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THE CONVERSAZIONE AT THE EDINBURGH MUSEUM OF  
SCIENCE AND ART, 1875

JOHN BURNETT

THE INDUSTRIAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND was founded in 1854.<sup>1</sup> Its first and most visionary Director was George Wilson (1818–59), who died before any of its buildings were completed. He was followed by Thomas Archer (d. 1885), under whom the east wing and about one third of the present main hall were built in 1864–66. The rest of the main hall was erected in 1871–75, and the west wing was added in 1885–89.

The completion of the main hall of the Museum in 1875 was celebrated by a ‘Conversazione’ – ‘one of the most brilliant affairs of the kind ever witnessed in Edinburgh’.<sup>2</sup> When in 1862 visitors had first been admitted to see the collections in temporary accommodation, Archer had held a series of ten Conversaciones for various public bodies, beginning with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, ending with the Pharmaceutical Society and including the Corporations of Edinburgh and Leith and their guests.<sup>3</sup> In the vastly increased space which was available in 1875 there was a single event.

The total number of visitors who entered the Museum on the evening of the Conversazione was 2005. The queue of coaches and cabs which delivered them stretched up Chambers Street, along George IV Bridge, down the High Street, the full length of the South Bridge, ending in Nicolson Street. It took seventy minutes for the crowd to pass through the turnstiles and be presented to the Lord Provost. Thereafter, as the *Scotsman* said, ‘The proceedings were very simple. A brief address was delivered by the Lord Provost, and there was a procession around the Museum.’ The guests were able to see the collections which had been assembled over the previous twenty one years, as well as a small

number of significant loans. A temporary conservatory or ‘winter garden’ had been erected in the main hall by the Lawson Seed & Nursery Co., Queen’s Seedsmen, who had a shop in George IV Bridge and several nurseries near Ferry Road.

The newspaper reports of the Conversazione are dull: lists of objects, lists of people, and the text of Lord Provost Falshaw’s uninspired speech. However, the atmosphere of the occasion was caught by David Milne (b. 1838) the Museum’s ‘fireman’ or boilerman until his retirement in 1908. He wrote a poem of twelve four-line stanzas, which was printed as a single sheet: a copy survives in the Archives of the National Museums of Scotland. The purpose of this note is to reprint it with some brief comments. It is part of a Scottish poetic tradition which begins in the sixteenth century with ‘Pebelis to the Play’ and ‘Christis Kirk on the Green’ – the account of a day’s revelry which ends in disorder. Fergusson’s ‘Leith Races’ is perhaps the most familiar of such poems.

The Conversazione

The great event of '75, which caused sae muckle hurry,  
Came aff fu' grand on Thursday last, the 14th January.  
And oh! it was a grand affair, and lookit very bonnie:  
A splendid sicht it was to see the Conversazione.

The men had lots of overtime to get things put in order,  
For close upon their weekly wage their overtime did border;  
But really they deserved it a', they made things look sae bonnie,  
And had them a' sae weel arranged for the Conversazione.

Some men came doon frae Kensington, and lots o' stuff  
brought wi' them,  
Such ugly casts they did appear, it was a shame to see them;  
But faith when they were a' set up they looked sae very bonnie,  
That the London men great credit got at the Conversazione.

The 42d crossed the sea, to thrash that funny fellow,  
The great King Coffee Calcalli, and they stole his umb(e)rella;  
Sir Garnet gave unto the Queen this umb(e)rella bonnie,  
And she did kindly sent it doon to the Conversazione.

The Elkingtons o' Brummagem sent doon a splendid vase tae,  
It's valued at sax thousand pounds, the people it amazed sae  
That they in croods did flock around this vase sae neat and bonnie,  
Its value gied their hearts a stound at the Conversazione.

John Walker, no tae be behint, a model engine brocht. sirs,  
Its motive power was very strange, by steam or wind was  
wrocht, sirs;

And John M'Gavin merits praise, he blew the wind sae bonnie,  
And kept the engine in full steam at the Conversazione.

The half o' what was tae be seen 'twould tak a month to tell, sirs,  
If ony o' ye here can daet, I canna daet masel, sirs;  
Therefore I houpe ye will excuse my missin' things sae mony,  
In my account o' what took place at the Conversazione.

The ladies dressed their vary best to grace the grand occasion,  
The Gentlemen were no behint, tae keep their reputation;  
Some had red coats, and some had blue, but a' were dressed sae bonnie,  
That really t'was a treat to see the Conversazione.

Some for the sake o' pleasure came, and some to swig the brandy,  
While some there came to eat and drink whatever came  
maist handy;

And faith they made a tidy job, and did it clean and bonnie,  
For deil a cookie could we get at the Conversazione.

Professor ARCHER kindly then did take the case in hand, sirs,  
And said that he next evenin' would himsel a supper stand, sirs;  
And this I think, ye will admit, is better far than ony  
O' the cookies or brandy we'd hae got at the Conversazione.

Some members o' the civic board did cause a little bustle,  
And at the cloak room barrier wi' the bobbies had a tussle;  
Buchanan got the richt about, and Sutherland as cronie,  
Was frae the barrier turned out at the Conversazione.

But things were a' sune put tae richts, the crood began dispersin',  
The Bobbies and Attendants sune had room for free conversin';  
By twal o'clock the place was cleared, and an acoont fu' bonnie  
Next mornin' in the press appeared o' the Conversazione.

Some notes may be useful.

*Some men came doon frae Kensington:* From 1858 to 1903 the Museum was part of the Science

and Art Department of the Privy Council's Committee on Education, whose responsibilities included the Museum of Irish Industry in Dublin and the South Kensington Museum. The latter dominated the others, and Philip Cunliffe Owen, CB, Director of the South Kensington Museum, attended the Conversazione.<sup>4</sup>

*Such ugly casts they did appear:* The two large plaster casts were of the door of Augsburg Cathedral and the rood screen of St Michael's Church, Hildesheim. The other major loan from South Kensington was a large collection of portrait engravings.<sup>5</sup>

*King Coffee Calcalli:* The umbrella and a collection of gold ornaments were the spoils from the first Ashanti War (1873–74), in which Sir Garnet Wolseley (1833–1913) had been the British commander, defeating the forces of King Kolfi Karikari. The southern part of the Ashanti empire became the Gold Coast colony in 1874 and is now Ghana. As a result of Wolseley's success he was promoted Major-General and was the victim of W. S. Gilbert's satire in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879). The umbrella, six feet in diameter, had excited great interest when exhibited in the South Kensington Museum the previous autumn, and Archer had written to the Secretary of the Department of Science and Art to ask for it to be lent by the Queen for display in Edinburgh.<sup>6</sup> At this time the monthly attendance at the Museum varied between 25,000 and 40,000, except for January 1875 when the figure was 76,679.<sup>7</sup> A copy of the Museum's Annual Report which is still in the Museum bears a pencil note in the margin beside this huge figure: 'Umbrella'. The imperial flavour of the evening was increased by the large number of colonial objects which were on display. The guests were received by the Lord Provost under 'the great Delhi gateway' to the music of the Royal Dragoons and the Royal Scots: the Indian Mutiny had been only eighteen years earlier.



*Elkingtons o' Brummagem:* Messrs Elkington of Birmingham lent the Helicon Vase, 'a masterpiece, alike of design and execution, in artistic metal work,'<sup>8</sup> 'the apotheosis of Music and Poetry'.<sup>9</sup> The vase was widely exhibited and is now in the Royal Collections. Elkingtons also lent some highly-praised cloisonné enamels. There was some resentment at the loan of material from England, and a letter was published accusing Archer, 'who sneers at everything Scotch, including its art', of being biased.<sup>10</sup> It was an unreasonable criticism of a man who was striving to bring to Scotland the most interesting and attractive material he could find.

*John Walker, no tae be behint, a model engine brocht:* John Walker (1830–1901) was the Foreman of the Museum's workshop from 1868 to 1899, a period when it made many models. The engine cannot be identified with any of the entries in the Museum's accessions register.

*Some had red coats:* Many of the men were in uniform, the Lord Provost as Lord-Lieutenant of the County, others as officers of Volunteer regiments.

*Professor Archer:* Thomas Archer had an unusual career. Like Wilson, he was trained as a surgeon. He was a customs officer at Liverpool at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and enthusiastically sought material for it. Having shown his commitment to technical education he was given charge of a collection of industrial material in Liverpool. The early death of George Wilson gave Archer an unexpected opportunity, though where Wilson had been jointly Professor of Technology at the University of Edinburgh and Director of the Museum, Archer was appointed only Superintendent of the Museum. One suspects that he was chosen partly because he was less independent than Wilson. For a decade he continued Wilson's policy of

concentrating on the collecting of industrial material including raw materials such as building stone. After 1870 the decorative art collections grew more rapidly, and there is a strong – but as yet unproved – impression that this was due to pressure from South Kensington. The loan of two large architectural plaster casts for the *Conversazione* stands for a complete change in the emphasis of the Museum.

*At the cloak room barrier wi' the bobbies had a tussle:* 'At half-past ten the band of the Dragoons played the National Anthem, which formally brought proceedings to a close. A great rush was now made to the cloak-room, and not a few of the gentlemen, impatient of delay, got inside the barriers and created some confusion. Ultimately, however, the place was cleared and order restored.'<sup>11</sup> The 'bobbies' were members of the City Police who were seconded to the Museum, the predecessors of the present warders. James Buchanan and Daniel Sutherland were members of the Town Council, and Buchanan – perhaps appropriately – was a wine and spirit merchant in the Cowgate.

The press gave a formal account of the *Conversazione*, and Milne an informal one. The event can be viewed in other ways, as propaganda for technical education and for government-funded science; or as a miniature of the Great Exhibition of 1851, attempting to show Britain's industrial might. In the Museum world, it could be regarded as a demonstration of the control exercised by London over Edinburgh. These were not Milne's concerns, since he viewed the whole thing (quite literally) from below, from the basement boiler room. Thus, having diverted us, he leaves us with a string of questions and speculations, including a most intriguing one – who paid for the *Conversazione*?

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am grateful to the staff of the Library of the National Museums of Scotland for their help in locating sources, to Dr Allen Simpson for his perceptive comments, and to Godfrey Evans for advice on the Helicon Vase.

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- 2 *Scotsman*, 15 January 1875.
- 3 T. C. Archer, *Report of the Superintendent of the Industrial Museum of Scotland for 1862*, p. 1. The Museum’s annual reports were printed as appendices to the Reports of the Science and Art Department of the Committee of [the Privy] Council on Education, and also issued separately.
- 4 *Edinburgh Courant*, 15 January 1875.
- 5 Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art, manuscript register of ‘Specimens on loan 1865–86’, pp. 28–29.
- 6 Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art, Copy Letter Book 1865–77, f. 666.
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- 8 *Scotsman*, 15 January 1875.
- 9 Walter Smith, *The Industrial Art of the International Exhibition*, 2 vols (Philadelphia 1876), II, 134–138. quoted by John Culme, *Nineteenth-century Silver* (London 1977), p. 205.
- 10 *Edinburgh Courant*, 19 January 1875.
- 11 *Scotsman*, 15 January 1875.