

Ear we go again

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ELEPHANTINA: A HUGE MISUNDERSTANDING

Andrew Drummond

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'A FRIEND of History' opens proceedings upon the tale of Dr Patrick Blair and the "greatest curiosity"; that is, the elephant that died and was dissected in Dundee in 1706. A true story, astoundingly, and our narrator has fallen upon the dusty bones in the Dundee, Perth And Cupar Advertiser in the drear winter of 1825. Since "we do not readily abandon the hint of an untold story", he sets about fleshing it back out, and returning Patrick Blair to his public and the adulation he rightfully deserves. To this end, information is unearthed about Gilbert Orum, an engraver who supposedly ("very little is known of his life") assisted Dr Blair in his project, and it is to his journal that History's Friend turns for facts.

Elephantina, like Drummond's previous novels *An Abridged History* and *A Hand-book Of Volapük*, is replete with the trappings of an academic work. Presentation is meticulous – faux leather with gilt-esque inlays beneath a sleeve of 'elephant hide', a small but satisfying nod to Drummond's love of knowledge and his teasing treatment of it. Orum's illustrations of the elephant "clothed" and "unclothed", "Short Remarks on the Hall of Rarities", and copious footnotes provide choice historical nuggets: it is here we learn the Friend's viewpoint on most everything, from the impending Act of Union, to his wife's cooking. His unimaginably stentorian, deliciously sententious and pedantic intonations damn Orum at every possible juncture for his general existence as a "liar" with a "love of Libel".

These breathless condemnations are comic to read, and presumably to write. For yet again Drummond convincingly and consistently captures the speech patterns of the time – somewhat over-elaborate and pompous, somewhat windy. He has said, on this style of writing, that it's "hugely entertaining, since the language strongly reflects the moral attitudes of the period." This floridity never grates but manages to be entertaining and instructive throughout.

"Accepting our responsibility as Editor with the utmost gravity", the narrator is compelled to denigrate Orum's opinion on events in the light of the written word of Dr Blair, *Osteographia Elephantina*. This essay was published in 1710, and tension is evident between Orum's inward disagreement and uncomfortable collusion with Blair's treatment of the deceased elephant, resulting in two very different final tributes. Despite Orum's morals, however, a man and his family must eat. Many humorously awful set pieces arise, involving elephant viscera, outstanding bills and local traders, all delivered with a bouquet of flavoursome pungency.

One in particular sees the people of Dundee, having eaten the meat, turn mad. "Men and women were lying on the ground, eyes staring wildly, from the depths of the closes there were shouts of insane laughter and dangerous reels were performed in and out of house entrances", not to linger upon the "respectable clerk" wrestling "with a broad woman of low repute, the pair of them utterly naked and silent". There is something so sardonically perverse in Drummond's word selection, his wry powers of linguistic ventriloquism over uptight, sensitive Orum.

Humour is explored too through the deployment of asterisks, though "Moral Duty was to remove this remark by Mr Orum – (but] our Editorial Duty compelled us to leave it in the public gaze", and a footnote reading "Education; education; education. Dr Blair was quite correct", in response to Dr Blair teaching Hendrie's tearaway brood, is admirably piquant.

With the help of a sterling cast of bit-part players, including Miss Gloag, the cook who speaks the language of swearwords, and Hendrie Orum, brother and rascalion, the cogs of humour in *Elephantina* turn in several different and equally appealing directions.

The depth of Drummond's research allows for a read in which "nothing is lost between Nature and Depiction", but in which everything is gained by Drummond's playfulness with the facts. This ambiguity coupled with his confidence and flair in handling embellished truths, and his "desire to share some of the accumulated lumber of four decades and more, passing on slightly obscure knowledge, to remind 21st century readers to look occasionally behind the curtains and under the sideboards of history", produces much to admire and much to learn. Although there are a few stray threads of far-fetched plot at play, particularly in the denouement, this book is less Curate's Egg and more Kinder Egg; a proper treat and a joy to consume, with something to learn at its heart.