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Catherine Roach

book review of

Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment by Wendy Bellion, and *Scenes and Traces of the English Civil War* by Stephen Bann

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Wendy Bellion,
Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment.
University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.
272 pp.; 11 color and 51 b&w illus.; bibliography; notes; index.
\$124.95 (hardcover); \$34.95 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-0-271-08364-3; 978-0-271-08365-0

Stephen Bann,
Scenes and Traces of the English Civil War.
London: Reaktion Books, 2020.
288 pp.; 75 color and 38 b&w illus.; chronology; bibliography; notes; index.
£40.00 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-1-789-14228-0

In the past year, statues have come down amidst debates over the racist, colonialist pasts and presents of nations such as the United States. Some sculptures have been removed by authorities, others subject to spontaneous removal or alteration. In Richmond, Virginia, the home of my own university, a statue of Christopher Columbus was thrown into a lake, a likeness of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis dragged from its pedestal, and the monument to Robert E. Lee transformed through paint, projections, and performance into an eloquent counter-memorial. The pace of these removals, both official and otherwise, may have felt sudden to contemporary observers. But as two recent publications demonstrate, such practices have a deep history in Anglo-American culture. In this context, the phrase “Civil War history” can refer not only to the battle over slavery in the United States in the nineteenth century, but also to the battle over religion and parliamentary power in England in the seventeenth. Stephen Bann’s *Scenes and Traces of the English Civil War* starts in the immediate aftermath of that political cataclysm and concludes in the early twentieth century. Wendy Bellion’s *Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment* also spans multiple eras and multiple media, focusing on the life and afterlife of a statue of George III (1770) torn down at the outset of the American Revolution. As Bellion vividly demonstrates, although it was dismembered in the late eighteenth century, this monument persists to the present day through a plethora of relics, images, and performances. Together, these works provide the opportunity to think through the cultural significance of erecting, deposing, and resurrecting statues. The two books differ sharply in their approach: Bann assumes that the symbols of the English Civil War decreased in political resonance over time; Bellion shows, more

convincingly, how representations and reenactments of the American Revolution persisted precisely because of their profound political utility.

Sculpted kings on horseback feature prominently in both books. Bann devotes a chapter to Herbert Le Sueur's monumental brass portrait of Charles I (ca. 1633). Commissioned by a courtier for his estate as a demonstration of loyalty, the statue survived the Civil War in hiding. As Bann relates in fascinating detail, contemporary accounts suggest that the sculpture was sold to a merchant who hid it, rather than using it as scrap metal. (A later legend even claimed that the canny merchant sold brass knives and forks as fraudulent souvenirs of the statue's destruction.) This long bet on the monarchy paid off: after the Restoration, the surviving sculpture was re-erected in central London, in the symbolically resonant site of Charing Cross, not far from the place where the depicted king was beheaded. It remains there to this day.

In contrast, the sculpture at the heart of Bellion's study stood for a relatively brief time. Joseph Wilton's gilt lead image of the mounted George III was imported to New York from England in 1770 by local leaders commemorating the repeal of the Stamp Act. Protestors tore it down only six years later. Much of the sculpture was used to create bullets, but surviving fragments and the bullet-making tools became relics of the conflict. British officials sent the detached head of George III to London as evidence of colonial depravity. There, politician Lord Townshend and his wife kept it under a sofa, to be revealed only to select guests. In this context, as Bellion writes, "the symbolic decapitation of a British monarch summoned the disturbing memory of Charles I and stirred unease about the future of the living King" (116). Bellion acutely identifies two key paradoxes surrounding this sculpture and its afterlife: first, in tearing down the monument to symbolize their independence, the rebelling colonists nonetheless deployed an enduring British tradition of protest, with its roots in sixteenth-century religious schism and seventeenth-century civil war; second, commemorating the demolition of the statue meant resurrecting it, again and again. Bellion traces the shifting political and cultural implications of the vanished but perpetually re-presented likeness of George III through the United States Civil War and into the twentieth century, demonstrating how representations of the destruction of the statue supported narratives of national identity and white supremacy. The earlier events charted by Bann thus also appear in Bellion's book, but the two authors draw very different conclusions from this material.

Bann's book considers the "visual legacy of the Civil War" (9). Its ambitious scope encompasses seventeenth-century monuments, eighteenth-century illustrated histories and revivalist interiors, and nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century paintings. It is divided into roughly two halves. The first considers what Bann defines as "traces" of the English Civil War: "surviving material indications of lost lives," including funerary monuments, iconoclastic damage to sculptures, and the equestrian statue of Charles I. The second moves beyond the seventeenth century to examine the development of "scenes," or "recreations, based on historical evidence, of significant incidents in the Civil War," with a special focus on historical genre paintings of the mid-nineteenth century (33). The potentially fruitful theoretical distinction between traces and scenes remains underdeveloped, however. In addition, much of the analysis in the second half of the book

relies on the faulty notion that nineteenth-century depictions of the Civil War lacked contemporary political significance.

Of most interest to scholars of nineteenth-century art will be the final three chapters, which consider representations of the Civil War in paint and print. Two of these chapters focus on Paul Delaroche, the French painter of historical scenes whose art developed in close conversation with his British contemporaries. Here, Bann draws on his extensive knowledge of Delaroche and offers new insights into the artist's contacts, including his interactions with the English painter James Ward and with the aristocratic patrons (and brothers) Lord Francis Egerton and the second Duke of Sutherland. Both brothers owned works by Delaroche and promoted them through display in their collections and at the British Institution (confusingly, this organization is misnamed as the Royal Institution several times).^[1] In these chapters, Bann provides a useful account of episodes important both to the history of images of the English Civil War and to the history of cross-Channel artistic exchanges. Less effective is the final chapter, which surveys images by artists other than Delaroche from the 1830s to the early 1900s. Important works are only briefly discussed, such as Ford Madox Brown's majestically bonkers *Cromwell on his Farm at St. Ives* (1874, Lady Lever Art Gallery). Other major examples are omitted—or worse, their existence denied. Bann states that Brown was the only member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle to paint a Civil War subject, a claim that ignores, among others, John Everett Millais's *A Proscribed Royalist, 1651* (1853; The Andrew Lloyd Weber Collection). This concern may be related to another issue with this chapter, which is a lack of reference to essential scholarship on the topics at hand.^[2]

More importantly for the subject under discussion here, in his final chapter Bann asserts that the political valence of the Civil War faded over time:

I would argue that the distinctive feature of English historical genre was precisely the fact that it had no overarching political agenda, as in France or in the emerging nation states that called for new historical symbols to reinforce their shifting identity (215).

This argument rests on the mistaken premise that nineteenth-century Britain did not experience political turmoil or need political symbols. True, unlike France, Britain avoided revolution within its national borders. But to those living in nineteenth-century Britain, this seemed far from a guaranteed outcome, especially during the postwar economic hardships of the 1810s, the riots leading up to the Reform Act of 1832, the tumultuous decade known as the Hungry Forties, and the resistance to imperial rule and racist oppression in India in 1857 or Jamaica in 1865. In such fraught contexts, representations of the Civil War, especially those of a deposed and executed king, carried a political charge. In 1825, the British government's theater censor blocked a production of Mary Russell Mitford's new play *Charles I* on political grounds; when it was finally produced a decade later at a theater beyond official control, a favorable review urged that "[t]here is nothing in the play to offend the most strenuous supporter of the monarchical principle."^[3] Similarly, the question of whether Cromwell should be commemorated in sculpture in the rebuilt Houses of Parliament generated debate "from the 1840s onwards," and remained controversial even after William Hamo Thorycroft received a commission in the 1890s.^[4]

Bann's belief that nineteenth-century images lacked political import leads him to overlook key aspects of some works. For example, consider George Cattermole's design for a book illustration, *Cromwell Before the Coffin of Charles I*.^[5] As Bann notes, this engraving clearly responds to Delaroche's influential image of Cromwell contemplating the corpse of Charles I, which circulated widely through exhibition and reproduction (fig. 1). Bann acknowledges that Cattermole's later depiction of the same scene provides "novelty" but overlooks the ways the artist transforms his precedent to substantive effect (217). Delaroche depicts a direct corporeal confrontation between Cromwell and the former monarch. In Cattermole's image, by contrast, the body is not visible (fig. 2). Instead, Charles appears restored to elegant life, in the form of a painted portrait hovering over Cromwell's shoulder. This gesture reverses the power dynamic of Delaroche's motif, making Charles seem to gaze on Cromwell, rather than vice versa. The king has been killed; the king cannot be killed. This image of the persistence of monarchy had direct political relevance for nineteenth-century Britons, particularly in the 1840s, a decade of widespread economic hardship, famine in Ireland, and Chartist demands for reform.^[6] Images of the Civil War perpetuated a myth of England as beyond conflict, its regicides safely in the past—belying contemporary realities such as social dislocation caused by industrialization or the foundation of the nation's wealth on imperialist violence. Nor were such messages limited to prints or paintings. As Bann notes, during the nineteenth century Londoners decorated the resurrected statue of Charles I on the anniversary of the Restoration. But he also asserts that "it is hard to imagine that this act held any great political significance" (210).

Fig. 1, John Rogers after Paul Delaroche, *Oliver Cromwell and Charles I*, 1830–40. Engraving. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [\[larger image\]](#)

Fig. 2, George Cattermole, *Cromwell Viewing the Body of the King*, 1845. Engraving. Published in Rev. Richard Cattermole, *The Great Civil War of Charles I and the Parliament* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845), vol. 2, following page 310. Artwork in the public domain. [\[larger image\]](#)

Turning to Bellion's book, we learn that such acts could in fact have profound political significance on both sides of the Atlantic. Far from drawing a distinction between Britain and North America, Bellion shows how shared cultural practices, including the ritual decoration and desecration of sculptures, linked the imperial metropole with its present and former colonies. *Iconoclasm in New York* invites us to think of sculptures and other civic monuments as things in space, but also things in society, both acting and acted upon. Moving from the destruction of the statue of George III in the late eighteenth century to its recreation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bellion's book incorporates a truly impressive range of materials, including sculptures, bullets, caricatures, broadsides, parades, postcards, and political protests. Particularly important as a model for art history, she also draws on the field of performance studies. Bellion treats "iconoclasm as a performative phenomenon" that resonated over several centuries, its political valences evolving over time (5). The book "asks why Americans destroyed the statue of George III in 1776—and why they keep bringing it back" (3). In the eighteenth century, embodied interactions with sculptures produced physical fragments that were treated variously as trophies, relics, and instruments of war; these events were then commemorated in paintings and prints, flat art that provided the template for later performances, including costumed reenactments and tableaux vivants. Meticulously researched and vividly written, *Iconoclasm in New York* provides a model for the field, demonstrating that the practice of art history can be at once expansive in scope and highly specific in its claims.

The first half of the book, "Iconoclasm," focuses on the eighteenth century. It begins by considering the cultural geography of lower Manhattan, where "liberty poles" were repeatedly erected by disgruntled colonists and destroyed by official forces. As Bellion argues, the very material of these poles was politically significant: they were made from tall pine trees, whose elastic qualities made them prized as ships' masts. Colonial landowners resented the British government's claim to these valuable timbers, making erecting a liberty pole a double act of defiance. Bellion's account of the late colonial monuments considers not only their physical form, but also the sounds of protest, construction, and destruction that would have surrounded them, as well as contemporary accounts that imbued such objects with the power of speech. It was in this context of repeated creation and erasure that local leaders decided to commission two sculptures from an English artist, one in lead of the

monarch, and one in marble of the politician William Pitt the Elder (1770), who was seen as a champion of colonial rights. Bellion charts their insertion into the symbolic geography of the city, and their role in the imagination of its citizens, before their destruction.

The second half of the book, “Afterlife,” traces the history of these objects and their memories into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It begins with the physical remains, including chunks of the lead statue preserved by loyalists and the damaged marble of Pitt, which remained on public view in various sites in New York for much of the nineteenth century. Having followed the material relics in their far-flung paths, the book then turns to mid-nineteenth-century images that reimagined the events of the Revolution for a new generation. Central to this inquiry is an oil painting by the Bavarian immigrant Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III* (1852–53), which was informed by the events of 1848. Created just a few years after Cattermole’s reassuring image of the persistence of monarchy, it instead celebrated a tradition of resistance to royal rule. As Bellion shows, like the vast majority of representations of this event, this picture shows the moment before destruction, paradoxically reinstating the sculpture in order to commemorate its removal. By such means, she demonstrates, a deposed king can retain symbolic power through repeated display of his image. Significantly, Oertel included Indigenous and African-descended figures in his representation, albeit on the margins of the crowd or flung to the ground. Later iterations of the scene erased these presences altogether, imagining a racially undifferentiated national origin. As Bellion writes, “images of the statue’s destruction staged the forgetting of nonwhite Americans even as they posited the end of a royal America” (154). This racialized origin story took on new significance during the age of increased migration. Between the Centennial in 1876 and the early decades of the twentieth century, reenactments of the revolutionary deposition helped tell the story of the nation’s origins in a way that elided the important roles of Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and more recent arrivals from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe. Some of these reenactments bordered on the absurd—for instance, Bellion has unearthed a 1935 photograph of bonnet-clad women standing around a smoking caldron, recreating the melting down of the statue of George III. But despite these delightfully ludicrous details, Bellion’s account urges us to take such events seriously, as deeply political statements of identity that rework the past according to the cultural impulses of the present day.

Bellion’s insistence that we consider public protest and performative reenactment as vital means of cultural expression, inseparable from the art objects with which they work, provides a salutary message for this moment. Protest, she shows us, is not necessarily a negative act, and iconoclasm can also be considered “a creative phenomenon” (4). Moreover, embodied engagement with sculpture, up to and including its destruction, should be taken seriously. As the episodes detailed in both books reveal, however, to alter or even to destroy an image is not to rob it of its power. Charles I and the myth of a benevolent monarchy lasted well into the nineteenth century. George III continued to haunt the United States long after his sculpted head disappeared under a sofa in London. We should ask ourselves if such power might also be exerted by the Confederate leaders now similarly deposed. The effects of civil wars, whether in England or the United States, can reverberate long after the pedestals have been cleared.

Catherine Roach

Associate Professor of Art History
Virginia Commonwealth University
croach2[at]vcu.edu

Notes

[1] Bann asserts that such displays cannot be reconstructed, although recent scholarship visualizing historic exhibitions demonstrates otherwise. See, for example: Sally Webster, et. al., "A Digital Recreation of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery: A Contribution to the Early History of Public Art Museums in the United States," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 2018), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2018.17.2.22>. For digital renderings of the British Institution, see: *What Jane Saw*, <http://www.whatjanesaw.org>; Catherine Roach, "Rehanging Reynolds at the British Institution: Methods for Reconstructing Ephemeral Displays," *British Art Studies* 4 (Autumn 2016), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-04/croach>.

[2] Key sources absent from the bibliography include: Roy Strong, *And When Did You Last See Your Father? The Victorian Painter and British History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Andrew Sanders, *In the Olden Time: Victorians and the British Past* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2013).

[3] Quoted in David O'Shaughnessy, "Charles the First (1825)," in *The Censorship of British Theatre, 1737–1843*, <https://tobeomitted.tcd.ie/MS42873.html>.

[4] Benedict Read, "Sculpture and the New Palace of Westminster," in *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, ed. Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding (London: Merrell, 2000), 268.

[5] Although Bann dates this book to the 1850s, its publication began in 1841, with the first volume appearing under the title *The Great Civil War of Charles I and the Parliament*. The image of Cromwell and the body of Charles was published in the second volume. Rev. Richard Cattermole, *The Great Civil War of Charles I and the Parliament* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845), vol. 2, following page 310; Donald Hawes, "Cattermole, Richard (1795?–1858), Writer and Church of England Clergyman," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/10.1093/ref:odnb/4900> [login required].

[6] For a related argument, see: Andrew Sanders, *In the Olden Time: Victorians and the British Past*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 70.

Illustrations

Fig. 1, John Rogers after Paul Delaroche, *Oliver Cromwell and Charles I*, 1830–40. Engraving. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 2, George Cattermole, *Cromwell Viewing the Body of the King*, 1845. Engraving. Published in Rev. Richard Cattermole, *The Great Civil War of Charles I and the Parliament* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845), vol. 2, following page 310. Artwork in the public domain. [\[return to text\]](#)