

## Review

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# Talbotype Illustrations to the *Annals of the Artists of Spain* by Sir William Stirling Maxwell

Facsimile and Critical Edition,  
edited by Hilary Macartney and  
José Manuel Matilla.

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Hill & Adamson, Mark Napier, albumen print,  
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, SNPG HA 1703

'The past is a foreign country', wrote L. P. Hartley (and went on to say: 'they do things differently there', but let's leave that to one side for just now). From the late seventeenth century, wealthy and educated young men from the United Kingdom used to go on what was known as the Grand Tour – a sort of proto-Gap Year for toffs – so that they could come home, sophisticated and polished, after witnessing the excitements of Italian and German cities, as well as those of France, and settle down to running their estates, or joining one of the few suitable careers open to them in the church, the law, politics or possibly the military, with a broader appreciation of life outside these narrow islands. This partly explains the collections still to be found in long-standing aristocratic houses: they contain souvenirs from the Grand Tour – sculpture, paintings, drawings. These have enriched the British patrimony and helped our peculiarly insular behaviour to have at least some understanding of the culture of our closest neighbours.

The Iberian Peninsula did not figure in these itineraries: too far away, too backward-seeming, and thus really not pertinent to the education of young Britons. Add to this, a decaying ruling class (especially the Spanish royal family: too interbred by the reign of our own Victoria – who married her own first cousin and caused all those haemophilic descendants: again, another story for another time) and a recent theatre of war against the bogeyman of Europe, Napoleon himself. It is hardly surprising that by the accession of Victoria to the British throne in 1837, not many people knew much about the cultural life of Spain, and fewer cared.

Not so the wealthy Scotsman, William Stirling (1818-78), subsequently Sir William Stirling Maxwell of Keir and Pollock: despite contemporary art historians and critics finding Spanish religious art and portraiture inferior to that of the Italian schools, Stirling found it admirable because of its lack of idealisation and realism. His first visit to Spain in 1841 lasted merely a week, one day of which

was spent exploring Seville. In the museum there, he encountered Murillo's *Sta. Justa and Sta. Rufino*, and was so enchanted that he ordered a copy to be made, ready for his next visit the following year. The copyist, a local artist named José Roldán (1808-71), was to make many copies and engravings of original Spanish art for Stirling. Inspired by what he saw, Stirling decided to write a history of Spanish art: and at some point during the composition of what became the three-volume *Annals of the Artists of Spain*, published in 1848, he decided to use examples of the new photographic art as illustrations in an accompanying volume for a favoured few. Because of technical difficulties, these were not direct copies of the paintings, but photographs of drawings, lithographs or other copies. Nevertheless, this was a landmark in photographic history: it was the first art history book to be illustrated with photographs, the first in a long, long line, and you and I are the beneficiaries every time we buy an art book that brings together within two covers the work of artists whose originals are scattered around the globe.

Just how and why Stirling decided to illustrate his book by this new and untried method is not known for certain, as there are gaps in the historical evidence. Photography was, in 1848, if not in its infancy, 'just a nine-year old child', as Larry Schaaf states at the start of his contextual essay. Hilary Macartney demonstrates how Mark Napier, an Edinburgh lawyer and cousin of Stirling, was hugely enthusiastic about the new art. His letters to Stirling demonstrate his fervent admiration for the process and its potential: he sat for the pioneering Scottish partnership of D.O. Hill and Robert Adamson in 1845-46, and around the same time he acquired copies of Talbot's images of London from an Edinburgh printseller. These would have been made at the Reading Establishment, an attempt by Talbot to scale up production of his calotypes for illustrating his books, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46) and *Sun Pictures in Scotland* (1844), his homage to Sir Walter Scott.



Nicolaas Henneman, Talbot's former valet, was in charge of production there. However, further technical difficulties meant the quality of the images, and the permanence of the ensuing prints, left much to be desired, not only by critics. A number of images were also – against Mark Napier's advice – ordered from Hill and Adamson, but, as Hill informed Stirling in a letter dated 17 August 1847 (quoted in full in an appendix): 'Owing to Mr Adamson's serious illness your order for 50 copies of each of the Velasquez & Murillo Engravings has not yet been completed.' As Hilary Macartney observes, 'they did make at least double the fifty prints required of the *Surrender of Breda*'; 92 of these prints belonging to the National Galleries of Scotland have been examined recently in a 2013

unpublished Master's dissertation, cited in the extensive bibliography. For your €85.50, you get two volumes, one a facsimile hardback of the extremely rare fourth volume of illustrations originally produced in two forms (large and small) of twenty-five each, and presented by Stirling to interested friends and relatives. This has been produced as it might have been seen when first produced, before fading or other time-related problems beset it. The second soft-covered book consists of *Studies and catalogue raisonné*, edited by Hilary Macartney and José Manuel Matilla; and this contains scholarship of the most intensive and critical detail. I could find no further questions to ask after I had read the six essays covering context, sources, conservation questions, and

biographical details. There follows a catalogue raisonné, a census of the fourth volume, and a series of intelligent and supportive appendixes. I found it all quite fascinating, possibly because as a former museum curator I find questions of provenance and attribution fundamental to the preservation of material culture – and here is a book that supplies a lot of the answers.

Yes: they did do things differently in the past. Nonetheless, here in the present, Hilary Macartney and José Manuel Matilla have made accessible to a new and wider public a publication which was to have reverberations which Sir William Stirling Maxwell could not possibly have foreseen. The accompanying exhibition, which can be seen online at the Prado, is well worth a virtual visit.

Hill & Adamson, Engraving of 'Las Lanzas the Surrender of Breda' by Velasquez, calotype, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, PGP HA 4505

