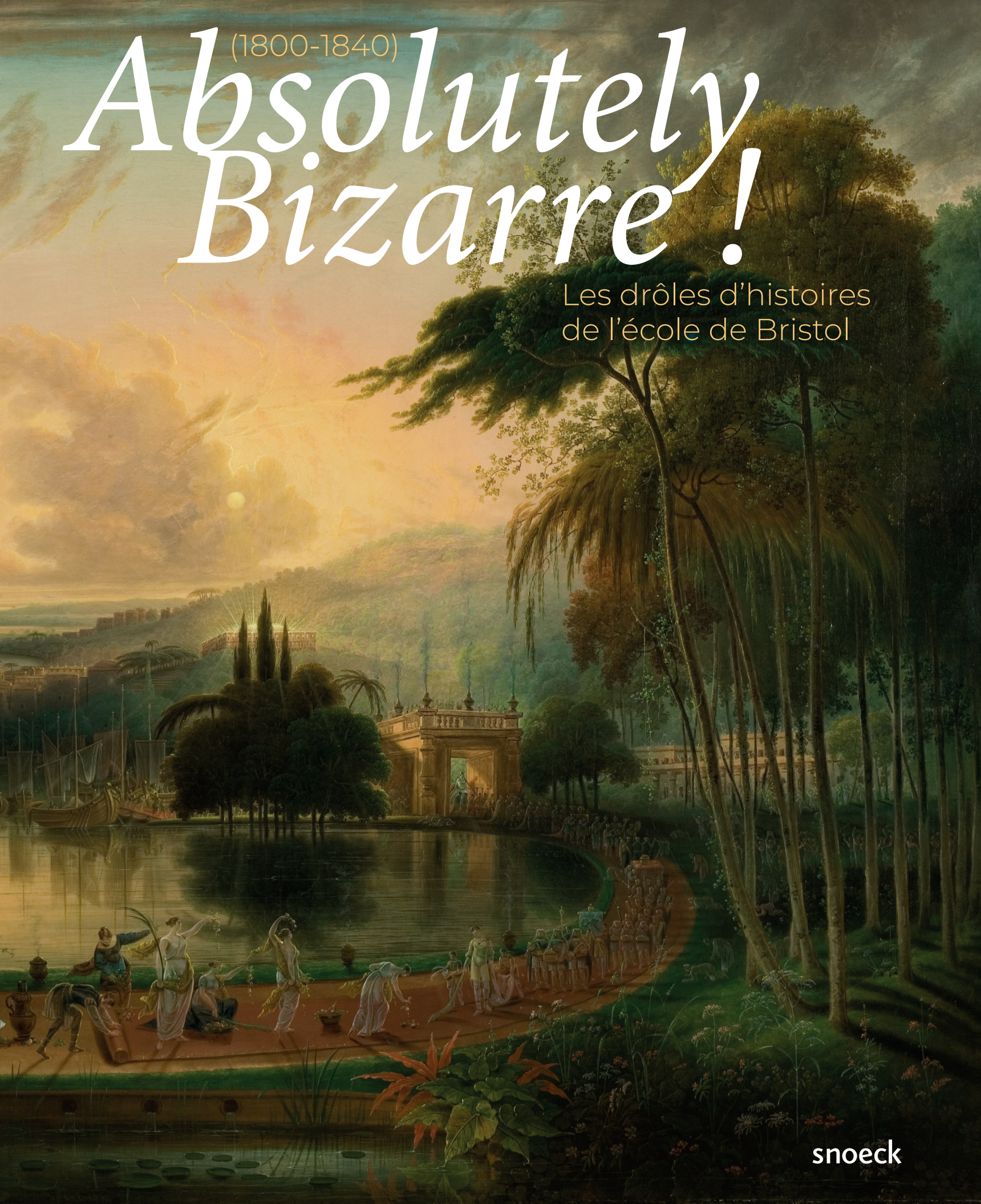


(1800-1840)

Absolutely Bizarre!

Les drôles d'histoires
de l'école de Bristol



Edward Bird and the Bristol School of genre painting

David H. Solkin

Although there were other provincial centres in early nineteenth-century Britain that hosted active societies of artists, Bristol was unique in supporting a small group who specialised in the painting of 'common' or 'familiar life' – the terminology then used for what we now know as 'genre'. Portraitists and landscape artists, both professional and amateur, could be found working in many towns outside the capital; but narrative images that involved the arrangement of groups of figures at whole-length and in action, even on a small scale,

demanding a level of expertise that normally required extended study at a drawing academy, of which the only British examples could then be found in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh had opened as recently as 1799, when its first cohort of students included a precocious fourteen-year-old named David Wilkie (1785-1841). Seven years later Wilkie would emerge from near-total obscurity to dazzle the London world with *Village Politicians* (fig. 1), his debut exhibit at the Royal Academy; with this skilful exercise in the manner of the seventeenth-century Flemish master David Teniers II (1610-1690), the young Scotsman effectively gave a new impetus and direction to British genre painting¹. News of his success must have



Fig. 1

David Wilkie
Village Politicians

Oil on canvas, 57.2 x 74.9 cm; RA 1806
The Right Hon. The Earl of Mansfield
of Mansfield

soon reached Bristol, where a self-taught drawing-master by the name of Edward Bird (1772-1819) had already begun to try his hand at the depiction of incidents in the life of the common people. Despite going on to become a regular exhibitor in London, and achieving nationwide repute as one of Wilkie's closest rivals, Bird continued to live in Bristol. Here he inspired several other painters to devote themselves to genre.

Bird had grown up in Wolverhampton, where in his early teens he had been apprenticed to a large firm of japanners – japanning being a technique of covering furniture and other household objects with black varnish in imitation of Oriental lacquer, which was then decorated with a mixture of gilding, oil-painting or inlaid work. An example is a tray persuasively attributed to Bird (**fig. 2**), bearing a winter scene freely copied from an engraving after George Morland (?1763-1804), one of the most popular painters in England during the 1790s and very early 1800s; the tray is most unlikely to have been decorated before 1801, the year when John Raphael Smith's print after Morland's *Breaking the Ice* was published. If the copy is indeed by Bird – who we know continued to work as a japanner after moving to Bristol in 1794 – it links him to a genre tradition that extended back through Morland and other current practitioners such as Francis Wheatley (1747-1801) and Julius Caesar Ibbotson (1759-1817) to Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), and in turn from Gainsborough and the artists of the French rococo to its origins in the seventeenth-century Netherlands.



Fig. 2
 Attributed to Edward Bird,
 after George Morland
Breaking the Ice
 Oil on japanned tea tray,
 54.5 x 76.1 cm.; c.1801-5
 Bristol Museum and Art Gallery



Fig. 3
 Henrich Guttenberg
 after David Teniers II
Le Vieillard
 Etching and engraving, 16 x 20.5 cm.;
 from *Galerie du Palais Royal*, vol. II, 1808
 British Museum, London



Fig. 4
 Edward Bird
The Old Soldier's Story
 Oil on canvas, 26.6 x 34.3 cm.; 1808
 Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Fig. 5
 After (?) Edward Bird
Good News
 Oil on panel, 29.9 x 52.5 cm.;
 original exh. RA 1809
 With Dobiaschofsky Auctions, Bern, 2019

Although there were some fine examples of Dutch and Flemish genre painting in Bristol private collections², Bird's knowledge of such works is likely to have come mainly from engravings. The print after a celebrated Teniers in the Orléans collection (**fig. 3**), for example, looks to have supplied him with the basic compositional idea for the *Old Soldier's Story* of 1808 (**fig. 4**), which demonstrates an adequate command of the Flemish master's idiom, albeit less assured than Wilkie's³. While competent enough, there is nothing in this little picture



to indicate that Bird stood on the verge of bursting onto the national art scene as a major painter of genre subjects. But his situation was just about to change dramatically: at some point in 1808 the London-based engraver-turned-publisher Robert Hartley Cromek, who had come to Bristol on other business, stopped by Bird's studio, where one picture so impressed him that he persuaded the artist to allow him to take it back with him to the capital, for the purpose of submitting it to the next exhibition of the Royal Academy. The work in question was called *Good News*; and though the original has sadly been lost, what appears to be a faithful copy has recently come to light (**fig. 5**)⁴.

This previously unpublished oil on panel corresponds in almost all of its particulars to the descriptions written by contemporary critics, who analysed Bird's picture in meticulous detail when it appeared at the Academy in the spring of 1809. Take, for example, the account that appeared in *The National Register*:

The principal figure in this piece is a veteran soldier, whose ardour is excited by the intelligence which has just arrived, and which has been read aloud by an honest, old cobbler in the common room of a village inn. The old warrior is so highly exhilarated with good liquor and good news together, that he seems unable to express his joy with sufficient energy. He brandishes his walking stick, cocks his hat, and participates in the victory which has been gained, in the praises of the commander, and the intrepidity of the combatants. This figure is well conceived, but not boldly executed... The old man who is listening to the soldier, and cheering his enthusiasm with all the sympathy of honest hilarity, is much better delineated, and more carefully finished. The best figure, however, is the cobbler. He is turning his head to reprimand two young loobies [i.e. louts] who are ridiculing him and the old soldier. His air is exquisitely natural: the expression of contemptuous irritation is admirably imagined and well defined... A boy, and a young woman with a child, assist in directing our attention to the veteran: their wonder mingled with pleasure is well described, and powerfully assists the general and reigning idea. The post-boy covered with heat and dust, and the bar-maid pouring out a refreshing glass for him, and dividing her attention between the good news and his tale of fatigue, are well depicted. Mr Bird is in the road to arrive at Wilkie's excellencies: he is, however, still very far behind them. There is a slovenliness in his finishing: all the furniture of the room is badly drawn, and generally deficient in perspective: the light has no repose, and the first effect of the picture is of a spotty confusion. Mr Bird possesses genius; but genius is lost without that skill acquired by application⁵.

In the eyes of the reviewers, what Bird and Wilkie had achieved – and what *Good News* seemed to exemplify, despite the weaknesses in its execution – was a new and improved form of genre painting: one that equalled the 'wonderful imitation of natural objects' associated with the Netherlandish old masters, but which surpassed them by adding humour and sentiment to figure, and a certain definite action, or, what we may call in poetry a MINOR FABLE, to the justness of form. All the figures are exhibited as doing something—what is done by each being the different parts of the same action.

The art of the painter, therefore, in this stile, consists in a double point: the correctness of the Flemish style with respect to figure, and the imitation of the humour, and characteristic sentiment of the scene which he has chosen to represent. In plain words, he has to animate, to inform, and to characterise his figures, with that particular expression which belongs to the moral part of his subject. He rises, therefore, to what may be called the dignity of composition in the EPIC of common life⁶.

The moral communicated by *Good News* was highly patriotic: for the newspaper that the post-boy has delivered, and that the cobbler is reading out to the assembled company, celebrates a recent victory in Britain's ongoing war against Napoleonic France. Clearly certain

elements of the scene were meant to provoke amusement, but the main emphasis was on 'sentiment' – feelings ranging from exultation to admiration to affection to annoyance, but dominated by sympathy and patriotic pride.

Given the painting's nationalistic theme, it may come as no surprise to learn that none of its reviewers acknowledged (or perhaps even realised) that Bird had based his pyramidal composition, as well as the pose of the seated man with his arm outstretched, on a well-known French source: Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *L'accordée de village* (1761; fig. 6), which the Bristol artist must have known through the mezzotint (in reverse) of 1777 by Samuel de Wilde⁷. The overall structure that *Good News* shares with the Greuze, featuring a broadly symmetrical arrangement of subordinate figures around a central significant

action, was not one normally associated with genre painting. Instead its origins lay in the far more elevated region of historical art, the tradition of Raphael and Poussin, upon which Greuze had drawn to enhance both his own reputation and the moral weight of his rustic betrothal scene. The latter point was one that Bird must have appreciated. Since the news being announced by his cobbler was of a British military victory, it made sense to underline the scene's connection to that distant glorious event by employing a compositional framework traditionally associated with the lofty portrayal of heroic deeds. The same device not only served to lend 'dignity' to a 'low' pictorial type; it also invited the inference that the common people deserved to be honoured for their contributions to the nation's welfare, and to its fortunes on the battlefield in particular. A widespread and growing consciousness that success in war would require the support of even Britain's most impoverished subjects is one factor that helps to explain why depictions of their lives



Fig. 6
Jean-Baptiste Greuze
L'accordée de village
Oil on canvas, 92 x 117 cm.; 1761
Musée du Louvre, Paris

assumed an unprecedented degree of cultural prominence during the Napoleonic era.

Indeed there is evidence that by 1809 genre had become a topic of lively discussion amongst Bristol's small circle of amateurs and art-lovers, who seem to have been more willing to give Bird their advice than to spend any money on his pictures. The local sketching club centred around the artist had recently been joined by George Cumberland (1754-1848), a prolific writer on art with extensive connections in the London art world; soon after settling in Bristol in 1808, Cumberland appears to have taken Bird under his wing. Not only is he likely to have been responsible for introducing him to Cromek, but he also strongly encouraged his protégé to base all the figures in his genre scenes on portraits taken from life. Shortly after Bird's premature death in 1819, Cumberland wrote a letter to his son, who was thinking of becoming a genre painter, urging him to 'Work from nature. Poor Bird, who died on Monday last at 5 o'clock in the morning, would have starved had he not taken to that plan, chiefly by my advice. All his figures were models, and the moment he quitted them, fame quitted him'⁹. In the case of *Good News*, we know from two early sources that the veteran brandishing his cane was painted from an old soldier who often posed for the artist; that the beer-drinker with his right hand raised in celebration is a portrait of a man named Underwood, the servant to a local butcher; that Bird's father-in-law served as the model for the cobbler; that his eldest son posed for the boy on the left; that the deaf man was a local labourer who was actually deaf; that the young mother was a Mrs Adams (a relation of Mrs Bird's), and the bar-maid a Miss Peach⁹.

The practice of depicting family members, friends, and more distant acquaintances as players in pictorial dramas of everyday life would become one of the defining hallmarks of Bristol School genre painting, but this was to form only part of Bird's rich legacy to his immediate successors. In the years following the spectacular success of *Good News*, he expanded his range of artistic references beyond Teniers the Younger and Greuze by engaging with the works of two of the most celebrated British genre specialists, the great past master of satire William Hogarth (1697-1764) and the modern prodigy David Wilkie. The imprint of Wilkie's *Rent Day* (1807, RA 1809; private collection), and of Hogarth's modern moral subjects – especially the first scene in *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1743-5; National Gallery, London) – can clearly be discerned in *The Reading of the Will Concluded* (fig. 7, and cat. no. **), which drew crowds of



Fig. 7
Edward Bird
The Reading of the Will Concluded
Oil on panel, 62.2 x 97.7 cm.; RA 1811
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery



Fig. 8
Edward Bird
The Departure for London
Oil on panel, 61 x 91.5 cm.; RA 1815
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

admiring viewers when it appeared at the Royal Academy in 1811. What they appear to have appreciated above all were Bird's talents as both a storyteller and a moralist: not only had he managed to convey the satisfaction of those who had benefited from the will, and the anger of those whose hopes had been disappointed, but from the carefully marshalled details of all the figures' appearance it was also plain to see that the virtuous and the vicious had each received their just rewards.

This was Bird's first attempt at representing an episode in the lives of the 'respectable' classes (something Wilkie had yet to do), and while critics

still complained about his colouring and finishing, they were generally agreed – and rightly so – that his art had improved dramatically in the two years since his London debut. The subject of *Reading the Will*, the magazine *La Belle Assemblée* assured its affluent readership, 'is one of those dramatic occurrences in private life, which calls forth the expression of various passions and traits of character, and is therefore particularly suited to the talents of Mr. Bird, whose former productions, in common with those of Mr. Wilkie, have fully established the superiority of English Artists over those of the Flemish School, in that great requisite of painting, the union of morality with the accurate and lively representation of domestic scenes'¹⁰.

Bird contributed at least one picture of this type to every annual Academy exhibition between 1809 and 1815, starting with *Good News* and concluding six years later with *The Departure for London* (fig. 8, and cat. no. **); in this last work, once again, he exploited Greuze's *L'accordée de village* as a fruitful source of ideas, on this occasion both for the grouping of the father and son and for the division of the composition into female and male halves (at left and right respectively)¹¹. But by now, a year after he had been elected to full membership of the Royal Academy on the strength of a history-painting of *Queen Philippa Supplicating King Edward to Spare the Lives of the Six Burghers of Calais* (London art market, 2015), Bird had ambitions to make his name in a nobler form of art. For him, the decision to abandon genre in favour of history would prove little short of calamitous; but other Bristol artists quickly saw an opportunity to occupy the space he had vacated.

No one took fuller advantage of this situation than Bird's one-time pupil Edward Villiers Ripplingille (c.1789-1859), who soon set about producing genre scenes on a larger scale and with narratives of greater complexity than his former master had ever attempted. Visitors to the Royal Academy in 1822 were captivated by Ripplingille's *The Recruiting Party* (fig. 9 & cat. no.**), an exercise in the manner and spirit of Hogarth's 'comic history paintings'¹² of contemporary life. Here the central action features a sergeant, resplendent in his red and white uniform, making a great show of false joviality as he endeavours to persuade a reluctant young man to exchange his settled way of life for a career in the army. The same gullible youth has allowed the recruiter to fill his mind with dreams of untold wealth and martial glory – but those fantasies, a mug of ale, and the general air of drunken conviviality of the country fair have made him oblivious to the dangers in prospect. Behind him and to our right, the comedy of the fair suddenly sinks into tragedy. The ribbons on the hat of the young man leaning against the tree trunk indicate that he has just enlisted, though his expression suggests that he has already had second thoughts, prompted by the reactions of his



Fig. 9
Edward Villiers Ripplingille
The Recruiting Party
Oil on canvas, 81.5 x 135.9 cm.; RA 1822
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery



Fig. 10
Samuel Colman
St James's Fair, Bristol
Oil on canvas, 87.6 x 134 cm.; 1824
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

parents: his mother overcome by grief, his father offering some belated admonishment or advice. The justification for their negative reactions can be found close to hand, in the person of a crippled veteran asking for alms at a cottage door. In the interaction of the seated father and his standing son, Ripplingille's image echoes the comparable motif in Bird's *Departure for London*; but where the prospects for that young man's future were bright, for the army's new recruit they are quite the opposite. Here the 'EPIC of common life' promises to end in disaster.

It may well be a manifestation of the deeply troubled social mood in Britain during the decade after the end of the Napoleonic Wars that the most ambitious Bristol School genre paintings of the early to mid-1820s express a similar sense of foreboding. In *The Stoppage of the Bank* (cat. no.**), which owes far more to Ripplingille than to Bird,¹³ Rolinda Sharples described the traumatic effects on a variety of Bristolians of the bank failures caused by the collapse of the London stock market in 1825 (known as 'The Panic of 1825'). Even more pessimistic in tone, however, is Samuel Colman's remarkable image of *St James's Fair, Bristol*, from the year before (fig. 10 & cat. no.**). Basing his composition on Ripplingille's *Recruiting Party*, and incorporating the central theme of the picture of a Country Auction that Bird had exhibited in 1812 (fig. 11), here Colman positioned himself as a commentator on the achievements of his fellow Bristol painters, and at the same time as a stern critic of the community to which they all belonged.

From various pieces of evidence we know that Colman espoused the prophetic and anti-worldly Christian beliefs associated with the early nineteenth-century British culture of Dissent or Nonconformism

of English Protestant sects opposed to the established Church. The immediate inspiration for his portrayal of *St James's Fair* came from a pamphlet published in Bristol in 1823 by a like-minded Dissenting preacher named G.C. Smith, who wrote in protest against the city government's refusal to allow him to deliver a public sermon on a Sunday at the fair in question. In an extended diatribe against the 'pawn-brokers, publicans, thieves, and prostitutes' who pursued their business at the fair-ground, Smith condemned its entertainments, their operators

Fig. 11
Edward Bird
The Country Auction
Oil on panel, 65.1 x 99.1 cm.; RA 1812
With Richard Green, London, 2013



and their customers as symptomatic of the characteristic evils of a modern (and most unsaint-like) commercial society¹⁴.

It was this pit of iniquity that Colman soon went on to depict, in such a plethora of particulars as would require at least an entire book to catalogue. But there is one detail that encapsulates the meaning of the whole: almost lost in the crowd in the central middle-ground, a town crier wearing his characteristic black and red uniform stands with his back to us, looking out over the assembled multitude, his left hand grasping a book or paper inscribed with the words 'Lost at Vanity Fair / Miss Chastity' (fig. 12). The 'Miss' in question may be the seated young woman in the foreground, who is about to enter into an improper marriage, and whose fallen bonnet signifies her imminent fall from virtue; or she may be the pretty country girl on the far right, who in a deliberate echo of Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress*, is shown foolishly listening to a bawd; though surely the loss of chastity is also meant more broadly. But the *Vanity Fair* allusion can be only to John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and to the following passage in particular:

Then I saw in my dream, that, when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair... [where] all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. And moreover, at this fair there are at all times to be seen juggling, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind.

What the reference to Bunyan tells us is that, despite its localised subject-matter – and its inclusion of at least one portrait of one of Colman's fellow-townfolk¹⁶ – *St James's Fair, Bristol* is not ultimately about one particular fair, or even one specific town. Rather, Colman has portrayed the gaudy spectacle of the commercial fair as a synecdoche for the entire country – for a Britain infested with all manner of vice, and plunged into the abyss of moral and social perdition. This uncompromising attack of the evils of modernity spoke for the other-worldly fringes of the non-conformist middle classes, who enjoyed far



Fig. 12
Samuel Colman
St James's Fair, Bristol
(detail of fig. 10)

greater influence in the provinces than they ever achieved in London. Yet by now the school of genre painting to which Colman belonged, and that I suspect he wished to criticise as morally deficient, had begun to produce compositions of remarkable ambition, addressing highly complex themes of national significance. What had begun as a self-taught Bristol drawing-master's limited but worthy efforts to depict the 'familiar life' around him, had, with the encouragement of the city's amateurs and art-lovers, grown into a collective phenomenon that aimed to make its mark – not just on Britain's art world, but on the moral fabric of British society as a whole.

Notes

1

For a full discussion of Wilkie's *Village Politicians* and its critical success, see David H. Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-century Britain*, New Haven and London 2015, pp.7-35. The same source also contains much expanded analyses of the works by Rippingille and Colman considered toward the end of this essay.

2

E.g. the collection of the Bristol ironmaster Daniel Wade Acraman (1775-1847), which included works by Teniers, Jan Weenix, and Isaac and Adriaen van Ostade, amongst others. A Teniers formerly owned by Acraman, *A Dentist Pulling a Tooth*, was sold at Christie's, London, 4 July 2012, lot 149.

3

Entirely by coincidence, Wilkie had modelled his *Village Politicians* on the same work by Teniers, albeit in reverse.

4

There is a very slight chance that fig. 5, which I have only seen in photographs, is a heavily restored and overpainted work by Bird himself. But too many small discrepancies exist between this image and the contemporary press descriptions of *Good News* to leave open the possibility of its being the exhibited original. Since the latter was never engraved, the copy must have been done directly from the oil, which was purchased by the wealthy Bristolian Benjamin Baugh; it is therefore most likely to have been executed in Bristol, by one of Bird's students.

5

The *National Register*, 21 May 1809, p.334

6

[Francis Ludlow Holt], *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 9 April 1809, p.119

7

De Wilde's print after Creuze is entitled *Nuptial Blessing*.

8

George Cumberland Sr. to George Cumberland Jr., letter of 17 April 1819, BL Add MS 36507, f.96, q. Eric Adams, *Francis Danby: Varieties of Poetic Landscape*, New Haven and London 1973, p. 21. For further primary evidence from 1809 of Cumberland's firm opinions about how important it was for genre painters to base their figures on individuals observed from life, see Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary*, pp.31-2.

9

The identifications of the soldier and the cobbler come from 'J.E.' [i.e. John Eagles], *Catalogue of Pictures, Painted by the late Edward Bird, Royal Academician, now Exhibiting at the Rooms, Lately occupied by the Bristol Fire Office, opposite the Exchange, Bristol, Bristol 1820, no. 57, p.14*. The Reverend John Eagles was another member of the Bristol sketching society, and a close friend and pupil of Bird's. All the other identifications are taken from a set of manuscript 'Observations on Mr Bird's Catalogue' held in the Bristol Reference Library, compiled by the antiquarian and collector George Weare Braikenridge (1775-1856), in which he names as many of the individuals in Bird's pictures as he could identify. Braikenridge tells us that the old soldier in *Good News* 'lived at Wotton under edge & when Mr Bird sent for him to Bristol he was so very much intoxicated that they were obliged to strap him on the Top of the Coach to keep him from falling off'. From the same source we also learn that the clergyman shown on the far left of Bird's *Country Auction* of 1812 (see fig. 11) bears the features of George Cumberland.

10

[Francis Ludlow Holt?], *La Belle Assemblée*, new series, vol. III (May 1811), p.263

11

The connection between Bird's *Departure for London* and Creuze's *L'accordée* was first observed by Sarah Richardson, in *Edward Bird 1772-1819*, exh. cat., Wolverhampton Art Gallery 1982, p.20.

12

Hogarth's friend the novelist Henry Fielding was the first to describe him as a 'comic history-painter', in the preface to his novel *Joseph Andrews* (published 1742). Fielding coined this neologism in order to distinguish Hogarth's art from the monstrosities of caricature or 'low' burlesque, and to raise his *Modern Moral Subjects* to an elevated rank in the academic hierarchy of genres. Rippingille would have shared the same aspirations for himself and his *Recruiting Party*.

13

The basic composition of the *Stoppage of the Bank*, with its crowd of figures arranged laterally across the foreground in front of a sharply receding perspective framed by buildings on either side, has been lifted wholesale from Rippingille's *The Post Office* (RA 1819). Although the original version of this picture has disappeared, its appearance is recorded in an autograph replica of 1829 in the Leeds Museums and Art Galleries, Lotherton Hall. For an extensive discussion of the Rippingille, see Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary*, pp.193-8.

14

Rev. G.C. Smith, *Bristol Fair but NO Preaching*, Bristol 1823, p.14

15

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), part I, stage 6

16

The virtuous bookseller standing beside his wife in the stall at far left bears the same features as the unidentified subject of a portrait by Colman, also in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; for a reproduction, see https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/portrait-of-an-unknown-man-in-a-beaver-hat-188362/search/actor:colman-samuel-17801845/page/1/view_as/grid. I wonder if this is a likeness of the Rev. G.C. Smith, the author of the pamphlet that inspired Colman's picture (see n. 14 above). Presumably *St James's Fair, Bristol*, contains many portraits beyond the single example that has been identified.

Un site particulier
et une cité en plein essor



Joseph Mallord
William TURNER

Covent Garden, London 1775 – Chelsea, London 1851

*The Mouth of the Avon, near Bristol,
seen from Cliffs below Clifton*

1791 – 1792

Watercolour and bodycolour over pencil on paper

H: 0,22; W: 0,28 m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery,
K6431

This view towards the mouth of the river Avon is taken from inside a large, dark cavern in the overgrown rock face beneath Clifton, an elegant neighbourhood situated on the cliffs to the west of Bristol's historic centre, above the famous Avon Gorge. Italianate light warms the foliage and the rocks on the right where three climbers are clambering upwards, as well as the landscape in the distance towards the river Severn and South Wales. A vessel passes at the bottom left of the composition, of which only the topsails can be seen from this high vantage point.

Then at the start of his career, Turner was undoubtedly one of the most important British artists to visit Bristol and seek inspiration from the dramatic nearby landscape of the Avon Gorge, before the Bristol School artists began working in the city two decades later. The famous

geological feature, where the extreme tides of the river Avon cut deeply through a limestone ridge on their way to the sea, had become a popular locus for those in search of sublime views by the mid-18th century and in the visual arts the Gorge had become a recognizable subject through images by artists such as Jean Baptiste Claude Chatelain.

In 1791, at the age of only 16, Turner spent his September holiday in Bristol with friends of his father, the Narraway family. During the course of his stay, the young artist, who had joined the Royal Academy Schools in 1789 and exhibited a watercolour at the Royal Academy for the first time in 1790, spent so much of his time in the Avon Gorge that his hosts nicknamed him the 'Prince of the Rocks'. The sketchbook of this visit is kept in the collections at Tate Britain.

Prov:

Bristol, collection of Miss Dart, 1837; her sale London, Christie's, 27 April 1864, no.90; collection of W.C. Rawlinson, Esq (and Tatton?), 1887; T.A. Tatton sale, Christie's 14 December 1828, no.7 (as Mouth of the Avon); Cotswold Gallery(?), 1930; collection of Capt. J.A. (?); collection of (?) Hunter, 1951; his sale London, Sotheby's, 6th June 1951 (as Mouth of the Avon, near Bristol, seen from Cliffs below Clifton); Newcastle-upon-Tyne, private collection; Leyburn, North Yorkshire, Tennants Auctioneers Ltd., purchased by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2013

Lit:

Armstrong, 1902, p.244; The Studio, Spring 1909, illus. pl.2; Wilton, 1979, p.302; Carver, 2017, p.42

Exh:

Royal Academy, 1837; Burlington House exhibition, 1887; Bristol & Swindon, 2014

1

Paul Angier (engraver) after Jean Baptiste Claude Chatelain, A South View of the Cliffs Called St Vincent's Rock and Part of the River Avon, 1753, etching, BMAG M711

2

Joseph Mallord William Turner, Bristol and Malmesbury Sketchbook, 1791, Tate D00072–D00107, D40733–D40736



Joseph Mallord
William TURNER

Covent Garden, London 1775 – Chelsea, London 1851

Avon Gorge and Bristol Hotwell

1791 – 1792

Watercolour over pencil on paper

H: 0,35 W: 0,40 m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, K816

Bristol's surroundings offered Turner ample inspiration and spectacular scenery to apply his great sense of atmosphere and well-developed eye for natural grandeur. This large watercolour shows a view of the Avon Gorge and the elegant houses of the Hotwells spa, which attracted many visitors during the summer season, from the far side of the river. Neither would a ship be moored at this place on the Somerset bank of the Avon. The young artist has populated the scene with sailors working along the bank in the foreground. Significantly, he placed artistic needs over nautical facts – the vessel to the left would not have navigated this narrow part of the Avon under full sail.

The watercolour's large size, careful execution and finish made it suitable for exhibition. It demonstrates Turner's artistic ambition, as well as the new status of watercolour painting in British art.

Although the historical evidence regarding this watercolour and another image is confused³, it is likely that it was originally in the possession of either a relative of Turner, the Narraway family, to whom the artist gave several of the works he made during his visits, or one of their acquaintances in Bristol. The Museum and Art Gallery eventually acquired the work for £5 from a private collection in 1925.

Prov:

Rev. J. Nixon; London, Christie's, sale of Dr. Nixon, 9 July 1864; purchased by Reynolds; then Hull, Mrs. H.S. Fussey; purchased per Rev. J. Patton (as Hotwell House) by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 1925

Lit:

Redgrave, 1874, p.416; Bell, 1901, p.27; Finberg, 1961, p.457, Appendix 8; The Listener, August 1962, cover illus.; Wilton, 1979, no.18, p.302, illus. p.28(8); Wilton, 1987, pl.5; Hamilton, 2003, p.35 illus.; Greenacre, 2005, p.53 illus.

Exh:

Royal Academy, 1793, no. 323 (as *The Rising Squall, Hotwells, St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol*); Bristol, 1997, no.35; Birmingham, 2003-2004, no.18; Bristol & Swindon, 2014



³
The Avon Gorge at Bristol with the Old Hot Wells House, circa 1792, watercolour, 27.4 cm x 34 cm, previously BMAG K1091 (deaccessioned 1958), now The Courtauld Gallery, London, D.2007.DS.42

Nicholas POCOCK

Bristol, 1740 – Cookham, 1821

View of Bristol Harbour with the Cathedral and the Quay

1785

Oil on canvas

H: 0,6; W: 0,86 m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, K742

This view from Wapping on the south bank of the river Avon across the water to St. Augustine's Reach, shows how busy Bristol's harbour was in the late 18th century, with countless ships moored along its quays. A thirty-two-gun frigate is being towed down-river. The city's Gothic cathedral is visible to the left and St. Stephen's Church can be seen in the centre-right background. Likewise still surviving is Royal Fort House on top of the hill to the left, which was built in a largely neo-Classical style over destroyed Civil War fortifications.

Painted two years after the end of the American Revolutionary War, the picture's atmospheric golden

light is reminiscent of Claude Lorrain's harbour views popular with British collectors at the time. This picturesque aspect of the work might be attributable to a desire amongst Bristol's merchants for the recovery of a 'Golden Age' for the city's global trade, which had been disrupted by the conflict with America. Overall, though, the scene is rendered in the seemingly factual manner typical of Dutch and English marine painting since the 17th century. Types of vessels are clearly differentiated, reflecting Pocock's detailed maritime knowledge, and identifiable landmarks are included on the shore. The figures are carefully controlled in number and scale so as not to overcrowd the composition, leaving the main emphasis on the ships.

Nicholas Pocock was one of the few Bristol-born artists of the generation preceding the School. He had spent the first part of his professional life at sea before becoming a marine and landscape painter. This picture was probably commissioned by Thomas Daniel, a Bristol merchant and ship-owner, who as an owner of plantations in the West Indies was a prominent defender of slavery. Part of the city's political establishment, he served both as Mayor and as Master of the Society of Merchant Venturers, a powerful local trade guild.

Prov:

Bristol, Henbury House, estate sale of Thomas Daniel and Mrs. Frances Hill, 25 September 1895, no.266; then purchased by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 1924

Lit:

Grant, 1926, p.14, illus. pl.27; The Connoisseur, August 1928, p.204, illus.; Farr & Sewell, 1975, p.116 illus.; Gloucestershire & Avon Life, March 1979, pp. 74-75, illus. p.74; Greenacre, 1982, p.64, illus. (colour) p.5; Cordingly, 1986, illus. pl.6; Greenacre, 2005, p.33 illus. (colour)

Exh:

South West England venues, 1947, no.12; Plymouth, 1969, no.14; Milan, 1975, no.75; Bristol, 1982-3, no.43



Les peintres de genre et la comédie sociale



Edward Villiers RIPPINGILLE

King's Lynn, Norfolk, 1788 or 1789 – Swan village,
West Midlands, 1859

Portrait of Edward Bird, R.A.

1817

Oil on mahogany panel
H: 0,34; W: 0,26 m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, K5950

The artist Edward Bird, around whom the Bristol School first formed, is seen working at his easel at his home in Portland Street, Kingsdown, surrounded by a clutter of books, portfolios, sketches and a small cast of the *Apollo Belvedere*. He wears the elegant clothes of a gentleman which are consciously unprotected from paint; his hair is fashionably tousled. Bird is shown as the embodiment of the Romantic artist in his studio. The curtain across the bottom half of the window provides the top light preferred by artists but also allowed Bird's friend Ripplingille to emphasise his head against its dark cloth.

The reference to antiquity in the statue of Apollo and the implied assumption that an academic and serious

artist should study classical sculpture, contrasts with Bird's training as a japanning artist, decorating lacquered tin-plate domestic items such as trays. Ripplingille used the established formula of the artist in his studio to celebrate Bird's professional success and specifically his highly-respected and acknowledged status among the painters and collectors in Bristol. Bird was not only credited with first organizing the Bristol School's famous sketching meetings, he was also to become the city's first Royal Academician. He went on to become Historical Painter to Princess Charlotte, daughter of the Prince Regent.

Edward Ripplingille, as a friend of Bird, Francis Danby and John King, was also a member of the sketching group and fully integrated in the Bristol art scene and the portrait reveals the closeness of the artists. From 1839 this iconic picture was owned by the Bristol patron and antiquarian G.W. Braikenridge and from 1962 by E.V. Ripplingille Junior, a descendant of the artist.

Prov:

Mangotsfield, Bristol, John Haythorne; Haythorne collection sale, Hill House, Mangotsfield by English & Fasana, 18-23 March 1839, no.66; Brislington, Bristol, G.W. Braikenridge; by descent through Braikenridge and Hale families; Alfred Matthews Hale collection sale, in contents of the White House, Rake, Hampshire by Jacobs & Hunt, Petersfield, probably in no.137; then London, St. Leger Galleries, 1962; E.V. Ripplingille Jr. (descendant of the artist E.V. Ripplingille, *ibid.*), 1962; purchased from his son by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2002

Lit:

Greenacre, 1973, p.129, illus. p.128

Exh:

Bristol, 1820, no.46; Royal Academy, 1820, no.39; Bristol, 1973, no.112



Edward BIRD

Wolverhampton, 1772 – Bristol, 1819

The Embarkation of Louis XVIII at Dover

1816

Oil on panel

H: 1,10; W: 1,73 m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, K4105

This ambitious painting of contemporary history celebrating the restoration of the French monarchy in 1814 was made after Edward Bird had already achieved national success and was appointed Historical Painter to Princess Charlotte, the Prince Regent's daughter, in 1813. On either side of the painting, royal family members and dignitaries look on as Louis XVIII of France and the Prince Regent, later King George IV, meet on the deck of the Royal Yacht at the centre of the composition. Contrasting with the orderly nature of the State event in the foreground, the excited crowd of general public on shore in the background bear all the hallmarks of Bird's lively genre

paintings. Dover castle can be seen in the top right corner.

The picture was begun in 1814 and was conceived as part of a pair detailing both the embarkation at Dover and arrival at Calais of Louis XVIII on his return to France after Napoleon had been exiled to Elba. This marked the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy and the end of Louis' own exile, which had started with the French Revolution and included seven years residence in England, mainly spent at Hartwell House in Buckinghamshire. Bird had permission to sail on the royal yacht with Louis XVIII and made many portrait sketches of those present at the event from life, details he included in the sister painting of Louis' arrival at Calais. His hope of selling the paintings to the Prince Regent was disappointed despite multiple attempts to persuade him. Both paintings eventually came into the possession of the Earl of Bridgewater.

Prov:

Earl of Bridgewater; by descent to Earl Brownlow; London, Christie's, Brownlow sale, 7 May 1923, no.166; London, Christie's, 17 June 1929, no.136, purchased by Mitchell; London, Christie's, 9 June 1933, no.127; London, Christie's, 13 July 1934, no.119, purchased by Frost & Reed; London, Christie's, 8 March 1935, no.163, purchased by Dale; Weston-Super-Mare, Capt. W.C. Delance Holmes; Town Hall, Taunton, Delance Holmes sale, 15/16 December 1937; Weston-Super-Mare Public Library & Museum; presented to Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 1971

Lit:

Cumberland MSS., B.M. 36505.f.204, *ibid.* f.409, 36506.f.215, *ibid.* f.251-252, 36507.f.706, *ibid.* f.103, f.184, f.257, f.266, 36515.f.99, 36516.f.118, *ibid.* f.131; Ackermann's Repository of Arts, 1814, vol.12, p.39; The Examiner, 1814, p.288; Annals of the Fine Arts, 1816-1817, vol.1, no.3, p.407; Library of the Fine Arts, 1833, p.264; White, 1834, p.92; Art Union, 1843, p.112, p.198; The Artists & Amateurs Magazine, 1843, p.72-73; Hutton, 1907, p.220; Greig, 1922-1928, VII p.269, VIII pp.71-72, p.99; Millar, 1969, p.11; Greenacre, 1973, pp.110-111; Richardson, 1982, p.38, illus. pl.36

Exh:

Bristol City Art Gallery, 1973, no. 92 (as Departure of Louis XVIII from Dover);
Wolverhampton & London, 1982, no.81

¹³
Edward Bird, *Arrival of Louis XVIII at Calais*, 1814, oil on canvas, 109.8 x 173.9 cm, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, OP121



Edward BIRD

Wolverhampton, 1772 – Bristol, 1819

The Departure for London

1815

Oil on panel

H: 0,62; W: 0,91m

Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, K6482

Since 1935 Bristol Museum & Art Gallery's collection of works by Edward Bird has included a preparatory sketch for his acclaimed painting *The Departure for London*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815 and included in this exhibition¹⁴.

The image shows a family in their home preparing for their son's imminent departure. Such a scene was similar in sentiment to those often found in contemporary literature, and would become a staple of the Victorian novel. Two women are packing the young man's belongings while the elderly father bids farewell to his son, who is leaving to

begin professional life in the Capital, and, with luck, to make his fortune. A young boy announces the arrival of the coach - seen through a window in the background - with eager gestures.

In 2015 the museum was able to acquire the finished oil painting, signed 'E. Bird R.A.' at the bottom left of centre, which in 1815 had been deemed by the *New Monthly Magazine*: 'A happy expression of affectionate sentiment ... of tender feeling and discriminatory observation ... which cannot fail to appeal to the heart.'¹⁵

The comparison with the sketch shows that in the finished painting Bird added the figures of another young woman and a small child to better balance his composition. Both figures emotionally intensify the picture's portrayal of loving family life – a recurring theme in Bird's oeuvre. The painting shows Bird's awareness of the French artist Jean Baptiste Greuze¹⁶, but also highlights the popularity of 17th-century Dutch genre painting in 19th-century Bristol, where the artists' patron Daniel Wade Acraman had assembled a sizeable collection of Dutch and Flemish paintings.

Prov:

London, Christie's, 12 June 1957, no. 137; then London, The Fine Art Society; London, Christie's, 9 March 2000, sale of the Hon. A.J.F. Mackay of Enterkine, Scotland, no.259; then Exeter, Bearnes Hampton & Littlewood; purchased by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2015

Lit:

New Monthly Magazine & Universal Register, 1815, p.550; *Ackermann's Repository of Arts*, 1815, p.336; *Country Life*, March 1982, p.801; Richardson, 1982, p.25, illus pl.27

Exh:

Royal Academy, 1815, no.51; Wolverhampton & London, 1982, no.65

¹⁴ Edward Bird, *Sketch For The Departure For London*, circa 1815, pencil and grey wash on paper, 23.9 x 37.3 cm, BMAG K3082/098

¹⁵ *New Monthly Magazine & Universal Register*, 1815, p.550

¹⁶ Richardson, 1982, p.20

