

The Expert Eye – A Tale of Two Texts

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Object: *Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii*
by William Gell, published in London, 1817

'Facts, like stones, are nothing in themselves; their value consists in the manner they are put together, and the purpose to which they are applied.'

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 1833



Portrait of Sir William Gell
Detail from frontispiece of *Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii*, Second edition, published in London, 1832, vol 1. CB:790

Sir William Gell's *Pompeiana* made it possible for Pompeii and its myths to become as popular as they did in the Victorian age and beyond. The British archaeologist Sir William Gell published his account of Pompeii in 1817 in a large and lavishly illustrated volume. This archaeological report was very expensive and reached only a limited readership. Its initial retail price was 7 pounds 10 shillings - equivalent to a clerical worker's salary for about 15 weeks! It was a luxury item, and remained such, even when the price eventually came down. But it was an account of Pompeii by the greatest living expert, which may be one of the reasons William Cotton III decided to include it in his collection.

The vast majority of readers would thus not have been able to afford *Pompeiana*. But, importantly, it provided the basis for Edward Bulwer Lytton's historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (first published 1834). While the detail Bulwer bases his story on are Gell's, the story itself is Bulwer's. The work became immensely popular and introduced many of the conventions into Victorian culture that are still familiar clichés to us now, such as decadent Romans, virtuous Christians, and lion-fighting gladiators.

To take Bulwer's use of a Christian moral framework as an example: the destruction of Pompeii by Vesuvius in 79 CE became God's punishment of the depraved, corrupted and sinful Pompeians. In Bulwer's version, the Christian hero and heroine escape the general devastation. Indeed, just before the volcano erupts, the hero Glaucus is given to the lion in the arena, but the lion won't harm him.

The novel cost 31 shillings 6 pence when it was first published in 1834, the standard retail price for newly published novels. It was expensive, though much less so than Gell's *Pompeiana*. Popular works, such as



'Dressing Room of a Pompeian Beauty': Illustration by Franz Kirchbach to Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, London & New York: Routledge, c 1900.

Bulwer's novel, came out in ever newer and cheaper editions over the years. By 1839 there was a 5 shilling edition, by 1853 a 2 shilling one, and in 1879 the first paperback appeared, at just 6 pence. By the 1890s, cheap paperback editions were being produced in huge print runs of 200,000-300,000 copies, and the novel remained popular until well into the 20th century.

Many editions included illustrations. For most of the 19th century, inserting illustrations was a laborious and expensive process even though technology continued to develop. In order to print the illustrations, the cut areas of the plates were inked. Much more pressure needed to be applied than with the type, where only the raised parts were inked. This meant that for most of the 19th century, images had to be printed separately from the text and then inserted.

There were many spin-offs of *The Last Days of Pompeii*: theatre versions, songs, opera, pantomime, the circus, paintings, and book illustrations. Through theatre versions in particular, the story reached immense audiences.



Detail from title page of *Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii*. Second edition (in 2 volumes), published in London, 1832, vol 1. CB:790

In the end, all these versions are based on the myths propagated by Bulwer's novel – a text not possible without *Pompeiana* and indeed, starting with a 'Dedication to Sir William Gell'.

If you'd like to know more, see Dr Bautz's article; Annika Bautz and W. St Clair: 'Imperial Decadence: the making of the myths. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834)', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40.2 (to be published September 2012).



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