

James Pryde: the Edgar Allan Poe of Painting

By Louise Welsh

Not so long ago a tall tenement, a few doors down from the home of a friend of mine, fell down. My friend told me about it: the crash that sent her running to her children's room; the wave of dust that rushed along the street turning the summer's evening into choking night. She described the bewildered tenants standing on the pavement, some in pyjamas, one wrapped only in a towel, all of them empty handed. The sound that had heralded the building's collapse was so sudden and so loud they'd fled with nothing. It had saved their lives.

We visited the shell of the tenement on our way to the park. The council had put a fence around it, and braced the neighbouring apartment block with massive wooden props. We could see the guts of the demolished building, the depth of the foundations where a hundred years or so ago men had finished digging then turned their hand to the business of raising high, sandstone walls. Above us the exposed gable gaped at the sky. All that remained of the homes which had been stacked neatly beneath it, one on top of the other, was the wall adjoining the next building. It still held glimpses of the departed families: frayed wallpaper, a calendar hanging miraculously from a nail, a poster flapping in the breeze. High up, on the jagged remains of a top storey, an electric wall lamp glowed.

The void where the building had been was deathly. The tenements that framed it seemed taller than before. My friend and I lingered in silence, like mourners at a cenotaph, small and insignificant, swamped by absence. We might have been figures in a painting by James Pryde.

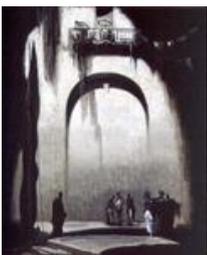
James Ferrier Pryde was born in Edinburgh in 1866, and though he was to spend more time in London than north of the border, the city of his birth retained a strong influence over his work:

I was very much impressed with the spirit of Holyrood, the castle and the old houses and closes of the High Street. The spirit of them appears to have affected my later work, although it did not do so in my pictures when I was younger.¹

Edinburgh landscapes haunt some of his paintings. The former British Linen Bank (now a Bank of Scotland) and the Melville Monument, both located in St. Andrews Square, are depicted in 'The Shell' (1908) and 'The Duke of York's Column' (c.1909-10) respectively. Pryde was conscious of striving for effect rather than realism. One of his sayings was, 'pictures must be pictures, not windows' and though they borrow from life, Pryde's landscapes are always works of the imagination. The bank's six columns are elongated and the building set on an invented slope, making it higher and more sinister than it appears in actuality. Monumentalism is a repeated trope. The figures with indistinct faces that often lurk beneath his buildings are dwarfed into insignificance. The impression of human fragility is reinforced by the large scale of some of his canvases. Surrounded by Pryde's paintings the viewer is also dwarfed. This identification between observer and subject is unsettling. We too are rendered small; transitory figures in a world of decay.

The light in Pryde's landscapes seems always to be a northern one. Where we do have an expanse of sky it is generally screened by clouds. 'The Flying Dutchman' (c.1911) is being chased into harbour by an incoming storm, 'The Deserted Garden' (c.1909) cast into shadows. Often the sky is only just glimpsed behind the looming focal structure, as in 'The Red Ruin'. It's tempting to see the city of Pryde's birth in the high walls and obscured heavens. He would have been thirteen when Robert Louis Stevenson wrote this description of Edinburgh's Old Town:

You go under dark arches, and down dark stairs and alleys. The way is so narrow that you can lay a hand on either wall; so steep that, in the greasy winter weather the pavement is almost as treacherous as ice. Washing dangles above washing from windows; the houses bulge outwards upon flimsy brackets; you see a bit of sculpture in a dark corner; at the top of all, a gable and a few crowsteps are printed on the sky.²



The Unknown

Corner (oil on
canvas) by
Pryde, James
Ferrier
(1866-1941)

Drying washing was to feature in many of Pryde's paintings. It sways from a balcony high above a towering archway in 'The Unknown Corner' (c.1912), droops from windows in 'La Casa Rosa' (1911-12) and takes the form of ragged bunting in 'The Duke of York's Column' (c.1909-10) and 'Vision of Dunecht Gates' (c.1922). Rendering fabric is a test of an artist's skill, but as with his cloudy skies, Pryde also repeatedly uses washing, bunting and drapes, to 'stage' his compositions. We get a sense of a curtain being drawn back to reveal what it is Pryde wishes to display. But curtains can also be used to conceal, and there is also the possibility that someone or something may lurk behind the hangings. The effect is one of uncertainty, a hesitation between what we see and what may be there, a sense of the uncanny.

The stage is an image we will return to in this discussion, just as Pryde repeatedly returned to it in his work. Theatre was central to Pryde's cultural life from an early age. His parents were dedicated theatregoers, friends of Ellen Terry and Sir Henry Irving (Pryde painted portraits of both actors). In 1894, in an attempt to earn a living, Pryde and his brother-in-law, the artist William Nicholson, formed [Beggartaff Brothers](#), a company of two, collaborating on designs for cheerfully un-gothic posters. They created advertisements for productions of *Cinderella*, *Don Quixote*, *Becket* and *Hamlet*, not all of which found favour. Colin Campbell suggests that Henry Irving's refusal to consider a poster designed by Beggartaffs for his 1899 production of *Robespierre* denied the 'brothers', 'their principal ambition as designers: the creation of a poster for a contemporary drama.'³ The disappointment heralded the death knell of the company.

Pryde didn't limit his theatrical ambitions to paper. Between 1894 and 99 he played small parts in several plays. Ellen Terry's son Edward Gordon Craig, with whom Pryde toured Scotland, described 'Jimmy' as 'one of the best painters who ever lived' and 'one of the biggest hearts on earth'. But Craig had no illusions about Pryde's dramatic ability, 'as an actor he never really existed: but the idea of acting, the idea of the theatre - or rather the smell of the place, meant a lot to

him. Yes, I think he got much 'inspiration' from the boards - and the thought and feel of it all, as of a magical place ...'⁴

Pryde's enthusiasm wasn't confined to the 'legitimate theatre'. He frequented Edinburgh's penny gaffs, small tented booths where playlets and shows were put on by travelling bands of actors and where Pryde could mix with,

Skulking jail-birds; unkempt, barefoot children; big-mouthed robust women, in a sort of uniform of striped flannel petticoat and short tartan shawl among these, a few supervising constables and a dismal sprinkling of mutineers and broken men from higher ranks in society, with some mark of better days on them, like a brand.⁵

James Pryde embraced bohemianism. William Orpen's oil painting 'The Café Royal, London' (1912) depicts a dapper Pryde bantering with a gypsified Augustus John. But Pryde was also interested in 'ordinary' and marginalised people and things: 'bus drivers, bowler hats, music halls, the man in the street.'⁶ One of his favourite pubs was [The Nell Gwynn](#) where, 'Characters straight out of Dickens abounded and one rubbed shoulders with the seedy side of Bohemian life'.⁷



His interest in the underworld found expression in the early 1900s in his *Celebrated Criminals* or *Notable Rascals* series, which was followed by *Four Famous Criminals* (1902). Taken mainly from the Newgate calendar, Pryde's subjects are reminiscent of those of Hogarth and Dickens in their knowing wiliness. The man in the foreground of 'The Derelicts' has like his fellows in 'Notable Rascals' (both 1902) the proud stance of an old world thespian, back straight, chin up, one foot thrust out. It's a pose favoured by today's catwalk models and indeed there's a challenge in the homeless man's posture which compliments the tattered stylishness of his clothes. Pryde's rogues favour 18th century garb, as did the painter, and like their creator some of them sport jauntily angled top hats or bowlers. Pryde was attached to his scoundrels. They can be glimpsed again on the fringes of architectural pieces such as 'The Cinder' (1911) or 'Queen Elizabeth's Bedroom, Cowdray Castle', and there's a roguish aspect to Sir Henry Irving in Pryde's 1906 portrait of the actor, 'Sir Henry Irving as Dubose in 'The Lyons Mail'.

Pryde embarked on what is perhaps his greatest work in 1909 with, 'The Doctor', subtitled, 'No 1 of a series of twelve pictures to be called The Human Comedy'. Pryde's jolly declaration, 'a bed is an important idea. Look what happens on it and how much of our lives we spend on it'⁸ is at odds with the gothic theatricality of the paintings. At the centre of each is a towering four-poster bed, very possibly inspired by an ornate four poster on display at Holyrood House, Edinburgh and which in Pryde's time was associated with Mary Queen of Scots. The bedchamber in which it stood was,

filled with debris and ancient clutter deliberately misleading visitors into the belief that they saw the chamber exactly as the queen had left it after the fatal stabbing of her Italian secretary David Rizzio.⁹



A contemporary photograph shows a secret door half-screened by an arras and the ornate bed swathed in rich but tattered fabric. It's easy to imagine how theatrical aspect of the room with its proximity to ancient history, concealed assassins and murder attracted Pryde. 'The Human Comedy' is no straightforward narrative of life. 'The Doctor' refers to a birth, but there is no cheer here. As usual Pryde's colours are sombre, his people dwarfed, their features obscured in the dim interior. The rest of the series (with the exception of the hardly joyful 'The Convalescent') seem concerned with death. Sometimes we suspect that someone

huddles between the sheets, but we cannot make them out. The thirteenth and last in the series, 'Death of the Great Bed' (begun around 1929) remained unfinished at Pryde's death. Pryde's bedchambers, with their shattered silks, tumbled bedclothes and ragged headboards anticipate the ruins that dominate his later work.

The First World War (during which Pryde served as a Special Constable) dealt several blows to the artist. His favourite sister Mabel (wife of William Nicholson) died in 1918 from influenza and one of her sons, Tony, was killed just a month before the war's end. During this period he also separated from his wife. Despite Pryde's vulnerability and growing depression this was perhaps his most artistically productive period, partly due to the patronage of Lady Cowdray of Dunecht House who acquired around twenty of his paintings over roughly two decades. A growing preoccupation with destruction is evident in the Cowdray collection. In 'Madonna of the Ruins' (for the eighty-foot wide lunette in the library of Dunecht House, completed 1922) a crowned and becloaked woman sits regally on the steps of a ruin. For once the sky is Marianne blue. Behind her looms the skeleton of another ruptured building. In 'The Blue Ruin' (1918) a tall tenement stands beneath a stormy sky in a blighted landscape. Its front wall of has been blown away. Ragged washing is strung across the building's fractured façade, and three tiny figures wait at its base. In 'The Husk' and 'Queen Elizabeth's Bedroom' (c.1918) only a bare shell of jagged building remains. Each looks uninhabitable, despite the small, indistinct figures loitering at their windows.

Although never accepted as a fellow of the Royal Academy, post WWI James Pryde was well known and largely well regarded in artistic circles. Lady Cowdray's patronage also meant that his work was sought after. But Pryde was unable to capitalise on his success. Even in the early Beggerstaff days he had been 'deeply involved in the life of the pubs and the coffee-stalls'¹⁰, perhaps alcoholism had always been waiting in the wings.

One last excitement hijacked Pryde in 1930 when American Producer Ellen Van Volkenburg persuaded him to design the set for a production of Othello starring Paul Robeson. Perhaps unsurprisingly the set was to, 'include a large bed for the murder of Desdemona'¹¹. Pryde's monumental vision had to be compromised. His drawings show, 'monster architecture about thirty feet high, and without using a

cast of midgets for contrast this size could not exist.’¹² Pryde’s scenery had dramatic impact, but his lack of experience as a set designer showed. Critics complained of the gloomy lighting and noisy scene changes - especially the construction of the giant four poster. Nevertheless Pryde enjoyed the after show party where he,

... gave the best performance of his life, contriving to look as if he had not only designed the scenery, but had written the play and enacted the chief part himself.¹³

Poor health dogged Pryde’s later years. His friend the artist WO Hutchison wrote that he always thought Pryde was,

working up to his last dramatic picture, to be found dead in his four-poster bed with the curtains hanging in tatters around him, and the cobwebs spread over his special possessions. He had an uncanny feeling for the macabre ...¹⁴

In the end Pryde was discovered collapsed and malnourished on his studio floor. He was removed to St Mary Abbots Hospital, Kensington, where he spent his final two years. Visitors reported that he seemed happy enough, taking to boiled sweets and detective fiction rather than alcohol, unaware of the Blitz turning the London landscape into one of the scenes of his imagination.

References & Further Information

¹ James Pryde quoted in Derek Hudson, *James Pryde: 1866-1941* (Constable, 1949) p. 20.

² Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘Old Town - The Lands’, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes* (Pallas Editions 2001 (1879)), p. 23.

³ Colin Campbell, *The Beggarstaff Posters: The Work of James Pryde and William Nicholson* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1990) p. 83.

⁴ Derek Hudson, *James Pryde: 1866-1941* (Constable, 1949) p. 37.

⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, ‘Old Town - The Lands’ (Pallas Editions, 2001 (1879)) p. 25.

⁶ Martin Shaw quoted in Derek Hudson, *James Pryde: 1866-1941* (Constable, 1949) p. 47.

⁷ Martin Shaw quoted in *James Pryde* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1992) p. 22.

⁸ *James Pryde* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1992) p. 25.

⁹ Cecilia Powell, *Rascals and Ruins; The Romantic Vision of James Pryde* (London: The Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation, 2006) p. 21.

¹⁰ Derek Hudson, *James Pryde: 1866-1941* (Constable, 1949) p. 34.

¹¹ *James Pryde* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1992) p. 52.

¹² *James Pryde* p. 52.

¹³ *James Pryde* p. 30.

¹³ *James Pryde* p. 63.

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