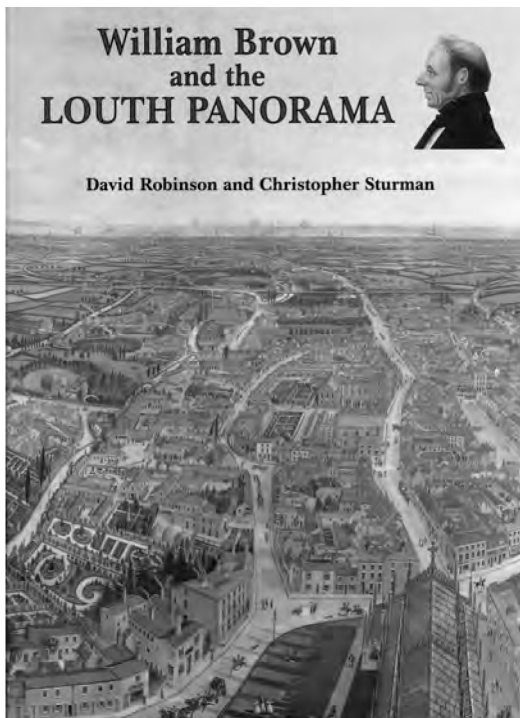


REVIEW

Mervyn Heard

WILLIAM BROWN AND THE LOUTH PANORAMA

David Robinson OBE and Christopher Sturman
Louth: Louth Naturalists', Antiquarian and Literary Society, 2001
Hardback, 144pp, ill. £26.50, ISBN 0-9539533-0-0



The widespread influence of the panorama, or of mid-nineteenth-century improvements in optical technology in general, on provincial artists and amateur showpeople is seldom explored in print. And for this reason *William Brown and the Louth Panorama*, by David Robinson (for once, not 'our' David Robinson but another gentleman of the same name) and the late Christopher Sturman, of the Louth Naturalists', Antiquarian and Literary Society, is certainly a book worthy of a more universal readership.

This excellent publication contains not only pull-out prints of the panorama but some 230 other illustrations, 190 of which are in full colour. The text is clear and wide ranging, and is remarkably detailed in a way that, perhaps, only a labour of love can be. It might even



appear a bit too parochial – nearly 150 pages devoted to two paintings of one small market town – but that's actually its strength. By focusing on this single subject, Robinson and Sturman achieve a much wider and more lively account than many a general survey manages: true in-depth research should always produce something greater than the sum of its parts, and this is no exception.

William Brown (1788–1859) was a correspondent for the *Stamford Mercury* and a skilled miniaturist. As an artist he was at his most prolific in the 1840s and 1850s, and the most impressive surviving example of his work – his aerial panorama of the Lincolnshire market town of Louth – now hangs in the Council Chamber of Louth Town Hall. It was begun in 1844, when scaffolding was raised around the spire of St James's Church in Louth in order to undertake much-needed repairs. Working on a platform some 300 feet in the air, Brown set about producing a 360-degree panorama of the town from a series of detailed sketches. The finished work, in oil paint, consisted of two linen canvasses each measuring 9 feet by 6 feet, and it was first exhibited in 1847. When it was rediscovered in a cottage at Markby in 1949 it was attached to two rollers, suggesting that it may have been exhibited as a 'moving panorama'.

Brown was a dissenting Methodist and staunch teetotaler. His interests lay not solely with the panorama, but also with all visual aids to educational and moral improvement, including the efficacious use of the magic lantern. Brown produced and exhibited many of his own slides, whose subject matter was much influenced by Carpenter & Westley.

I am obliged to Josephine Clark, Research Assistant on the 'Louth Realtime Panorama Project'¹ for first drawing my attention to the following two accounts, which also appear in the book. The first is from the *Lincoln Rutland and Stamford Mercury* of 24 April 1846, recording Brown's performance at a recent interdenominational tea party for 250 children at the Wesleyan Chapel. The report states:

Mr W. Brown, assisted by W. Armitage, exhibited a large number of well-executed phantasmagorical views (painted by Mr Brown) on the dissolving principle, as exhibited at the Royal Polytechnic in London. The artist seems to have avoided the offensively comic subjects of the magic lantern, the scenes being fraught with scientific, moral and religious instruction throughout and affording great gratification to the children and such adults as were lucky enough to squeeze in among the little congregation on this interesting occasion. Such was the interest taken in the exhibition by the children, that we believe the series of figures representing 'the seven steps to happiness' will be long remembered.

A more detailed account of a subsequent tea party appeared in the same paper nine months later, on 22 January 1847. This is interesting too, because Brown clearly felt that his home-produced collection and style of performance was unique and worthy of its own name – the 'Polyopticolorama'.

JUVENILE TEA MEETING

On Friday inst. the Rev. Hales, Wesleyan minister of this town, conducted an excellent tea meeting liberally provided by the friends of scriptural instruction for the children regularly addressed by that gentleman on religious topics every Saturday afternoon, in the large vestry adjoining the chapel in Eastgate. Three hundred of these, including young persons composing the Wesleyan Bible classes, were afterwards highly delighted by again witnessing Mr William Brown's 'Polyopticolorama' – a series of phantasmagorical paintings executed by himself, and arranged under the heads of distinguished sovereigns, eminent statesmen, divines, etc., extraordinary animals, surprising inventions, celestial scenery, natural phenomena, impressive morals and sacred topography. Among the more remarkable of these as attracting the special attention of the audience, was the 'railway to Louth' consisting of the distant town and a series of first, second and third class railway carriages, with luggage trains, &c., swiftly gliding past and as swiftly returning – the views of the Holy Land, calculated to infuse into the mind devotional feelings; the striking portrait of the exhibitor, painted from a clever daguerreotype taken last summer, and the final revolving pyrotechnicorama or artificial Chinese coup de feu in honour of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, which elicited from the juvenile audience loud and repeated bursts of joy and irrepressible applause. The portraits of eminent men were not at all inferior to those in quality, nor 'the way to be happy' less likely than formerly to stimulate the youthful mind to habits of virtue and piety. The whole passed with great hilarity, and the children separated at about nine o'clock, highly delighted with the rational amusements of the evening, and filled to overflowing with emotions of gratitude to the excellent minister who so perseveringly and successfully interested himself in the moral and religious welfare of the rising generation.



William Brown and the Louth Panorama is available by post from the Louth Naturalists', Antiquarian and Literary Society, at The Museum, 4 Broadbank, Louth, Lincolnshire LN11 6EQ, UK, price £29.50 inclusive of postage in the UK.

Telephone enquiries to 01507 601211 (+44 1507 601211 from outside the UK).

NOTES

1. The Louth Realtime Panorama Project was initiated in 1998. Inspired by Brown's panorama, it was an ambitious attempt to produce an online virtual tour of Louth using the detail contained in Brown's panorama. Unfortunately the project recently came to an end due to lack of funds.