

## **The Northern Pre-Raphaelite: William Bell-Scott and his art**

On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2019, Michael Thomson spoke on this northern artist, who showed the history of the North-East through his art.

William Bell-Scott was born in Edinburgh in 1811. He was the seventh son of Ros Bell, an artist and sculptor, and Robert Scott, an engraver.

The Edinburgh scene at the time was dominated by empire builders. Realism and New Science was very popular in the Victorian era, for example, advances in geology proved that the Earth was much older than had been previously estimated.

Bell-Scott rejected the classical realism of the French School of painting, and was influenced by the realistic British painting. The 'dark satanic mills' of industrial Britain were widely featured in the art of the time, as were the Arthurian legends.

In 1843 Bell-Scott was residing in London. He entered some of his sketches into a competition for decorating the interior of the recently rebuilt Houses of Parliament. They were rejected, but the Board of Trade were sufficiently impressed with his work to offer him a job as Director of the Government School of Design in Newcastle upon Tyne. He remained in this post from 1843-1864. As well as lecturing he was very influential in the art of the North.

As a northern Pre-Raphaelite he mixed with Ruskin and Rosetti. Rosetti was particularly fond of wombats and introduced them to his friend Bell-Scott, who produced a sketch of Rosetti holding one of his beloved wombats.

Bell-Scott's best-known works are to be found at Wallington, where his murals and paintings adorn the magnificent central hall. His series of paintings, produced between 1857 and 1861, mainly depict Northumbrian history and the iron and coal industries. Some of his works also feature members of the Trevelyan family, who had inherited Wallington. There was apparently an element of competition between the Trevelyans and the Armstrongs of Cragside. One of the Armstrong's daughters is portrayed by Bell-Scott reading a Mathematics book, indicative of the major part that scientific progress played in their lives. After the ground floor was completed in 1861, he had to wait two years before he was commissioned to paint the upper section with the story of the Battle of Otterburn from the Border ballad 'Chevy Chase'. His most significant work includes 'The Death of Bede' which is full of symbolism and based on one of Bede's letters.

Bell-Scott liked to express things in the context of the time, to create an image as realistic as possible. He painted an iconic image of Hadrian's Wall at the time of the Roman occupation, and a very accurate portrayal of Tynemouth Priory, and of Grace Darling on a rescue mission in a lifeboat with the Farne Islands with birds swooping. In later years the Newcastle shipping industry is featured in his work.

Towards the end of his life his eyesight deteriorated and he started to write odes to sonnets and medieval-style ballads. He died at Penkill Castle in Ayrshire in 1890.

This talk gave us a fascinating and informative insight into the life and works of this northern artist.