

Two Old Friends, *Boadicea* and *Tewdric*

William Gibbs

If you had visited Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1904, you would have been confronted by two bronze sculptures in the entrance lobby. On the one side stood the statue of *Boadicea and her Two daughters* by Gloucestershire-born John Thomas (1813-1862) and on the other was *The Death of Tewdric* by Brecon-born John Evan Thomas (1810-1873). In an extraordinary twist of fate and after various journeys, both these works are now on display in y Gaer in Brecon and this article relates how they came to be here.



Art Journal 1857

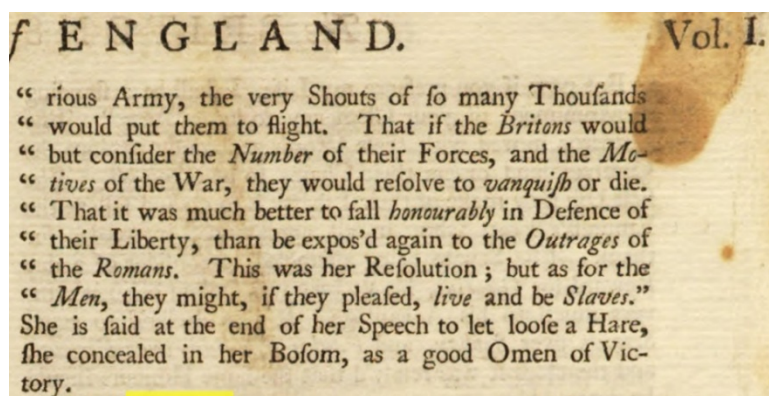


The Death of Tewdric
J. Evan Thomas
The People's Illustrated Journal 1852

The Story of *Boadicea and her daughters*

John Thomas' work was originally a marble statue commissioned by the wealthy Birmingham politician and entrepreneur Sir Morton Peto for the mansion that Thomas was designing for him. The sculpture, which has long since disappeared, was the first to represent Boadicea and was shown at the 1857 Royal Academy Exhibition alongside *Venus and Cupid* and busts of Queen Victoria.

The Exhibition Catalogue explained to visitors to the Academy unfamiliar with Boadicea, that it showed the first century '*Queen Boadicea inciting the Britons to avenge the loss of their liberty and the wrongs inflicted upon her children*' and the catalogue continued "*The closing part of the oration on that occasion was in the following words 'It was much better to fall honourably in the defence of liberty than be again exposed to the outrages of the Romans!'*" These words were taken from the 1712 *History of England* by the French historian Brian de Rion which helped establish Boadicea in British folklore and which finishes with a final flourish as Boadicea "*at the end of her speech let loose a hare she concealed in her Bosom as a good omen*



Extract from *History of England* by Brian de Rion 1712

of Victory". One critic writing about the Academy exhibition singled out *Boadicea* as the only statue amid the "startled nymphs" which could "affect the heart of the spectator or give his pulse one additional throb". From then on, Boadicea became quite a cult figure, with representations including the dramatic sculpture of the queen in her chariot, now on Westminster Bridge, and Tennyson's epic poem.

Quite how the bronze version came to be made by the great Birmingham metal works of Elkingtons we don't know. This version was displayed in the 1862 International Exhibition, in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, where it surmounted Elkington's display in the 'Birmingham Court'



Birmingham Court, Crystal Place ,detail, Boadicea appears behind the show case

Details of the Boadicea Sculpture

The "sword" that Boadicea holds aloft is a Roman soldier's dagger or "pugio", similar to those used to assassinate Caesar, no doubt taken from a Roman soldier.

There is just one contemporary description of Boadicea and it is by the Roman Historian Cassius Dio who described how "*a great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch. This was her invariable attire.*" John Thomas has used his own imagination to clothe his Boadicea. There are bracelets on her arms and she wears a form of tiara, none of which looks particularly Celtic.



Pugio, Romano
British Dagger, iron



Boadicea and her Daughters
John Thomas , 1857
y Gaer, Brecon



Boadicea and her Daughters (detail)

However, around the arm of one daughter is a simple coil like the bracelets founded in Celtic burials. Below Boadicea's foot is a shield marked with the initials SPQR, a symbol of the "70,000" Romans who are about to be slaughtered when Boadicea and her Iceni warriors defeat the Roman army and then sack the city of Londinium.



Boadicea and her Daughters (detail)

It is the figures of her daughters that are most poignant. The cause for Boadicea's revolt was the torture and rape of

Boadicea and her daughters by Catus, the Roman collector of revenue, and her children are here as witnesses to this brutality (later in the 19th century certain Welsh historians, claiming her as a part of Welsh heritage, argued that she was acting in retaliation for the massacre of druidic communities on Anglesey).

The Story of *The Death of Tewdric*

This sculpture was originally made in plaster by John Evan Thomas and his brother William Meredyth for a competition at the 1848 Abergavenny Eisteddfod. This had been initiated by Lady Llanover and Rev Thomas Price who wished to extend the range of artistic responses to truly Welsh achievements. The work commemorates the final heroic moments of the 6th century King Tewdric who had been persuaded out of retirement from his hermit's cell to lead the Welsh forces fighting to repel the Saxon hords. In the course of winning the battle Tewdric was mortally wounded.

The source for the artist's inspiration was said to be the Book of Llandaff but that describes the king dying alone. By contrast, in John Evan Thomas' work



Death of Tewdric Electrotype 1850
y Gaer, Brecon

he is held in the arms of his daughter Marchel with the strains of a final *englyn* sung out by his bard. The bard is perhaps the most dramatic and striking figure in this triptych. Thomas found inspiration in the painting by de Louthembourg, a romantic image itself inspired by the poem, *The Bard* written in 1747 by Thomas Gray which immortalised the dying of the last Bards. Harp competitions were central activities in the Eisteddfod and John Evan Thomas makes the harp and the harpist the pivotal feature of his creation.



The Last Bard
Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg,
engraving, 1794



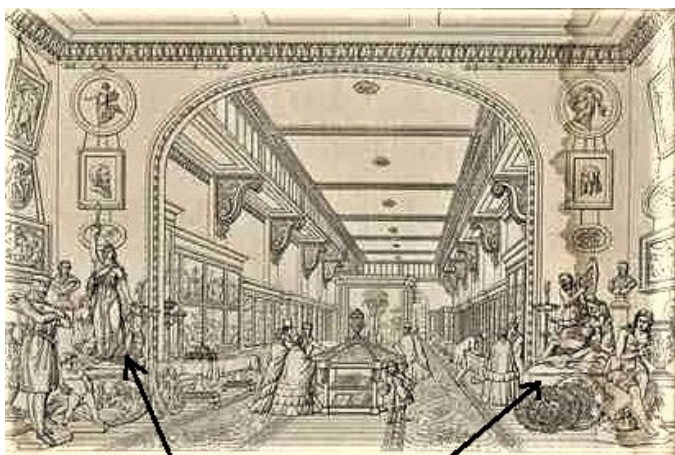
Death of Tewdric (detail of Spur)

King Tewdric is dressed in mail with spurs on his heels, implying that he was mounted in the battle. For details of armour it is likely that the artist would have consulted the eminent collector of British armour, Samuel Meyrick of Goodrich. Marchel, Tewdric's daughter, has many similarities to the kneeling mourning females that John Evan

Thomas has used many times his monuments and memorials. Here she is more animated, her head is close to her father's suggesting that she is comforting him in his last moments. She wears a coronet and her mantle is edged with embroidery.



The Death of Tewdric (detail)
John Evan Thomas, Brecknock



Boadicea and Tewdric on display
in Elkingtons Showroom ca 1860

Sometime after being shown at the Royal Academy in 1849, the original sculpture of *The Death of Tewdric* was bought by Elkingtons who, using their brand new system of replication in metal, created an electrotype in 1851. This was shown as the centrepiece of Elkington's display at the Great Exhibition of that year and then went on show for several years in their showrooms alongside, for the first time, *Boadicea*.

The Display of *Tewdric* and *Boadicea*: confusion reigns

At the opening of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1885, John Thomas' *Boadicea* was on view, having been presented by Elkingtons. However the description in the catalogue incorrectly read as follows : *A group of figures in Bronze, Queen Boadicea and Her Daughters by John Evan Thomas.*

By 1892 *Tewdric* had joined *Boadicea* in the Birmingham Gallery. It is recorded in the catalogue as a "*bronze group modelled by Thomas and cast by Messrs Elkingtons and Son, Presented by the representatives of the late Miss (Elizabeth) Phipson.* The Phipsons were leading pin manufacturers in Birmingham in the 19th century and it seems likely that a Phipson had bought *Tewdric* from Elkingtons and then it had passed down through the family until an Elizabeth Phipson or her executors, decided in 1892 to give it to the Birmingham Art Gallery. So our statues were brought together: one by John Thomas and the other by John Evan Thomas.

However, for several years, both works continued to be attributed to John Evan Thomas and the details in the Gallery catalogues are a 'mish mash' of the achievements of the two sculptors. This is not the first or the last time the two sculptors will be confused . Earlier in 1862 when John Thomas died at the age of 49 an obituary under the heading *The Late Mr John Evan Thomas* appeared in the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*. Finally in 1904 the Birmingham Art Gallery Catalogue gets it right and both works are correctly listed.

What happened Next?

During the next few decades, the merit of the two works waned in the eyes of curators, partly due to the lack of appreciation of Victorian culture as the new century overturned received ideas on art but also perhaps both were seen as merely "reproductions" of a lost original. "Electrotypes" in particular, were removed from museum galleries and put into storerooms.

I have been unable to find any records in the archives of Birmingham Art Gallery describing *Boadicea's* and *Tewdric's* fall from favour. There is a reference, which I have not been able to verify, that *Boadicea* was sent to stand on the dam in the Elan Valley, Birmingham's reservoir in the heart of Wales. At some point both were de-accessioned by the museum. The historian of 19th century sculpture, Benedict Read, records that the fate that has befallen much Victorian sculpture has been "*temporary oblivion or permanent*

destruction” and notes that of almost three hundred British sculptures exhibited at the International Exhibition of 1862, few have survived.



Boadicea and her Daughters

In its former location beside Brecknock Museum

I surmise that while trying to find a resting place for *Boadicea* a Birmingham museum official, seeing the mistaken attribution to John Evan Thomas in their 1885 catalogue, decided that the Brecknock Museum, “the home” of the creator, would be an ideal destination. The statue was transferred to Brecon County Council and from there to the Brecknock Museum. In 1979, the statue came down by lorry from Birmingham to Brecon, and, so the story goes, the sword disappears while it was parked overnight in Builth. In 1992, extensive repair was carried out and a replacement sword made by MB Fine Art. For many years *Boadicea* stood beside the museum in Glamorgan Street until eventually an observant museum volunteer noted the error of attribution and *Boadicea* was once again

correctly labelled as by John Thomas. (I hope there may be a reader of this article who can elaborate on this intriguing story).

Tewdric meanwhile is also reassigned by Birmingham to Brecon County Council who pass it on to the National Museum of Wales, where its importance is recognised once again and it is put on show in the Main Hall. There it was seen by Brecknock Museum Curator David Moore who requested its return to Brecon and, somewhat surprised when his request was granted, was able to place it in the entrance hall of the Brecknock Museum. To make up for their loss, in 2003 the National Museum of Wales acquired the only other copy of *Tewdric* to have been made by Elkingtons, which had been bought by the Powysland Club in 1876. This version of *Tewdric* was recently an important exhibit in the British Museum Exhibition on the Celtic Revival.

Both *Boadicea* and *Tewdric* have shared a journey which started from a concern to establish and interpret historical characters for the 19th century: *Boadicea* a victory monument for a queen, *Tewdric* a symbol of the value of Welsh culture and history. We should be grateful that these two works, after their various wanderings, are safe for the time being in Brecon and appreciate the fact that two Victorian sculptors can still speak to us of suffering and survival.