

William Gell's Pompeii

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DESSALES, H. 2019. *Recueils de William Gell. Pompéi publiée et inédite 1801–1829*. Paris: Hermann Éditeurs. Pp. 434. ISBN 9791037002129.

The first three decades of the 19th c. were transformational for the appreciation of classical antiquity in Britain. The Napoleonic Wars had a profound impact on art history as much else. In Athens, the British Ambassador, Lord Elgin, competed with his French counterpart to appropriate the marble sculptures of the Parthenon, and endured the stinging rebukes of Lord Byron. At the same time, the topographer Sir William Gell endured a milder barb from Byron for his hasty survey of the Troad: "coxcomb Gell," though in later editions he was merely "classic Gell." In the first two decades of the century, Gell, like his friend and collaborator Edward Dodwell, worked in Greece and Turkey, publishing in their watercolors invaluable records of the state of classical antiquities. Up to 1815, Italy was under French control, making it less open to British travelers, and benefitting from the rich campaign of excavations at Pompeii driven by Queen Caroline Murat. With the end of French control, Gell shifted his attention to Italy and produced a series of topographic volumes both on Rome and its environs and, most famously, on Pompeii. It was Gell's volumes on Pompeii, the first covering the excavations of 1817–1819, the second those subsequent to 1819, that did more than any other serious publication to open up Pompeii to a broader public, inspiring along the way Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*.

Gell then is a familiar figure in the history of Pompeian studies. Yet, despite his numerous publications, it emerges that much of his work is unpublished. In 1998, a young French Pompeianist, Hélène Dessales, made a brilliant discovery in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut national de l'histoire de l'art in Paris of two anonymous volumes of drawings, entitled *Pompeii Published 1819* and *Pompeii Unpublished*, which she identified as being by William Gell, confirming her identification by comparison to a dossier of Gell drawings

in Naples, recognized by Stefano De Caro. She also set about tracking down other collections of unpublished Gell drawings and correspondence, spread across London, Oxford, Bristol, Rome, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The present volume reproduces and publishes in exemplary fashion the two volumes from Paris, and thereby sets a model for all other unpublished collections of Gell material. It may also help to flush out other hitherto unnoticed collections, including two missing from her list in the British School at Rome, a notebook of travels in Spain, and a curious scrapbook by Lady Mary, Countess of Coventry, containing numerous letters, verses, and sketches by Gell. Dessales shows how it should be done, with a full reproduction of the dossier, followed by explanatory notes.

Wherein lies the value, the sceptic may ask, of publishing Gell's unpublished work? The uneven state of the publication of the site of Pompeii has long made it clear that "excavation in the archives" can be as valuable as excavation in the field. But what in my view gives Gell's work a special importance is its place in a moment of transition between drawing and photography. The development of photographic techniques by Fox Talbot, Daguerre, and others belongs to the mid-1830s, just too late for Gell to avail himself of them. But he made extensive use of the *camera lucida*, which by projecting an image of a scene through a prism enabled a new level of accuracy. Gell experimented with this technique, only invented in 1807, both in his surveying of the environs and Rome and in Pompeii. He used it extensively for wider street scenes in Pompeii, for buildings, rooms, and for details: thus the low relief scene of sacrifice from the "temple of Mercury" (now called Lares Publici) is explicitly labelled "camera lucida" (Unpublished Pompeii, no. 17). He was a skilled draftsman in his use of freehand, but he also trained his eye to see through the single viewpoint of a prism. If his work is less "accurate" than a photograph, it has the advantage of intelligent interpretation that a camera lacks. We have therefore an archival record of an unusual type, carried out by an artist who had trained himself to read antiquities through years of practice before he made Pompeii his focus, and with a passionate curiosity for everything he saw. It is a form of interpretation honed by experience and disciplined by the use of a quasi-photographic technique.

The collection contains both published and unpublished drawings. Is there any gain in seeing the original versions of already published drawings? Dessales is careful to record in which volume the published drawings can be found. Comparison makes it easy to see that the process of engraving involved numerous small changes to Gell's originals. Everything that was loosely sketched is tightened up, columns become more ponderous and formal, indications of damaged fabric do not precisely correspond, and small details like vegetation are replaced or excluded. It becomes evident that what Gell published is at an additional remove from his original documentation on site. We know that he could be fussy with his engravers: in the case of the environs of Rome, he was insistent that the contours of mountains should not be changed. The published versions must have had his approval. Nevertheless, it is of great benefit to be able to go back to his original versions, which retain a freshness and often a color that is missing from the rather dark engravings. The comparison is enough to reassure us that in publishing other examples of his notebooks, as one must hope that other collections like the Getty will soon do, there is nothing to be gained by omitting already published work.

Sir William Gell looked at the freshly excavated material of Pompeii with an infectious enthusiasm, one that inspired many like Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Although his work never

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reached the exquisite standard of François Mazois, who published the French excavations for Queen Caroline, it reached a far wider audience. The author is to be congratulated both on rediscovering this lost treasure, and for publishing it to the highest standard.