inimical to its genius to make it illusionistic as may be done with painting. This rigour in stained glass is a creative element, free of the temptations that have beset painting ever since the Italian renaissance.

Modern artists who started as illustrators have found a formidable problem in moving into paint, and unless they can break this early, may never quite reach the full power which painting demands. So great an artist as Daumier, trammelled by his lifelong work as illustrator, cartoonist and lithographer, had great difficulty, not only in achieving true three-dimensionality, but in making any but the exaggerated forms of satiric illustration. The same necessary struggle to escape from engraved illustration into true painting is to be seen in Hogarth, though he freed himself relatively early, since it was not training as an illustrative draughtsman he must throw off, but a more rudimentary training in decorative work, with a fine visual memory his best tool. He had little to unlearn.

Burne-Jones had drawn obsessively from childhood – imitative as such a child in the world of illustrated books and magazines must be. Arrived in Oxford, taken into the embrace of the Maclarens, he began work on illustrations for Maclaren's projected Fairy Family – brilliant, derivative of illustrations by Doyle or Robert Seymour, they indulged a free fantasy, vividly back and white, Germanic in intensity. Encouraged by Maclaren and by the injunctions of Ruskin's Modern Painters, he drew regularly in Bagley Wood; but more and more dissatisfied with what he did, abandoned them unfinished. (John Christian revived them, with Maclaren's text, in a fine edition of the book that was to have been, in 1985).

The first signal that struck Burne-Jones was the sight, late in 1855, of the illustrated edition of Thackeray's The Newcomes in which Doyle's gentle images, that would have delighted him a year before, he now contrasted with Rossetti's
Maids of Elfen Mere' in The Music Master and the earlier Holman Hunt etching for Woolner's 'My Beautiful Lady' in The Germ. Both Morris and Burne-Jones were deeply impressed by Hunt when later they met him: both wrote about this significant moment, Ned to his father, telling how 'While I was painting and Topsy was making drawings in Rossetti's studio, there entered the greatest genius that is on earth alive, Holman Hunt – such a grand looking fellow, such a splendour of a man.' Hunt too, years later, recalled this moment: 'Calling one day on Gabriel at his rooms in Blackfriars, I saw, sitting at a second easel, an ingenuous and particularly gentle young man... He was introduced to me as Jones and was called Ned.'

Three words are regularly corrupted in critical or anecdotal writing on the art of the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, and by a not unnatural extension, in the United States and other anglophone lands: Preraphaelitism; Aestheticism; Impressionism. Pre-Raphaelite dates exactly from the middle of the nineteenth century, following the first exhibition of work by Hunt, Millais, Rossetti: Aestheticism from the late 1870s–1880s; with Impressionism close on its heels. In general all three words have been used without thought, inappropriately, often as terms of derision, telling more about the journalists who coined them, the critics who have subsequently used them, than about the forms of visual, literary and musical art within which they pretend to discriminate. Yet all three words do have serious meaning when there underlies their use a knowledge of the history in which they were once embedded.

Most abused of the three is Pre-Raphaelite, which has a very particular origin in the field of visual art, while Aesthetic and Impressionist, general in kind, may readily and not always illegitimately be extended outside the fields in which they were first pressed into use. Pre-Raphaelite is rooted in the world of painting, of European, of Italian painting, the painting precisely of Raphael; only rarely, after conscientious consideration, may it be used in non-visual contexts: and never in a general sense. I speak of 'serious' critics: never mind the journalists though they slacken all language, building on ignorance, not knowing that even true information is no more than the beginning of meaning. The continual misuse of the word Pre-Raphaelite has in this century created a whole Chinese wall to obscure the real meaning of the art of Burne-Jones and his friends.

Tennyson has been made the stereotype of Pre-Raphaelite in poetry, adding as much confusion as clarity to any discussion of either painting or poetry. Though he used Arthurian themes from Malory well before Morris, Rossetti, and Burne-Jones, it is not the use of tales from Malory that defines Pre-Raphaelite, the term justly invented before any of them touched Arthur or Guenevere. Tennyson became friendly with all three original Pre-Raphaelites, without at all understanding what warranted that name: he did not at all like, either, the illustrations they made for Moxon's selection of his poems and grumbled at more than one. Nor could he ever give the same rough-edged vigour to his poems that Morris did in Guenevere: Morris saw the brutality of medieval 'romance' which is perfectly clear in both Malory and Froissart. Tennyson's passion for verbal music forbade this, no less than his lack of historic sense: though his glorious myopia gave us wonderful miniatures. If we are to tie Tennyson in with the Pre-Raphaelites, it can only be
as a pre-Pre-Raphaelite: which still would have baffled a man so little oriented on the world of the visual arts: from which only Carlyle stood at more distance.

We may with justice call the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins Pre-Raphaelite, since the visual is so essential to the dynamic of his poetry, and his boyhood and youth passed in a setting in which sensibilities both visual and verbal had been transformed by the work of artists and poets like Rossetti and Morris. At Oxford a bare decade after Morris and Burne-Jones, having just before been taught in Highgate School by Richard Watson Dixon, he drew, in his first year at Balliol, in the same Bagley and Wytham Woods as Burne-Jones had done – better drawings and with less trouble – driven by the same influence of Ruskin, from Elements of Drawing and the first volume of Modern Painters. Hopkins had first thought of being a painter, but put that aside as too likely to release the passion he knew he had within.^

In his first days at Marlborough, Morris walked twice to and from Avebury and Silbury to discover for himself what they meant, taking from the great stone circles a symbolic memorial: a tiny white snail shell. He had gone to Marlborough already oriented on the past: the very particular past of these islands, seen in the ancient Forest of Epping, its prehistoric forts embedded in the hornbeams: churches like ivied Chingford, the ruins of Barking Abbey, the deeply implanted images of Canterbury and Minster-in-Thanet. In Wiltshire he found Savernake Forest, the Kennet Valley with its barrows and earthworks: in the very grounds of the College rose the mutilated Mount, contemporary with Silbury Hill, devastated by later cultures, reduced now to a shell-grottoed fantasy. Though he said later, that at Marlborough he learned nothing, this was less than the truth; for, as well as these extra collegiate wonders, there were devout High Church Goths on the staff, one at least of whom made enthusiastic if sketchy drawing of the Wiltshire churches. At either end of the great market place stands a Norman-founded church: Blore’s College Chapel, still building when Morris arrived in 1848, was well-meant as Gothic, though subject to much scornful criticism by high-minded lovers of Pointed Architecture (one or two may have aimed their darts from within). In that same year, the Wiltshire Archaeological Association began tunnelling into Silbury Hill, to determine once for all, was it Burial mound or Sacred Hill – man-made? This it was that provoked Morris’s own inquiry. In the same year, too, the Adderley Library was installed, filled with such books as fed Morris’s passion for architecture, history, archaeology – never, for him, separate. No doubt it contained literary classics too – such poets as Addison, Pope, Cowper, Gray – the father of our Gothic lore. It is less likely that moderns such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey; still less Keats and Tennyson – let alone atheist Shelley – were there. Such moderns Dixon, Jones, Cormell Price, Heeley, could take at will from the more secular and various shelves in King Edward’s School in busy, commercial Birmingham. Morris’s reading of them, as of Ruskin, seems to have come during his year of reading with Frederick Guy in 1852.

These contrasting libraries were well suited for these two very different boys. That of King Edward’s School, updated year by year, offered more secular and
more exotic intellectual food. Georgiana Burne-Jones’s *Memorials* list a few she knew to have been attractive to her husband: Layard’s *Nineveh;* Curzon’s *Monasteries of the Levant;* Wilkinson’s *Ancient Egyptians,* and surely alongside it the equally widely read Lane’s *Modern Egyptians;* George Catlin’s *North American Indians* first published by the author in 1841 from the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly where for some years his great Indian Collection had been shown; and surely, too, though not listed by her, John Lloyd Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Central America,* published in the same year by John Murray, illustrated by Frederick Catherwood’s fine engravings of the mysterious temples of Yucatan; perhaps also Captain George Ruxton’s *Adventures in Mexico* of 1847. All were modern and outward-looking by contrast with the productions of John Parker’s Gothic-oriented press in Oxford; many written by members of the ‘Oxford Society for the Promotion of Gothic Architecture’ – of which Frederick Guy was a member – which was itself a promotion of Parker’s own, and which, as Morris and Jones would find, had its own Library and collection in the Old Music Room.

Morris and Burne-Jones met in mid-January 1853, when their first Oxford term began, and they became friends. But their life-long friendship and creative partnership has deceived us into seeing them as two of a kind, which indeed they were not, as a scrutiny of Georgie’s depiction of Edward’s earliest years makes very clear. The differences are not at all the result of such different lives as the son of a rich City business man and a not very competent frame-maker/shopkeeper in Birmingham followed. They are fundamental, of character and disposition: hence also of activity in boyhood.

Both had strong verbal-visual powers: with Morris, the verbal led the visual; with Burne-Jones, it was the other case, and in both, the obsessions showed early. Morris at Marlborough, his head full of Gothic romance, was in great demand as a teller of romantic tales; at the same time, more and more preoccupied not just with architecture, but with archaeology: as to which one of his remarkable insights was the continuity of history and archaeology, not least in these islands. His perception and understanding of Avebury has nothing of the Druidic fantasies still generally held in the mid-nineteenth century: the massive stones were for him our *history,* just as much as the finely chiselled traceries of early Christian buildings. His base was thus narrower than Burne-Jones’s, his ever-widening interest deeper.

Burne-Jones on the other hand was from infancy an obsessive draughtsman, his school fellows at Birmingham’s King Edward Grammar School demanding of him as the boys of Marlborough did of Morris, largesse from an endless store – not stories, but images, often of the immediate contemporary world, but most often derived from the illustrated books and periodicals which flourished here from the moment when the new steam technology, the production of paper in the web not sheet, made the mass-producing rotary steam press available, first for the printing of the *Times* – always at the front of new technology – and next for the printing of illustrated books and magazines. In this trade the perfection of stereotyping by Lord (Citizen) Stanhope, combined with new cast iron presses and the perfection of wood engraving by Thomas Bewick, made possible a completely new type of publication: above all, available at modest prices to the widest readership. The first book to be so printed was Youatt’s *Cattle; their Breeds, Management and*
Diseases. Promoted by the new ‘Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge’ under Charles Knight, it was printed, to the great annoyance of the Duke of Northumberland, on Clowes’ new steam presses next door to his lordship’s town house. And in the same year, 1832, the same Society began the first mass- and international-circulating magazine – the Penny Magazine. Ten years later came the wonderful Illustrated London News, the television of its day, and the then comic Punch: all full of brilliant drawings cut on wood by the new generation of engravers. Though the basically secular nature of these productions alarmed Establishment Christians like John Parker, who instantly set up a Saturday rival to the Penny, these new, wide-ranging, universally interesting periodicals fascinated all classes of society, here, in France, in Belgium, in Germany in the USA. Making drawings for the engravers, whether or not with the help of the daguerreotype/photograph, available from 1839, was now a valuable source of income, much more reliable than painting, for many artists, though the most established or ambitious did not care to have this side of their work known. But for that great majority of the population which had little acquaintance with ‘fine art’ or access to collections of paintings, the visual world was newly revealed, bright and sparkling in black and white. Eighteenth century books appeared by contrast dull sheaves of word-dense pages. In a period where literacy had become more generally important than in earlier times, the public for these new books grew faster and faster – a great raft for Mr Dickens, Mr Bulwer Lytton, Mr Collins ... And alongside the bright illustrations, far-reaching imaginative speculation on human life, the nature of the universe – it was not only Mr Darwin’s wonderful book of 1859 that began to shake men’s minds.

When at the end of 1857 the Oxford Union Debating Hall murals were as near finished as they would ever be; with Gabriel disappeared to Matlock and who knew where else in his reconciliation with Lizzie Siddal; with Morris most of the time in Oxford, making the selection from his poems that was soon to be published as The Defence of Guenevere and much of his time spent with Janey, painting ‘La Belle Iseult’ – which like the Defence was a sealing of their engagement – Burne-Jones found himself adrift. Back in Oxford now and then, working with Spencer Stanhope in a forlorn effort to finish his mural, he abandoned any thought of a degree and went back to Red Lion Square, where Stanhope stayed with him. Both became for a period much dependent on Madox Brown. For Jones this was particularly important. Not yet at all confident in his skill or invention as a painter, he could and did learn a great deal from Brown, of just the kind which Gabriel could not teach, but for which Brown’s training admirably fitted him. Articulate drawing, perspective, pictorial structure, such as he had mastered by the age of twenty in Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Paris, Rome and London, he now put at Jones’s disposal. Stanhope’s working alongside supported Ned too, for he, before joining the happy band, had worked under Watts on the great Lincoln’s Inn mural. Brown was no less kind and helpful in domestic matters, encouraging Georgie also in drawing: her musical gifts appealed to him and Emma.

All this time, Brown, and Hunt back from the Holy Land, were closer than they had ever been: mutual suspicion bred in their early days of counselling Rossetti had vanished, and together they revived those first principles of Pre-Raphaelitism
with such pictures as ‘Our English Coasts’ and Brown’s slyly titled ‘Pretty Baa Lambs’, in which with less marked austerity of manner than he had shown in ‘Wickliffe Reading his Translation of the Bible to John of Gaunt’ he resumed his engagement with clear colour vision and vital drawing. Burne-Jones and Stanhope were his chief lieutenants in the formation of the Hogarth Club; Brown’s plan to bring together like-minded artists, not only painters, though led by painters, into a body which should stimulate a new English art such as Hunt had hoped for ten years earlier. They were brought into contact with other artists and architects: for two years the Club had a wavering life, showing a wide range of work, though Brown left in a rage when his drawings for furniture were excluded, and Hunt very early drew back, never wishing to be second. Gabriel returned to their London world, Lizzie with him. Painters like Boyce moved in this reconstituted circle, and deep as his affection for both Morris and Rossetti remained, Ned began to be fully his own man.

The honeymoon journey to Italy on which Ruskin sent him and Georgie further helped him. Though he did not care for the copying which Ruskin exacted - by no means as ruthlessly as Linnell had exacted from poor Samuel Palmer - he learned enormously from the close scrutiny of paintings in north Italy, as Ruskin, who did not need the copies, had all along meant: and though for part of this time Ruskin was with them, imperative even in his tenderest kindness, here for a few weeks Burne-Jones was free to confront the Italian masters in their own place, the churches and palaces for which they had painted. Now too if at a distance, he began that move towards Michelangelo which, though both Ruskin and Morris disliked and feared it, laid the foundation of a grand style in later years. The fully worked out art of Burne-Jones is by no means all about willowy young ladies: nor is it sexless: sex underlies much of it like lava under Etna. A visit to Cardiff and the National Museum of Wales will show in the ‘Venus Discordia’ a very un-Patience-like painter. In many of the great Chaucer illustrations too he returned to the threatening power and mystery which he had so astonishingly expressed in the abandoned drawings for the Fairy Family. There is a seismic fund beneath Burne-Jones’s ‘aesthetic’ painting which would be far to seek in any of his contemporaries, or imitators of the nineties. The seven tiny, Blakean watercolour ‘Days of Creation’ (to be seen in Birmingham); the larger, no less Blakean angelic panels on the same theme, in Llandaff Cathedral; the ‘Venus Discordia’ in the National Museum of Wales; the never finished compendious ‘Troy’ also in Birmingham, from some of whose panels individual pictures were evolved (‘Discordia’ is one); and the ‘Phyllis and Demophoön’ that so upset fellow-members of the Old Watercolour Society by the full nudity of entwined male and female figures, these are the work of a real creative artist for whom what went on the canvas projected far more – hence Picasso’s attraction to his work.

In the 1860s, Burne-Jones moved more and more to classical themes; ironically, Morris’s Earthly Paradise may have stimulated this. In 1870, his great, dramatic ‘Phyllis and Demophoön’ was withdrawn from the exhibition of the Watercolour Society on objections made by other members of the Society. The next year, he took his third journey to Italy, revisiting Florence and Siena, but now going on to Genoa, San Geminiano, Orvieto and Rome, where he spent days studying
Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling, coming home more than ever imbued with Mannerist visual ideas. Classical subjects do not make a classical painter: and he was a painter of a very different order from Leighton or Poynner. If we are to draw, as we need, on words formerly used of Italian artists to identify what Burne-Jones was now becoming, Mannerist is the only just one. While it has been used of many different painters, the greatest of all Mannerists was Michelangelo, who now dominated him to an extent that alarmed Ruskin and to a lesser extent Morris. It is in the great compendium of paintings-to-be, the never finished Troy, that Burne-Jones’s ultimate Mannerism is most to be seen, and of the separate subjects set out in it, he made many finished pictures without ever completing the great whole. We might align this on Morris’s *Earthly Paradise* with its many unwritten stories; on Morris’s *Troy* fragments of 1860-62. Of these late paintings one in Cardiff (National Museum of Wales) the ‘Venus Discordia’ perhaps shows best what had now become possible for him. Nowhere is he so close to Michelangelo as in this threatening work. Not milk and water, not androgynous, no maidens trailing pale gowns here, but a powerful symbolist work.

Picasso, writing in the year before Burne-Jones’s death, said – ‘If I had a son who wanted to be a painter, I would not keep him in Spain a moment; and do not imagine I would send him to Paris, but to Munich ... as it is a city where painting is studied seriously’. A reminder that for most of the nineteenth century there were three major art centres in Europe: London, Munich and Paris. Of his own visit to Paris, three years later, Picasso said that it was meant to be only a halt on the way to England – to London, drawn by his love of the Pre-Raphaelites, of Burne-Jones above all. The presence of the English painter in Picasso’s works of the ‘Blue’ period is unmistakable, though Burne-Jones would have hated all that Picasso painted, as he came to hate the work of Aubrey Beardsley. Neither Burne-Jones nor Picasso, however, believed that painting should offer only direct transcripts of visual experience: it must be a vehicle of meaning beyond that.

Burne-Jones and Morris found that they shared a love of Keats’ poetry. They most probably encountered it in the two volume *Life and Letters* edited by Richard Wentworth Dilke, published by Moxon in 1848: Burne-Jones in the school library in Birmingham, Morris while reading with Frederick Barlow Guy in 1852. In the first volume, which has an engraving of one of Severn’s portraits of Keats, Dilke printed three Egyptian sonnets on the Nile, written one February evening of 1818 in Hunt’s Vale of Health cottage in Hampstead; by Hunt, by Keats, and by Shelley – though mistakenly it was ‘Ozymandias’ which he printed, not the one then written: ‘Ozymandias’ had been written at the end of 1817. Two years after the Bourbons had been restored to the French throne and Napoleon banished to St Helena, social as well as political patterns had changed, not quite to what they had been before the Revolution. Napoleon’s attempt of 1798 to take an army to regain India for France while the British imagined him intent on a cross-Channel invasion, had failed, and as later in Russia, he left his troops behind to make himself master of France. But he had taken to Egypt, the necessary staging post, engineers and draughtsmen, savants and historians, to investigate this ancient civilisation, mysterious, scene of the struggle between Caesar (Augustus) and Mark
Antony, the wonderland of Cleopatra; an early conquest of Alexander no less, the earliest home of science – and the study of Egypt by French archaeologists had attracted others, artists not least. Amongst them was mysterious Belzoni, renegade monk, professional strongman, who had first performed gymnastic feats in Astley's Amphitheatre to raise money, and later, in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, built in 1812 to house Bullock’s Museum, showed the treasure trove of his Egyptian researches.

With the end of the wars, Europe’s great capitals could once more be visited by the rich and famous. During the short Peace of Amiens (1802-3) they came in their thousands to visit Paris, to see the great man and the loot he had brought home, not least the works of art that drew Britain’s most ambitious artists to the Louvre. After 1815, much of this loot remained there. Rome became again a sunny, southern capital where for a few English guineas, a whole villa might be hired; to which invalids might be sent by hopeful physicians. At the same time, the French Academy School at Rome revived: British artists and some patrons thought that an English School at Rome might well be set up. From such a base, whether poor Keats recovered or not, Joseph Severn could well launch his career.  

Keats was buried in February 1821, and Severn was free to resume his painting. He had become well known if little seen in Rome among the English and was welcomed back to the social scene, soon getting commissions for portraits though most anxious to win fame – as was the convention – by ‘history paintings’ which, sent back to the RA in London, should make his fortune. Very soon he was taken under the wing of the Countess of Westmoreland who found his romantic story a social asset as much as his painting and skilful music making. He became her lion and rapidly supplanted Welsh sculptor John Gibson (sent out by William Roscoe) as the leading figure among the British artists. If they should come to be recognised as ‘the English School’ it would be Severn who would be its focus.

Lady Westmoreland found herself fired by the cult of Egypt to set up an expedition of her own: she would take as Napoleon had done, scholars and linguists – and her artist: disconcerting for Severn who knew that Rome was where he must be. Fortunately for him, a London acquaintance, another artist, arrived and they had just agreed to take an apartment together when the Egyptian trip threatened. This was Frederick Catherwood, come to Rome to launch his career – and he had no reason to think that Egypt would threaten that. He was full of enthusiasm. Lady Westmoreland’s scheme collapsed, so that it was not under her wing that Catherwood went to the land of the Pharaohs. Just how he went, with whom – by whom funded unless his brother James, who ran the family firm in London, is a mystery. But go he did, and travelled not only in Egypt but in Sinai, Baalbek, Jerusalem, becoming like the watercolourist J. F. Lewis, thoroughly at home in Middle Eastern ways. Some time in the 1830s he met an American lawyer, about his own age, who had made good in New York and set out to travel not only to the European capitals, but the Middle East. Thus Catherwood became guide and friend to John Lloyd Stephens and showed him Egypt, the Holy Land, Petra and Baalbek. When Stephens undertook a secret mission on behalf of President Van Buren to the shaky Central Republic, the Republic of Guatemala, cobbled together since the 1820s from the ruins of the Spanish Empire’s old Provinces from Mexico to Honduras, and on the point of collapse – he called on

John Lloyd Stephens, a successful, well-educated lawyer, who had practised in New York since his early twenties, closed his office at the end of 1834 and set out on the first of his travels: wasting little time in Europe, but going to Alexandria to begin a tour of Egypt, starting at Cairo, travelling up the Nile as far as the first cataracts, then returning to study the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the great temple of Karnak, the royal tombs which Belzoni had uncovered twenty years before: then by way of Sinai, to Hebron – with an excursion to Petra – on to Jerusalem, Nablus, Gaza, to return home by Beirut. This journey resulted in two volumes of Travels in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land in 1837 – reviewed by Edgar Allan Poe: 6 followed in 1838 by two more volumes, Travels in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland; in 1841, by two more volumes; Incidents of Travel in Central America, and these in 1843 by Travels in Yucatan. 7 He was a shrewd observer of things and people; on the Central American journeys he had for working companion Frederick Catherwood, who made the first careful and authentic drawings of the ruins of Copan, Uxmal, Palenque; on the first trip using the camera lucida, an instrument about to be superseded by the Camera or Daguerreotype-apparatus; and on the second journey they took with them such an apparatus, skilfully operated by Catherwood: only the second to be seen in Central America. On this expedition too they had the advantage of a doctor; their many illnesses on the earlier trip made Dr Cabot a welcome addition to the company.

Just when and how Stephens and Catherwood met is not clear: almost certainly in Egypt, where Catherwood, intermittently in the Middle East since the early 1820s, exploring, making drawings for his Panoramas, would be the best of guides, and may well have accompanied him into the Holy Land, where – as Georgiana tells in the Memorials, Catherwood had passed for an Arab in the sacred Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem. They may have met as Stephens passed through London, where in Leicester Square, in Burford’s famous Rotunda, he could have seen Fred Catherwood’s Panorama of Jerusalem. Or they may have met in New York, where, by 1836, Catherwood had his own Panorama on Broadway. By the late 1830s, they were old friends, and both probably knew Stephens’ fellow countryman, lawyer turned painter, George Catlin, whose celebrated ‘Indian Museum’ after a short stay in New York, was installed by 1840 in the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly. Catlin spent the years from 1832 to 1839 travelling the whole of North America to live with, study, and paint the Indian tribes, then being driven further and further West: and meant that there should one day be in New York a permanent Exhibition of Indian life, lore, and personalities, created from his paintings and collected artefacts. 8 Stephens, after his own Yucatan journeys, hoped to join to this a collection of Catherwood’s drawings and plans, and the full-sized casts they had made of the astonishing Mayan figure and inscriptive carvings, which should form a complete Museum of the Pre-Columbian life of America. After Yucatan, Catherwood travelled to California, which became a State of the American Union in 1850. My guess is that one of the interests which drew him there was the setting up of yet another Panorama, probably in partnership with his friend Colonel Frémont, who at this time was elected California’s first Senator, and whose Army
Survey drawings laid the basis of the Panorama of ‘The Route from Oregon to California’, shown in London and New York.

Young Ted had met his uncle-by-marriage on an early visit to Camberwell, and there surely must have seen his drawings of Central America and the Middle East, from which Burford’s Panoramas had been painted. The Catherwoods were proud of this travelled and distinguished relative, and Ted was not at all left out. The fantastic letters written by him in the character of ‘Edouard, Cardinal of Byrmynghame’ to ‘ye Ladye Annie’ were to the elder of Frederick Catherwood’s daughters, at a boarding school in Hornsey while their father was away, as he was for many months at a time; the tiresome quaintness shows Ted in a very friendly relationship with them.

The literary attraction of Arthurian lore had not yet displaced Jones’s wider interests stirred by the British Museum and larger reading; what his Uncle had opened was a secret window on that lore of Egypt, the Holy Land, the remote and mysterious desert of Edom, pagan Petra and Baalbek, which for fifty years so engaged the interest of English tourists, explorers and artists. Differently from the inquiries of the French, it was overwhelmingly Biblical history, the real scenes of the Judaeo-Christian stories, their authentication by survey and drawings, their compelling presentation in pictures and text, that fascinated artists like
Catherwood, David Roberts and Holman Hunt. When Catherwood wrote in April 1853 to ask his sister-in-law to thank her nephew for his help as he travelled through Birmingham to Liverpool, he did not omit to point out the opportunities opening up in California, over and above the diggings which had made it 'The Golden State', which might well tempt a talented young man. But romance won out over this lure, and it was High Art, not Show Business, that shaped Burne-Jones as he freed himself three years later from Oxford. The other choice would have led him ultimately into the world of Barnum and Bailey, even to the verge of the Cinematograph, the Bioscope, whose centenary has shared 1998 with him.

Harry Macdonald, Georgiana's brother, succumbed to the lure of the West: threw up his hopes of a career in India, went precipitately to America and became a journalist. Who knows how much an awareness of Ted's Uncle Fred may have influenced him?

NOTES
1 It seems likely that it was some part of the wine and spirit trade.
2 W. Holman Hunt, Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, (London: Macmillan 1905-6), I, p. 133.
3 Letter to his school friend Baillie.
5 The details relating to Joseph Severn are taken from Sheila Birkenhead, Against Oblivion: The Life of Joseph Severn, (London: Cassell 1943), Chp. IX.
7 For Stephens and Catherwood in Yucatan, see J. L. Stephens, Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan, (London: John Murray 1841), 2 Vols.