



December 2021

Dear Reader,

The December issue of *The HistWriter* comes to you from Wexford in Ireland.

This month I'm agonising over the blurb for my new novel *City of Famine*. I share a few observations on the *Bellotto exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery*. On the 10th December 2021 it's the 206th anniversary of the birth of Ada Lovelace (the 'mother of computer programming') so I revisit my short story *The Analytical Assurance Company*. And I review *'Black Dragonfly'*, a fictionalised biography of Lafcadio Hearn.

My website: HistWriter.com



'Bellotto: Views on a Fortress' at Manchester Art Gallery

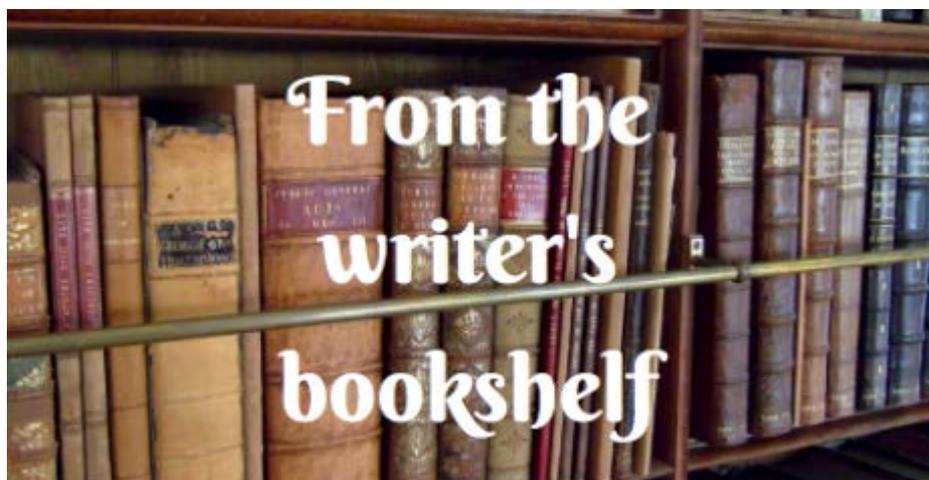
A rare trip to the UK for work last month also enabled me to enjoy meeting another writer for coffee at Manchester Art Gallery. Here I found a rich collection of works ranging from Dutch Old Masters to Grayson Perry. Displayed brilliantly together were the industrial townscapes of L S Lowry and Adolphe Valette. A current exhibition showed four views of Königstein fortress in Saxony painted by the Venetian Bernardo Bellotto (1722-1780), a nephew of Canaletto.

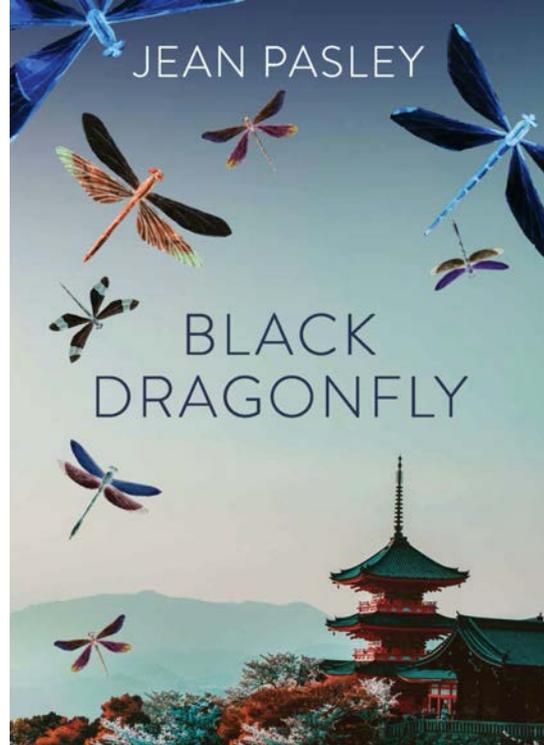
I pondered with a member of staff over the pattern of shadows in the otherwise precise and realistic view (above). The figures in the foreground have shadows running the wrong way, in the opposite direction to everyone else's. Meanwhile on the lawn behind the foreground building is a shadow that doesn't correspond to what ought to be there: a line of trees shown in a companion painting.

The careful detailing of Bellotto's work suggests that these anomalous effects could not be accidental. After all if he had made a mistake he could easily have overpainted.

At a Dublin exhibition of Canaletto's views of Venice I had learned that Bellotto's uncle was fond of repositioning the canal banks in his paintings so that buildings distant from each other could be face to face across the water. One possibility was that that Bellotto had likewise adjusted his shadows to improve his composition.

An alternative explanation came to mind. The paintings, dating from 1756-1758, had been commissioned by the Elector Augustus III at the start of the Seven Years' War in 1756. The peaceful scenes belied the reality of the war-torn country; moreover Bellotto was never paid for his work nor delivered it as agreed. What if the male figure in the foreground were the Elector himself, and his anomalous shadow a comment on his duplicity?





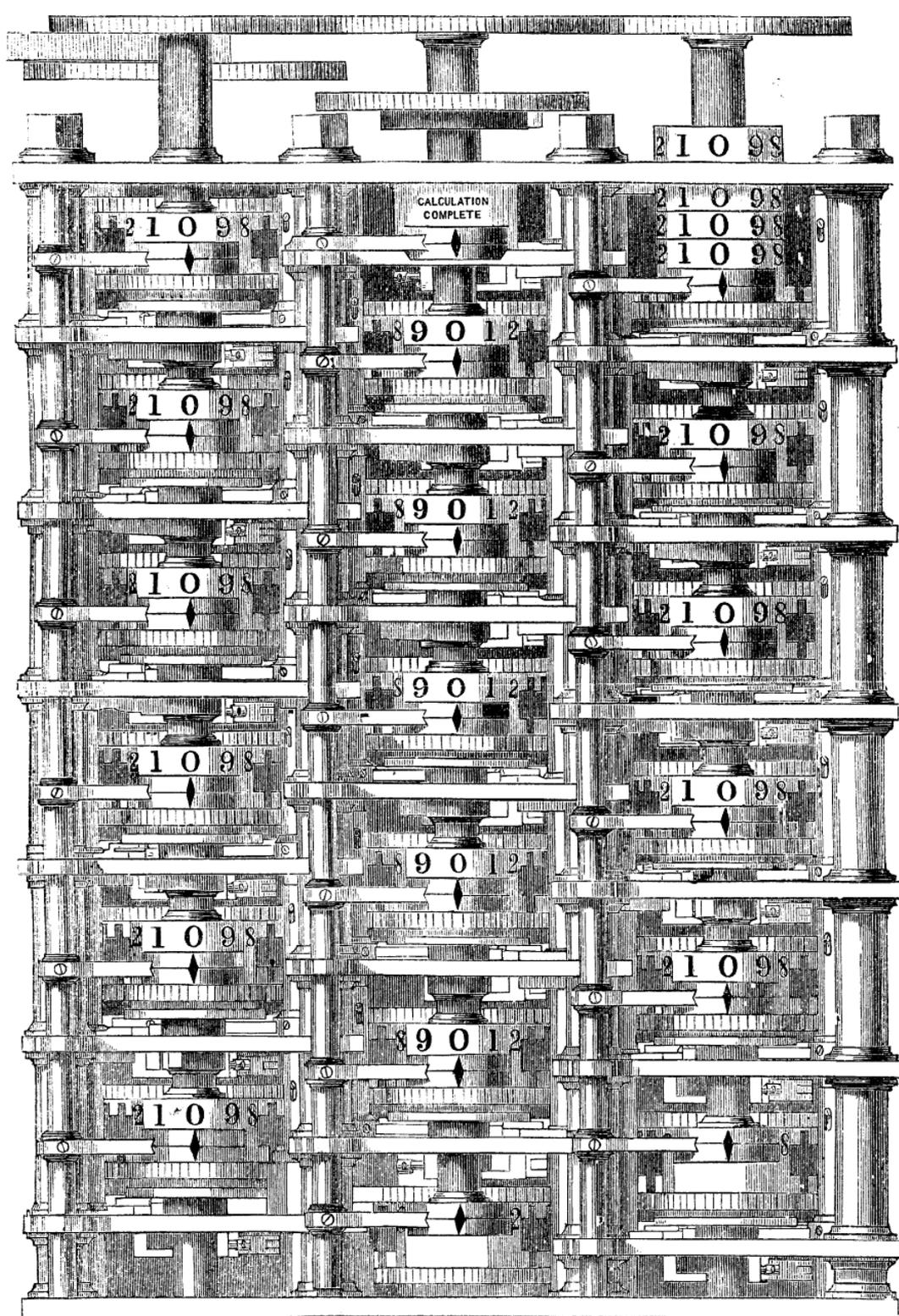
Black Dragonfly: Jean Pasley

Balestier Press: 2021

There is a beautiful, serene, Japanese garden which was laid out in Lafcadio Hearn's memory in Tramore, Co. Waterford, about an hour's drive from where I live: I took the picture above in spring 2018.

This interested me to read 'Black Dragonfly': Hearn's fictionalised biography. He was born in the late 19th century, an Irishman who, deprived of his inheritance, emigrated first to America to be a journalist and later to Japan to write and teach English. He married a Japanese woman, Koizumi Setsuko, and discovered himself at peace in the Japanese way of life at a time when it was still largely preserved from Western influence. Having been left by his parents as a young boy to be fostered by his aunt Sarah, he now found a stable family life and eventually became a Japanese citizen.

Jean Pasley has herself lived in Japan and her extensive research reveals itself in the detailed evocations of setting and character and the skilful way that she contrasts Japanese manners and culture with those of the West. An absorbing and satisfying read.



PORTION OF BABBAGE'S DIFFERENCE ENGINE.

Happy Birthday, Ada Lovelace

10 December 1815 -
27 November 1852

Charles Babbage was a mathematician, philosopher, inventor and mechanical engineer, and as well as applying mathematical analysis to actuarial calculations for the insurance business designed a digital programmable computer. But his 'Difference Engine' was not built successfully in his lifetime.

Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron, was his collaborator, and if he was the 'father of computing' she was the 'mother of computer programming' -

inventing a way to control the Difference Engine by punched cards using a technique borrowed from jacquard textile weaving.

I imagined that they had collaborated with the mechanical genius of Boulton and Watt in Birmingham to build a 'steampunk computer' for my short story 'The Analytical Assurance Company', published for free viewing on my website ([link](#)). My protagonist is named 'Ada' in her honour.

City of Famine Maybelle Wallis

Jane, a theatrical pianist, her actor husband, and their theatre company perform in Dublin, where her former lover works as a physician.

It is 1849, and Ireland is in its fourth year of famine.

As epidemic disease rages in an impoverished city they cannot forget their past - and the future looks ever more dangerous.

City of Famine

But what's the damn book about?

When nearly at the end of a novel of 80-90,000 words - like many writers - I splutter and stutter when trying to boil it down into a single sentence. I tried to describe it to my writer friend over our coffee the other week...

After Jane and William separated he emigrated to Ireland, where he's working as a physician in Dublin. He hasn't got over her, but she's been married to Edmond for some years, and as their touring theatre company arrives in Dublin for the first time she breaks the news to him, asking him to stay away.

This is during the Irish Famine and Dublin, its slums crammed with refugees from rural evictions, is seized by a cholera epidemic. Jane and Edmond briefly enjoy a glittering social life before Edmond falls ill and an unscrupulous physician entraps him in his old gambling addiction. Jane reaches out to William for help, but he resists involvement. Yet inevitably events throw them together.

A theme of the novel is poison, and the poisoned society. The disaster of the famine is always in the background with its associated epidemics of disease: I explore how people might have responded to it when the state had given up. I have 'Speranza' the poet and writer, standing up in court to claim her seditious writing, her young friend Anna who is torn between following her lead and her love for an officer in the Lancers, an idealistic young doctor who risks everything for the Irish Nationalist cause, a beggar girl orphaned by the epidemic in desperate need of help, and a wealthy landowner who has become rich by nefarious means but has made one enemy too many. Meanwhile, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert make a State visit.

'I have too many sub-plots,' I wailed to my friend. 'But don't worry,' I added, optimistically, 'they all come together in the end, I promise!' I hope I've created a story to resonate with today: pandemic, poverty and the gulf between rich and poor.

Next time:

Stylistics: Using Linguistics to Explore Texts and Meaning: This fascinating course on a branch of linguistics is provided on FutureLearn by the University of Huddersfield.

M Wallis | HistWriter.com

Forth Mountain

Wexford

Ireland



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