

Victorian Imag(in)ing of the Pagan Pyre: Frank Dicksee's *Funeral of a Viking*

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Composed across a dramatic diagonal from lower right to upper left, Victorian Royal Academician Frank Dicksee's imposing six-by-ten-foot *Funeral of a Viking* of 1893 features physically powerful men immersed in, even becoming a part of, the elements (*Fig. 1*). Roiling waves lap the feet of the assembled throng on the right. Coordinating its efforts with obvious strength and skill, a team of bare-chested warriors wades into the surf against crashing breakers, straining rippling muscles to launch the funeral barge. In the maelstrom of fire, water, and air is the supine figure of a Viking chief, clad in full armour, clutching sword and shield, his body starkly and obdurately outlined against the flaming pyre (*Fig. 2*). The source of the kindled glare, a man in glittering breastplate and helmet (*Fig. 3*), holds a burning torch at his side, while raising his other arm in a sweeping gesture that rhymes with — or activates — the right-left movement of the



Fig. 1: Frank Dicksee, *The Funeral of a Viking*, 1893, oil on canvas. Manchester Art Gallery.



Fig. 2: Frank Dicksee, *The Funeral of a Viking*, 1893 (detail). Manchester Art Gallery.

canvas. This gesture takes us from the present human world, comprised of detailed, bounded forms, to the unknown future of the natural realm, marked amorphousness, and dissolving in places into abstract patches of pure paint, a veil of orange and grey pigment (*Fig. 4*). The composition thus enacts the transformative effects of flame itself, in which material structures metamorphose into formless new substances or break down into constitutive elements.

While often dismissed as, at best, aesthetically limp and ideologically pallid, or, at worst, as insidiously reactionary, late-Victorian painting rewards close analysis because it reveals conflicts and contestations of a society in the throes of change. It gives visual form to the alternative beliefs emerging to trouble complacent orthodoxies, in terms of both art practice and value systems more generally. Taking *The Funeral of a Viking* seriously illuminates several such issues, including the state of Victorian painting and Dicksee's place within it in the 1890s; the rise of interest in the pagan past; debates within the Christian church about disposal of the dead and the nature of the afterlife; and, most relevant to the theme of this issue, the transformative potential of fire in Victorian Britain. To understand what is at stake here, this article explores how an image of a burning body might have made meaning in this time and place.

When viewed in the context of contemporary ideas about the pagan past, a kitschy melodrama sets in play new possibilities for the relationship between soul and body in a time of the loosening hold of



Fig. 3: Frank Dicksee, *The Funeral of a Viking*, 1893 (detail). Manchester Art Gallery.



Fig. 4: Frank Dicksee, *The Funeral of a Viking*, 1893 (detail). Manchester Art Gallery.

Christian beliefs. In particular, the work would have elicited reactions related to pressing contemporary debates about cremation. A familiar, almost required, element of Viking tales is the splendid funeral pyre of the warrior-king fallen in battle. Its depiction dramatically marks the cultural difference between nineteenth-century practices and those of the historical past through the illustration of a ritual disposal of human remains that remained taboo in Britain until the late nineteenth century.¹ This Viking fire burial negotiated ideas of Christianity and paganism via the figure of the corpse at precisely the moment that public discussion on this topic was at its most vociferous: Dicksee's painting slots neatly into the timeline of shifting opinions between the first official English cremation in 1885 and the full legalization of the practice with the 1902 Cremation Act.² The Victorian fascination with pagan fire-death reoriented Christianity's relationship with other religions as well as to its concerns about the body as matter.

¹ Peter C. Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

² The first crematorium opened in Woking in 1885, and London established its cremation complex at Golders Green in 1902 after the official act regulated cremation. See *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, ed. by Douglas J. Davies with Lewis H. Maters (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 137.

This article does not recover either Dicksee's intentional meanings or hard evidence that Victorians immediately linked his painting with contemporary debates about cremation or the relationship between the soul and body. Instead, it excavates some of the ways in which the conjoined topics of death and fire were threaded through a range of period discourses. Closely analysing both the depicted content of this work of art, and, more importantly, how its content is given formal expression, allows one to attend to the multifarious meanings they set into play and then to seek similar hermeneutic constructs in other spheres of culture. Much is to be gained by finding and linking areas of conceptual parallel. For instance, we illuminate both visual culture and science by examining side by side the ways in which each treated the idea of the wave, the tree, or the body. The possibilities available for meaning-making in any given moment of time, as indicated by their presence in a public and published conversation, are an instructive interpretive touchstone. Rather than retrieving any fixed or certain truths, this approach poses potential associations that, on the one hand, do help us understand nineteenth-century structures, priorities, thought forms, or frameworks; but, on the other, overtly demonstrate that any interpretive gambit is necessarily a creative, imaginative act — one that by its thrust compels readers to pay attention.

An analysis of this painting, therefore, must consider the semantic power of fire and how its representation might be especially associated with themes of transition: ends, beginnings, and moments or conditions of the in-between. Institutions related to religion, art, and death culture in this period were experiencing profound destabilization and reordering, and fire's appearance in these spheres — and in this picture — was instrumental in expressing this change. As a metamorphic element, fire signals change and transition, and its presence in Dicksee's *Funeral of a Viking* marks dynamic shifts in a range of social spheres, from art institutions to the Victorian manner of burial and understanding of death. The areas of painted fire are, after all, the most indeterminate passages in the picture, triggering our recognition of Dicksee's calibrated mix of styles in a work that also suggests other liminalities, such as the zone between the animate and the inanimate. The 1890s represented a critical juncture in the passing of an old order and the transition to a new; the death and burial of a pagan Viking might even seem an overdetermined metaphor for the end of an era. Yet such a simple reading does not take into account the picture's own narrative ambiguities; it is an image of passage rather than of conclusion.

Frank Dicksee and the origins of *The Funeral of a Viking*

The Funeral of a Viking appeared at a decisive moment in the history of British art. The Royal Academy's authority, along with its orthodoxies

regarding style and technique as a fixed body of knowledge to be conveyed from one generation to the next in precisely codified teachings, was disintegrating. In 1893, as a recently elected full Royal Academician, Frank Dicksee (1853–1928) had arrived at a crucial moment of his career. He needed both to justify his rise to the pinnacle of the British art world and to demonstrate his recognition that the Academy, in order to survive, would have to embrace recent stylistic innovations such as the ambiguous subject matter, freer brushwork, and brighter palette of Impressionism.

The London-born son of a painter (Thomas Francis Dicksee), Dicksee was well positioned to become a successful artist and, accordingly, climbed his professional ladder with aplomb; admitted at age sixteen to the school of the Royal Academy and exhibiting his first picture there in 1876, he quickly became an associate of the body in 1881, a full member in 1891, and, eventually, its president from 1924 until his death in 1928. Afterwards, his work occasioned little serious scholarly attention, although a recent catalogue raisonné suggests his renewed visibility among those concerned with traditional artistic skills and quality.³ Favoured characteristics at the time — narrative clarity, heightened emotion, melodramatic subject matter, painterly realism — later caused his fall from public taste, and unlike the work of other still-prominent Victorian artists, such as Edward Burne-Jones, Dicksee's painting was seen as neither politically nor artistically innovative, nor demonstrative of any one easily categorizable style or subject matter. His motifs ranged from biblical scenes to allegory to medieval genre themes to portraiture, with *Startled* (1892) (*Fig. 5*) (his diploma work gifted to the RA upon his elevation into full membership) displaying his abilities as a painter of the female nude.⁴

After another foray into feminine sensuality in 1892 with the Orientalist work *Leila*, Dicksee shifted gears to the overt masculinity of his sole Academy submission in 1893, *The Funeral of a Viking*, commissioned by businessman and mine owner George McCulloch for his newly founded collection of British art (*Fig. 6*).⁵ Only men appear in this composition,

³ Simon Toll, *Frank Dicksee 1853–1928: His Art and Life*, intr. by Frederick C. Ross MA (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club in Cooperation with the Art Renewal Center, 2016). Toll's project is related to a recent art education movement nostalgic for the period when artists were 'properly trained', with Dicksee cast as 'sadly [...] one of the last living practitioners of the content-based belief system of his era'. Frederick C. Ross, 'Introduction', in Toll, pp. 6–9 (p. 6).

⁴ E. Rimbault Dibdin, *Frank Dicksee (Royal Academician): His Life and Work*, Christmas Art Annual (London: Virtue, 1905), pp. 3, 6, 11.

⁵ Toll, p. 94. See also, A. L. Baldry, 'The Collection of George McCulloch', *Art Journal*, November 1897, pp. 325–29; *Catalogue of Exhibition of Modern Works in Painting and Sculpture Forming the Collection of the Late George McCulloch: Winter Exhibition* (London: Royal Academy, 1909).



Fig. 5: Frank Dicksee, *Startled*, 1892, oil on canvas, Royal Academy of Arts, London. © Royal Academy of Arts, London; Photographer: John Hammond.



Fig. 6: 'Interior at 184, Queen's Gate', in *Royal Academy Winter Exhibition Illustrated Catalogue* (London: Virtue, 1909), <http://123-mcc.com/other_history_art_journal.htm#Interior_at_184_Queens_Gate_London> [accessed 1 October 2017].

and they are rugged, muscular, and armoured. Given its imposing size, sensational subject, and dramatic lighting, the picture was clearly intended to make a statement; Dicksee himself branded it 'the largest and most important work that I have yet painted' (Toll, p. 95).

The Academy validated its new member by hanging the picture in a place of honour in the exhibition, yet critical reception was strikingly mixed (Dibdin, p. 12). Conservative publications such as *The Times* named Dicksee's canvas a picture of the year, while more innovative critics such as artist Arthur Tomson attacked it on stylistic grounds: 'the sentiment of paint and of colour has been entirely overlooked in the painter's vain struggle with his colossal subject.'⁶ A large number of reviews centred on whether or not the work 'impressed'; a report on a studio visit in the *Artist*, for instance, found the picture to be 'the most important [Dicksee] has yet painted [...] solemn and impressive'; in direct contradiction, the *Month*

⁶ 'The Royal Academy (First Article)', *The Times*, 29 April 1893, pp. 13–15 (p. 13); Arthur Tomson, 'The Royal Academy (First Letter)', *Studio*, 2 (1893), 77–78 (p. 78).

dourly stated: ‘it fails to *impress*.’⁷ Critics typically acknowledged Dicksee’s strengths yet qualified their praise, as here in the *Academy*:

Mr. Dicksee brings to the execution of his task good draughtsmanship, carefully balanced composition, the capacity for strenuous effort [...]. He *impresses* us with the sense that he has done his very best according to his means; of his fitness to grapple with heroic as distinguished from romantic and sentimental art he, nevertheless, fails to convince.⁸

Such disagreement is worth probing, as critical ambivalence typically indicates that an artwork has catalysed profound social and cultural anxieties.

Victorian Vikings

Dicksee’s technique may not have been universally pleasing, but the Viking subject matter guaranteed attention. As Andrew Wawn memorably remarks, ‘the Victorians invented Vikings’, with the word itself appearing for the first time in the early nineteenth century.⁹ Norse-themed novels, poems, saga translations, illustrations, histories, folklore, and archaeological studies followed thickly on one another from the 1840s in Britain, with H. Rider Haggard’s *Eric Brighteyes* (1891) and American writer and explorer Paul Du Chaillu’s *Ivar the Viking* (1893) being only two of the many examples contemporary with Dicksee’s painting. During the Royal Academy exhibition, a replica of a buried Viking ship discovered in Gokstad, Norway in 1880 sailed from Scandinavia to Chicago for display at the 1893 Columbian Exposition (*Fig. 7*). Dicksee may have enjoyed the topicality of the fact that the excavators at Gokstad had uncovered a skeleton and grave goods in the excavated structure, indications of the alternative Norse custom of burying rather than burning a warrior’s ship.¹⁰

Dicksee’s Vikings may at first seem profoundly other, with their half-animal costumes and their seemingly violent method of ceremonial body disposal. The man wearing a wolfskin and a horned helmet, which had

⁷ ‘Studio and Personal Notes’, *Artist*, 1 April 1893, pp. 115–18 (p. 117); Charles Goldie, ‘English Art in 1893’, *Month*, June 1893, pp. 182–93 (p. 187), emphasis added.

⁸ ‘The Royal Academy’, *Academy*, 6 May 1893, pp. 398–400 (p. 399), emphasis added.

⁹ Andrew Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁰ ‘The Viking Ship for the Columbian Exposition’, *Scientific American*, 24 June 1893, p. 393; numerous publications included the discovery of the skeleton, such as ‘Viking Ship’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne*, 3 (1887), 172–73.



Fig. 7: *The Norwegian* or *The Viking*, replica of Gokstad ship, Columbian Exposition, 1893, in *Glimpses of the World's Fair: A Selection of Gems of the White City Seen through a Camera* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1893).

only recently been invented as Viking headgear by the designer of the 1876 Bayreuth Wagner festival, suggests that these figures fully embrace the animal world (*Fig. 8*).¹¹ Dicksee's work also evoked the savage, romantic qualities of the literature of the Viking era, which Icelandic-enthusiast William Morris praised for its 'depth and intensity' while translating the *Völsunga Saga*.¹² Yet the Viking subject of Dicksee's painting would have generated a simultaneous identification and disidentification in British viewers. A few years before the publication of his novel, Paul Du Chaillu agitated Britain with *The Viking Age* (1889), which propounded a Norse

¹¹ Carl Emil Döppler, a German painter and illustrator, designed costumes for Richard Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuther Festspiele in 1876. See *Wagner in Rehearsal 1875–1876: The Diaries of Richard Fricke*, ed. by James Andrew Deaville with Evan Baker, trans. by George R. Fricke, Franz Liszt Studies Series, 7 (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1998), p. 12.

¹² Charles Eliot Norton, letter to William Morris, 21 December 1869, cited in Ingrid Hanson, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856–1890* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), p. xix.



Fig. 8: Frank Dicksee, The Funeral of a Viking, 1893 (detail). Manchester Art Gallery.

ancestry for contemporary Britons.¹³ Among those who entertained the idea was William Gladstone, whose letter Du Chaillu quoted in the introduction to *Ivar the Viking*: ‘when I have been [...] among Scandinavians, I have felt something like a cry of nature from within, asserting [...] my nearness to them.’¹⁴ In her 1879 novel, *The Viking*, Margaret Richmond Cartmell pinpointed her contemporaries’ conflicted attitudes to these peoples:

With all their cruelty, and barbarity, there is a charm about them that attracts us; their wild courage and wilder generosity rivet our attention, and we listen more willingly to [...] [their] legends than to tame chronicles of prosperous, industrious citizens.¹⁵

The currency of this discussion is evident in one art critic’s acknowledgement that Dicksee’s picture ‘will probably awaken the old controversy regarding our Viking origin’.¹⁶

As a seafaring empire itself, Victorian Britain found much to admire in the history of the Norsemen who had from the eighth century repeatedly invaded the British Isles and who united Denmark, Norway, and England in the eleventh century. Dedicated full time to a life of battle, the Viking soldier was notably fiercer and better prepared than his English equivalent. A Victorian historian described the military superiority of the Norse invader of the British isle: ‘as a professional warrior he had provided himself with an equipment which only the chiefs among the English could rival.’¹⁷ Distinguishing the Vikings from feudal peoples, Cartmell followed a common belief in describing her characters in *The Viking* as ‘free-born, proud, unyielding men’.¹⁸ Like the British, then, the Vikings were presumed to have cherished individual liberty.

Images of Vikings helped address a need for unambiguous gender roles and powerfully physical masculinity of the sort also explored in the related revival of medieval, chivalric, or Arthurian subjects. In Dicksee’s work, the bare chests and gleaming helmets draw equivalencies between metal and flesh, and, with the elaborate plate armour, provide a reminder

¹³ Paul Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: The Early History, Manners, and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-Speaking Nations*, 2 vols (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889).

¹⁴ Paul Du Chaillu, *Ivar the Viking: A Romantic History Based upon Authentic Facts of the Third and Fourth Centuries* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), p. xx.

¹⁵ Margaret Richmond Cartmell, *The Viking* (London: Tinsley, 1879), p. 2.

¹⁶ ‘The Royal Academy’, *Speaker*, 29 April 1893, pp. 482–84 (p. 483).

¹⁷ Charles Oman, *Art of War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1885), p. 21.

¹⁸ Cartmell, p. 4. In the introduction to *Ivar the Viking*, Du Chaillu cites Gladstone who observed that ‘the love of freedom in combination with settled order, which we hope is characteristic of this country, is markedly characteristic of Norway and of Denmark’ (p. xx).

of what real warriors had looked like; at this time armour was worn only ceremonially rather than in battle.¹⁹ As Caroline Arscott, following Klaus Theweleit, has observed, armoured knights announced a phallic hyper-masculinity, their hard-sheathed figures impervious to psychic or physical harm.²⁰ The rise of the androgynous, soft male body in art at the end of the century, in paintings by Burne-Jones and others, ran parallel to the newly emphasized armoured and muscular male body.²¹ Such a figure countered anxieties about the seeming degeneration of British masculinity at a time of high demand for soldiers to protect and extend the British Empire.²² Recent imperial wars in Afghanistan and Africa had expanded British territories, requiring yet more resources for defence and administration. Alongside adventure fiction, art in the 1880s developed a new form of the muscular imperial masculine ideal.²³ Remarking that Dicksee's picture appeared at the Festival of Empire Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1911, Joseph Kestner read its explicit imperial appeal and dark ideological undertones as a foreshadowing of Dicksee's later explicit fascist and racist views of the 1920s, when the artist, in his role as president of the Royal Academy, railed that 'the old standards of beauty are abandoned and a new order founded on negroid or other barbaric types usurps their place'.²⁴

Debates regarding their descent from Vikings therefore allowed Britons a range of identificatory possibilities while maintaining a fluid boundary between themselves and the world of the sagas or of Dicksee's picture, imaginatively enjoying the heroic deeds, courage, stoicism, and codes of honour there portrayed, while condemning the culture's blood thirst and violence. The extremes of the contrast also reassuringly reinforced the image of the civilized modern Victorian, allowing for a disavowal of the actual violence of the current imperial regime.

¹⁹ Nick Evangelista, *The Encyclopedia of the Sword* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 26.

²⁰ Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 59–67. For more on meanings of armour, see Arscott, pp. 52–103; Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. by Chris Turner, Carter Erica, and Stephen Conway, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

²¹ Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 173.

²² For more on this anxiety, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Michael Brown, 'Cold Steel, Weak Flesh: Mechanism, Masculinity and the Anxieties of Late Victorian Empire', *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (2017), 155–81.

²³ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 174.

²⁴ Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), pp. 12–16. Dicksee made his remarks in *Discourse, Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy* (London: Royal Academy, 1927), p. 14.

Christianity and the problem of the human body

Although the Viking theme of Dicksee's work raised some contentious issues, the specific moment he depicted would have contributed more fundamentally to the critical dismay. As an image of a funeral, the painting was in company with past Royal Academy works such as Frank Bramley's 1891 *For of Such Is the Kingdom of Heaven* (also owned by McCulloch) (Fig. 9). Bramley's work, however, reassuringly drew on Christian certainties in the title (Matthew 19. 14) and in the presence of the hymnals, guiding viewers' sentimental response through the use of the mourning colour of white, betokening the innocence of the dead child who will surely find a place in the kingdom of the title. Also, illustrated journals often portrayed the interment of statesmen, such as that of Lord Napier in St Paul's Cathedral (Fig. 10). As in *The Funeral of a Viking*, this *Graphic* engraving of 1890 portrays a group of men demonstrating appropriately stoic and respectful responses to the loss of a leader. Such images rarely included dead bodies, however, an absence here underscored by the black hole in the stone floor. Unlike these scenes of contemporary life, Dicksee's *Funeral* vividly represented a destruction of a corpse by fire, reminding viewers of the anxious moral and spiritual debates concerning this issue.



Fig. 9: Frank Bramley, *For of Such Is the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1891, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery. Wikimedia Commons.

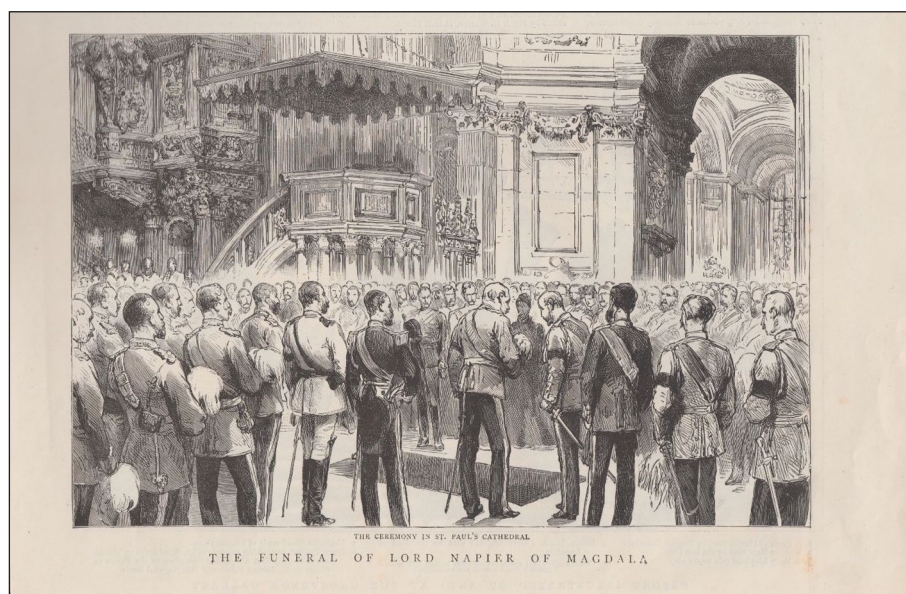


Fig. 10: 'The Funeral of Lord Napier of Magdala: The Ceremony in St. Paul's Cathedral', *Graphic*, 25 January 1890, p. 99.

Fire was, for Victorians, deeply identified with paganism. Folklore, archaeological scholarship, and literature were increasingly preoccupied with unearthing and exploring fire worship in the deep British past.²⁵ Without a trace of humour, historians stated that England was particularly suited to transferring a veneration of the sun to fire, since the gloomy weather made the orb itself so rarely available for homage.²⁶ Alongside the investigation into the Viking origins of British culture, a similar enquiry arose regarding the ancient Druid inhabitants of the islands, about whom little was known, a fact that did not prevent — and more likely promoted — scholarly creativity.²⁷ Believing that Druids, as well as Vikings, practised the religion of fire-worship, scholars located Stonehenge as a key site of Druidical solar ritual, a fact that Thomas Hardy elegantly condensed in the

²⁵ Du Chaillu discusses sun worship in *The Viking Age*, 1, chapter 20; see also, James Napier, *Folk Lore; or, Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland Within this Century: With an Appendix Shewing the Probable Relation of the Modern Festivals [...] to Ancient Sun and Fire Worship* (Paisley: Gardner, 1879).

²⁶ Jonathan Williams, *Druopaedia* (Leominster: Went, 1823), p. 17, quoted in 'History of Ancient Druids', *Druids' Magazine, A Compendium of Druidical Proceedings*, 3 (1832), p. 96.

²⁷ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

1891 description of the ‘great flame-shaped Sun-stone’ near which Tess of the D’Urbervilles sacrifices herself.²⁸

The presence of a funeral pyre, then, was a marker of the alien heathen. One potential reading of *The Funeral of a Viking* was that it symbolized the closing of a historical chapter, the new dispensation superseding the old order, through the motif of the death of a chieftain. In Victorian literature, a reluctance to deploy fire characterizes those who have turned to Christian beliefs; as the converted hero of J. Storer Clouston’s 1897 *Vandrad the Viking* asserts, ‘I will have no more burnings.’²⁹ This pattern is part of a larger ideologically inflected binary in which Christianity was identified with peace and paganism with violence. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and many others would have it, the rise of Christianity created a progression in human development from ferocity to empathy. ‘The law of force is dead! | The law of love prevails!’ Longfellow announces at the conclusion of his 1847 ballad, ‘Tegnér’s Drapa’, when the dead Norse god Balder, ‘the god of the summer sun’, is launched to sea in a burning ship, marking the end of the pagan era:

Thor, the thunderer,
Shall rule the earth no more,
No more, with threats,
Challenge the meek Christ!³⁰

In Viking tales, a hermit-priest, such as ‘Christian’ in Robert Ballantyne’s *Erling the Bold* (1869), often remonstrates with the protagonists, teaching that Christianity promotes harmonious society rather than revenge: ‘My god is not a god of war’, the hermit chides.³¹ On the right of Dicksee’s picture, far from the firing, the bard-like cloaked man (*Fig. 8*) could potentially be read as such a figure. Older, fully clothed, lost in meditation, he resembles the ‘aged man with a snowy beard, wrapt in a mantle of frieze, with bare sandaled feet, leaning upon staff, gazing out to sea with a strange, far-away look’ of Cartmell’s Priest John in *The Viking* (p. 10).

However, interpreting Dicksee’s painting of a burning body as a nostalgic image of a dead-and-gone culture does not take into account the fact that the recent cremation debates, as well as the rise of neopaganism and interest in alternative forms of religious expression, would have made

²⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, ed. by Tim Dolin (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 395.

²⁹ J. Storer Clouston, *Vandrad the Viking; or, The Feud and the Spell* (London: Nelson, 1897; repr. Floating Press, 2015), p. 57.

³⁰ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1900), p. 134.

³¹ R. M. Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Sea-Kings* (London: Nisbet, 1869), p. 19; Clouston, p. 38; Cartmell, p. 11.

aspects of this subject familiar rather than foreign, placing it in vexed relation to, rather than as the polar opposite of, Christian beliefs. Like the hermit figure in the Viking novels or possibly in Dicksee's painting, pagan and Christian practices intermingled, and fire funerals would have served as a reminder of the many newly flourishing alternatives to Christianity — and hybrid religious practices — in late-Victorian Britain. Various forms of neo-Druidism, for instance, arose from the late eighteenth century, peaking around a hundred years later in such manifestations as the Ancient Order of Druids which encouraged businessmen clad in robes and false beards to pose cheerfully around the fire-urns used in initiation ceremonies (*Fig. 11*).

Challenged in these ways, many Christians did still insist on an intractable barrier between their world and the pagan past. Late nineteenth-century rhetoric defining Christianity in contrast to paganism often couched the difference in terms of the inevitable replacement of a religion of materialist literalism with one based on intangibles and spirituality. Observing burial practices in ancient Scotland, for example, one archaeologist in 1881 perceived a clear watershed after the widespread adoption of Christianity, noting that the practices of cremation and the



Fig. 11: 'Under the Oak at Warwick' (detail), *Druid*, March 1907, p. 12.

inclusion of grave goods disappeared.³² No longer was it necessary for a person to be buried with needful items for the next world, because heaven was not understood as a mere continuation of mortal existence. Christians operated on the ‘conception that the soul after death might become a greater spirit power [...] [and] that it could exist without a physical body’.³³

However, the notion that Christianity refused the material in favour of a spiritual world was based on fragile grounds. Christian belief was not quite so immaterial as it purported, invested as it also was in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which came to dominate mainstream Anglicanism: faith in this principle actually demanded a degree of preoccupation with the maintenance of the stolidly material corpse.³⁴ A staunch argument against cremation, in fact, was that burning a body would hinder an individual’s resurrection.³⁵ The complex history of resurrection theology in the nineteenth century suggests that its mundane materiality was troubling to many Christians who believed their religion rose above objecthood; cremation debates inescapably raised these questions.³⁶

Dicksee himself was apparently interested in such issues by virtue of the fact that in 1889 he had explored the idea of the resurrection of a sacrificed leader in *The Passing of Arthur* (Fig. 12), an image that operates as a striking complement to *The Funeral of a Viking*. Borrowing Alfred Lord Tennyson’s title for the concluding *Idyll* (1869), Dicksee portrayed the armour-clad but wounded King Arthur on a barge just setting out for the Isle of Avalon, where, according to legend, he will be healed and sent into a magical slumber until such time as Britain has need of him. Unlike that of the Viking, Arthur’s body is not, therefore, destroyed, but remains intact in readiness for resurrection as per Christian tradition. The overt Christian references emphasized in Tennyson’s version of the Arthurian narrative put Dicksee’s picture in deliberate dialogue with the pagan Viking *Funeral*, reminding us that the Victorians mined a complex medieval past to explore contemporary issues.

³² Joseph Anderson, ‘Scotland in Pagan Times’, *Architect*, 22 October 1881, pp. 271–72 (p. 271).

³³ W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland: A Folklore Sketch*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1902), II, 302.

³⁴ Colin Buchanan, *Historical Dictionary of Anglicanism* (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2015), p. 202.

³⁵ Pat Jalland, ‘Victorian Death and its Decline: 1850–1018’, in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, ed. by Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 230–55 (p. 250).

³⁶ Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).



Fig. 12: Frank Dicksee, *The Passing of Arthur*, 1889, engraving, unlocated, in E. Rimbault Dibdin, *Frank Dicksee* (London: Virtue, 1905), p. 12.

Dicksee's chief, sailing to Valhalla with his dragon-ship, armour, sword, and shield, might have seemed incapable of an imaginative spiritual leap and consequently mired in a pagan investment in the physical world. The picture thematizes the tension between materialist boundedness and dematerialized matter through the figure of the Viking, which promises a future spiritual existence despite his current solid state. Yet fire dismantles bodies, as suggested by the way in which the burly man in the foreground is eaten away and dissolved by the torch, and burning corpses set in play numerous satisfactions and anxieties.

During the 1870s, the decade in which the cremation movement gained momentum, many intellectuals, physicians, and social reformers mustered a wide range of arguments for the practice, revealing insight into contemporary attitudes to what happened — or should happen — to the body after death. Elsewhere, I have explored the ways in which cremation's resolution of a corpse into its component molecules signalled the new acknowledgement of the body as part of the world, a discourse that resonates with both the nineteenth-century definitions of aestheticism and our contemporary understanding of affect.³⁷ Indeed, cremation as a practice acutely focused attention on the body itself, the debate forcing an at times gruesomely detailed visualization of the state of the cadaver when buried versus when burned: with its claims for a metamorphosis

³⁷ Nancy Rose Marshall, "A Fully Consummated Sacrifice upon Her Altar": Victorian Cremation as Metamorphosis', *Victorian Studies*, 56 (2014), 458–69.

or transformation of matter, cremation discourse entailed an insistent recognition of the corporeal nature of the human form. Dicksee's painting, in fact, might have helped viewers imagine what occurred in crematoria, a scenario approached but avoided by most writers, who relied instead on reassuringly bland illustrations of the furnace apparatus in use or comforting memorial gardens (*Figs. 13, 14*). A notable exception was George Bernard Shaw, who wrote of the 1913 cremation of his mother:

I went behind the scenes at the end of the service and saw the real thing. People are afraid to see it; but it is wonderful. [...] Then the violet coffin moved again and went in feet first. And behold! The feet burst miraculously into streaming

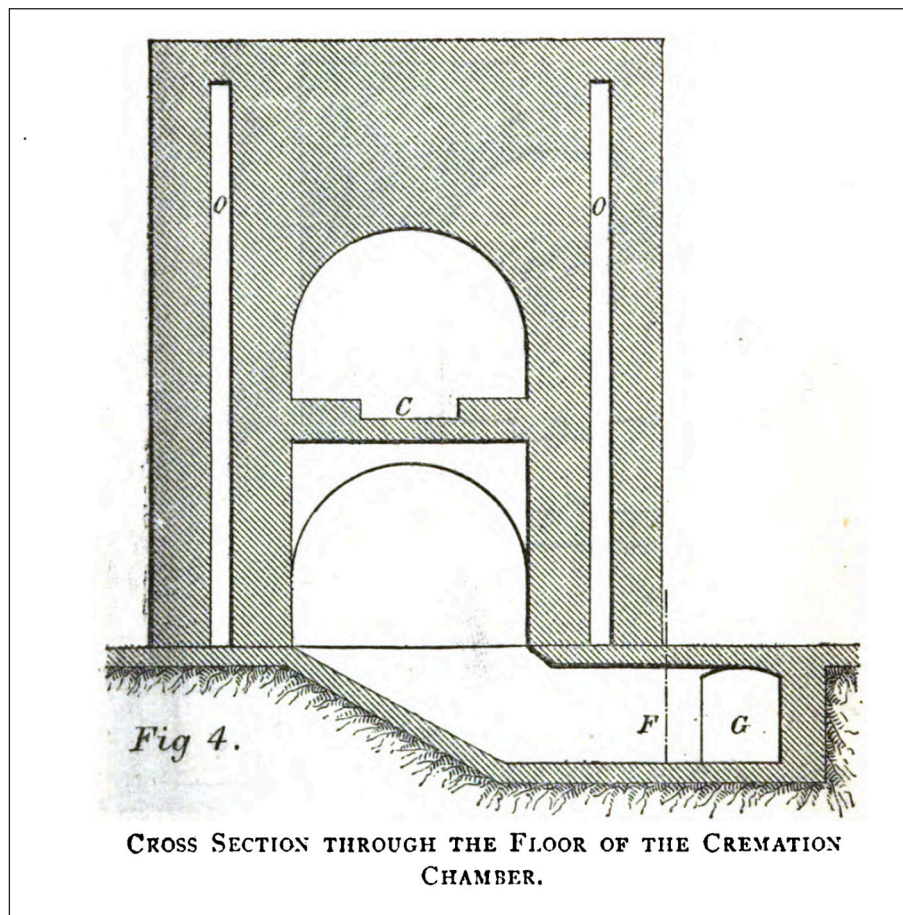


Fig. 13: 'Cross Section through the Floor of the Cremation Chamber', in Sir H. Thompson, *Modern Cremation: Its History and Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891), p. 34.

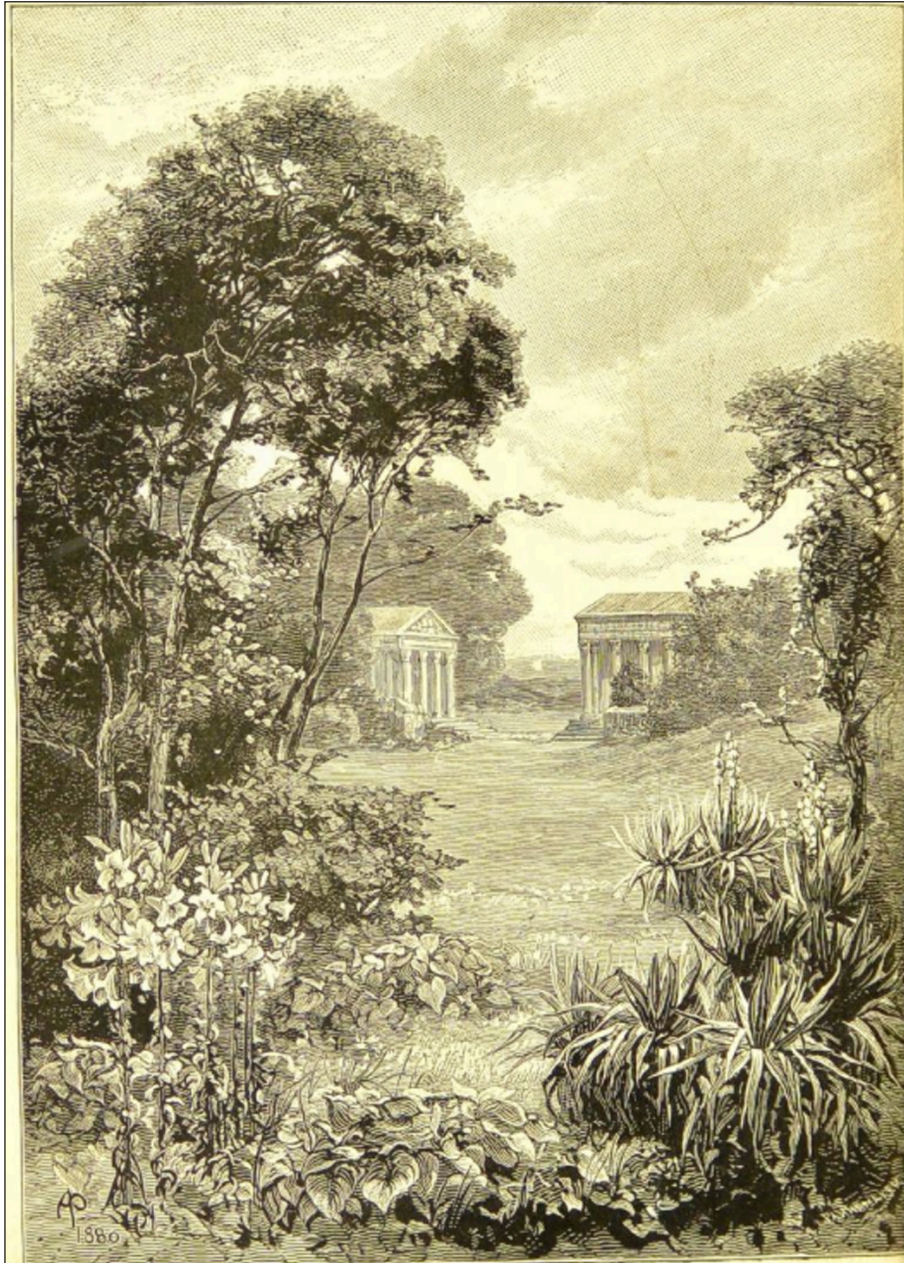


Fig. 14: 'Cemetery of the Future', in W. Robinson, *Cremation and Urn-Burial; or, The Cemeteries of the Future* (London: Cassell, 1889), frontispiece.

ribbons of garnet coloured lovely flame, smokeless and eager,
like pentecostal tongues, and as the whole coffin passed in,
it sprang into flame all over; and my mother became that
beautiful fire.³⁸

Dicksee's chieftain is likewise 'becoming the beautiful fire', transforming through the operations of the joyful, purifying element that freed the soul from the body into the cloud of smoke and ethereal elements at the left of the picture. Such a focus on what happened to the corpse during cremation raised questions for many, if not for the atheist Shaw, about the presence or absence of the spirit. Due to the successful arguments of those in favour of cremation, by the late nineteenth century more religious authorities accepted the fact that, like that of the Viking chief sailing to Valhalla, a body could both be dissolved by fire *and* enjoy future life.

Yet acceptance of the practice of cremation was an eccentric and bumpy process, bound up in new spiritual practices as well as in sometimes agnostic or even atheist scientific concerns. Uniquely channelling cultural conflicts and fears about cremation as a heathen practice endangering Christian ways, the Welsh neo-Druid William Price paved the way for the rise of the practice and industry of cremation in Britain in 1884. Imagining that his son, whom he named Jesus Christ, would become the principal leader of a new era under Druidic order, the 84-year-old medical doctor carried out his own invented traditions upon the infant's death by burning the body on a hill near Llantrisant in an act that attracted many distressed neighbours (*Fig. 15*). Following a strand of scholarship intent on finding relationships between ancient Britain and eastern religions and cultures, Price was imitating the Indian Hindu practice of cremation familiar to many Britons through colonial interactions.³⁹ Prevented from concluding his rite, Price sued and won his case, returning to complete the cremation on 14 March of that year; due to his efforts, from 1885 cremation was increasingly accepted (Powell, p. 250).

A rumour spread among Price's village that he was performing the Druid ritual of human sacrifice to the flames, a practice visualized most famously in the proliferating versions of the 'Wicker Man' engraving (*Fig. 16*). Indeed, Victorian Druid narratives are rife with such sacrificial scenes, often perpetrated on Christians.⁴⁰ Vikings, too, were believed to

³⁸ George Bernard Shaw, letter to Stella Campbell, 22 February 1913, in *Collected Letters 1856–1950*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence, 4 vols (New York: Viking, 1985), III: 1911–1925, 152.

³⁹ Dean Powell, *Dr William Price: Wales's First Radical* (Stroud: Amberley, 2012), p. 247.

⁴⁰ 'Sacrifice of the Druids: A Dramatic Sketch', *Druids' Magazine, a Compendium of Druidical Proceedings*, 3 (1832), 39–41; Middlewood Kirkbride, *The Arch-Druid; or, The Conquest of the Brigantes: A Lay of Ancient Britain* (Manchester: Emmott, 1885).

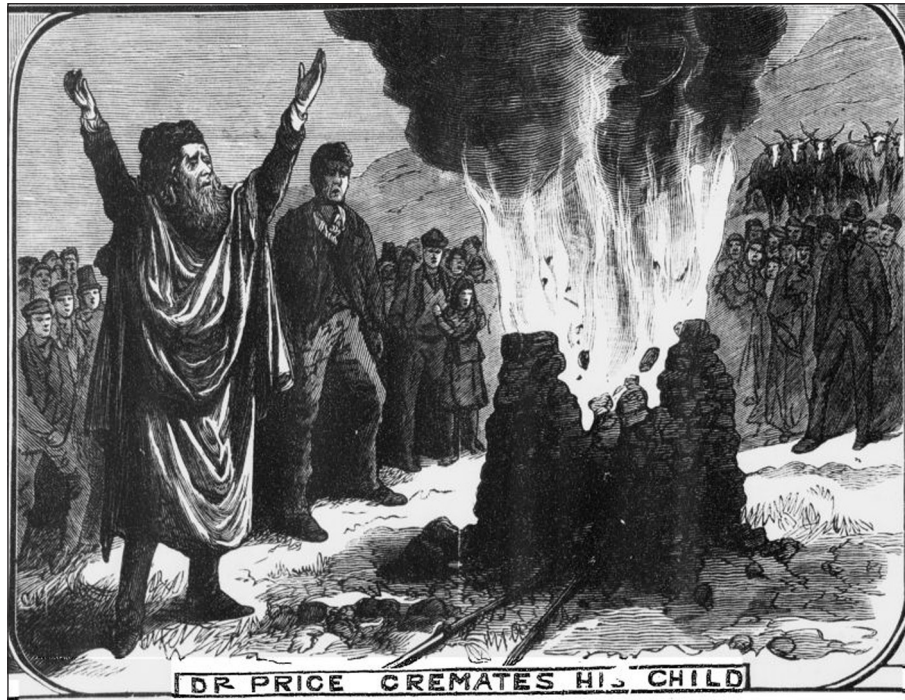


Fig. 15: 'Dr Price Cremates his Child', *Illustrated Police News*, 5 April 1884, p. 1.

have engaged in the practice.⁴¹ Polish artist Henryk Siemiradzki's 1883 painting, *Funeral of a Ruthenian Noble*, which found its way into a history text of 1889, portrays a Viking chieftain's body being torched along with that of a living young woman (Fig. 17).⁴² It was a generally held view that only Christians had evolved beyond such practices, and that 'all heathen religions reek with blood thus shed'.⁴³ Oft reiterated was also the notion that sacrifice, found in all religions throughout time, came to an end with Christianity because Christ's martyrdom obviated all future need for such an act.⁴⁴

Given the link between pagan fire, bodies, and human sacrifice, as well as the fact that some Viking tales included kings who were not

⁴¹ James William Buel, *The Story of Man: A History of the Human Race* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing, 1889), p. 95.

⁴² Vikings burn animal offerings in Ballantyne, p. 303, and H. Rider Haggard, *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* (London: Longmans, 1891), p. 39.

⁴³ Charles Merivale, *The Contrast Between Pagan and Christian Society* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1872), p. 31.

⁴⁴ J. A. Wylie, *History of the Scottish Nation*, 3 vols (London: Hamilton, Adams; Edinburgh: Elliot, 1886–90), 1: *Pre-Historic, Druidic, Roman, and Early Christian Scotland* (1886), p. 130; Merivale, p. 7.



Fig. 16: Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Wales*, 1781, in Nathaniel Spencer, *The Complete English Traveller* (London: Cooke 1782; repr. 1854). Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 17: Henryk Siemiradzki, *Funeral of a Ruthenian Noble*, 1883, oil on canvas, State Historical Museum in Moscow. Wikimedia Commons.

quite dead when they set out on their burning boats, it is possible to see Dicksee's warrior as potentially still animate, in the process of dying so that his people can live.⁴⁵ The spectre of sacrifice lurked in pagan pyres, and writers leapt with surprising frequency from this topic to a discussion of flesh eating. Commented one, 'the age of human sacrifice will never be found very far removed from the age of cannibalism, for the primitive sacrifice was essentially a feast.'⁴⁶ Vikings were of course associated with this custom, as a character in *Erling the Bold* reports that a marauding band will 'lay waste [...] with fire and sword, and burn us all alive, and perhaps eat us, too' (p. 329). The Viking corpse thus echoed images of barbaric native customs depicted in centuries of European image-making, such as Stradardus's depiction of Amerigo Vespucci and America, in which a human leg is being served up as a rotisserie delicacy (Fig. 18). One objection to cremation was couched in precisely these terms, based on the fear that

⁴⁵ As in Haki in Du Chaillu's *Ivar the Viking*, who is launched on a burning ship while still alive (p. 142), or Ballantyne's *Erling the Bold*: 'Guttorm was still seated by the helm, his face pale as death, but with a placid smile on his mouth, and a strange, almost unearthly, fire in his eyes' (p. 392).

⁴⁶ Karl Pearson, *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*, 2 vols (London: Arnold, 1897), II, 62.



Fig. 18: Jan Ven der Straet, called Stradarus, *Discovery of America: Vespucci Landing in America*, c. 1587–89, pen and brown ink drawing. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York CCo 1.0.

loved ones would be roasted like meat, and the smell and toxicity of the burning body occasioned much anxious commentary.⁴⁷

In the ways in which *The Funeral of a Viking* raised the idea of human sacrifice and the concerns it may have provoked regarding the body's potential for resurrection and the edibility of human flesh, the picture resonated with Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are consumed as the sacrificed body and blood of Christ. Catholics and Protestants were divided on the doctrine of transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and wine became the actual body of Christ at the moment of consumption. In the anti-Catholic vitriol of the period, Catholics, like pagans, were therefore accused of eating their dead, and the fearsome implications of the Eucharist became a spectre to terrify those tempted by Romanism. In 1873 *Bible Christian Magazine* agitated readers with the hint:

Christ could not have intended to make *cannibals* of His people but such they are in fact, if the Ritualistic and Romish dogma be true, that the bread and wine when consecrated become 'the real body and blood, soul and Divinity of Christ'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ 'What Shall We Do with Our Dead?', *Urn*, May 1894, p. 8.

⁴⁸ 'Mr. Thomas Tegaskis', *Bible Christian Magazine for the Year 1873*, pp. 73–84 (p. 76).

Warning against ‘the insidious march of Popery in our loved and free country’, a writer in 1894 wandered from the ‘gross superstitions of religious priestcraft’ to ‘poor wretches starving at sea’ who partook of cannibalism, to British explorer Henry Morton Stanley’s doubts about drinking a human being’s blood in a brotherhood ceremony in Africa.⁴⁹ This telling train of thought combines several predictable associations, including African anthropophagi and Western sailors reduced to eating each other, but it does so in the context of a description of Catholic belief. The mere mention of any form of Christianity as cannibalistic, of course, set in play doubts about the entire religion.

Dicksee and the state of late nineteenth-century painting

Returning to Dicksee’s canvas, *how* the work was painted is as crucial to the way it produced meaning as its subject matter. Pertinent here is the way that the vulnerable male body operates as a means of referencing the state of picture-making at the time. The body resonates with the idea of humanity reduced to meat, threatening male boundedness by its potential disintegration. As an image of a concrete male form about to dissolve into air, fire, and water, Dicksee’s picture elegantly signed the state of the disintegrating academic tradition based on the linear bounded outline, visually registering tensions between form and formlessness pertinent to the art of the period. Indeed, in its capacity to reduce solids to their component elements, fire underscores ideas of formlessness, and, notably, the passages of painted fire in the work are the most abstract. The solid body encased in metal will eventually dissipate as vapour and smoke, just as highly detailed representational painting will give way to the ambiguous, the uncertain, the painterly, reminding us that Dicksee’s picture is grappling with the aftermath of Impressionism and freer paint-handling styles.

Academics at this point were forced to recognize the significance of new ideas concerning the roles and goals of art. The formation of the New English Art Club in 1886 had furthered the dismantling of the authority of the Royal Academy already begun by the rise of the Grosvenor Gallery and other alternative venues in the 1870s, and the emergence of Aestheticism and Impressionism fomented irrevocable change in the definition of art itself. A glance at George McCulloch’s collection reminds us of the extraordinary diversity of the art of this period, as Dicksee’s picture resided comfortably alongside more avant-garde works such as the 1872 *Self-Portrait* by James McNeill Whistler or Jules Bastien-Lepage’s *Potato Gatherers* of 1878 (Figs. 19, 20), as well as near other academic works such as Frederic

⁴⁹ A Ritualist, *The Half-Way House; or, The Sign of the New Jesuitical Hostelry* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1894), pp. vi, 37.



Fig. 19: 'Interior at 184, Queen's Gate', in *Royal Academy Winter Exhibition Illustrated Catalogue* (London: Virtue, 1909), <http://123-mcc.com/other_history_art_journal.htm-Another_view_of_184_Queens_Gate> [accessed 1 October 2017].

Leighton's *Garden of the Hesperides* (1892) or Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Sculpture Gallery* (1874).

The old guard of the Academy resisted looser brushwork and experiments in optical effects by decrying the apparent haste and lack of



Fig. 20: Jules Bastien-Lepage, *October: Potato Gatherers*, 1879, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest 1928.

technique of this movement, advocating the acquisition of ability over sustained and serious study. As Academician William Powell Frith famously demanded in his excoriation of these artists who he saw as being ‘in a state of disease’: ‘let them keep Nature before their eyes for hours, days, and weeks, and then perhaps their impressions will be more what they ought to be.’⁵⁰ Others, such as artist and critic E. M. Rashdall, defended these innovations as ‘an honest endeavour to solve new problems, to conquer new fields for the kingdom of art’; a picture, Rashdall maintained, should be ‘something more than an “illustration”’: ‘the outcome of the individuality of the artist’.⁵¹ In the new art, the emphasis was on subjectivity, the celebration of a unique perspective or an individual reality. In the words of aesthete

⁵⁰ W. P. Frith, ‘Crazes in Art: “Pre Raphaelitism” and “Impressionism”’, *Magazine of Art*, 11 (1888), 187–91 (p. 191).

⁵¹ E. M. Rashdall, ‘Mr. Frith, R. A., Speaks’, *Artist*, 1 May 1888, pp. 131–32 (p. 132).

Arthur Symons, discussing the literature of the period, Impressionism represented ‘the very essence of truth — the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it’.⁵²

In the later nineteenth century, then, colour and visible paint came to denote novelty and individual expression, while linearity and detail signalled tired tradition; this new artistic imperative condensed aesthetic and physical responses to suggest that beauty was processed by a responsive body that in turn allowed for a transcendence of the particularities of narrative, history, or the material world. And in order to denote that present body with its responsive sensorium, Impressionism deployed painterly marks that dismantled bounded, legible structures. As Victorian art historian G. Baldwin Brown suggested, Impressionism appeared as ‘a reaction against [...] the “Academic” school of painting [which was] [...] pre-eminently a school of form [and] subordinate[d] a detailed treatment of form to general effect and beauty of tone and colour’.⁵³ Through combining lessons from the separate camps of form and of colour, and of painterly and realist styles, Dicksee balanced concepts of matter and form, form and formlessness, thereby marking the passing of not only an artistic and social investment in the solid but also of all certainties concerning correct representation.

Dicksee’s choice of a burning body as the subject with which to investigate ambiguities of style and content would have been deeply meaningful even down to the formal and material level of facture itself. In representation, fire is a powerful tool for conveying notions of indeterminacy and liminality. To paint the element is necessarily to reckon with the problem of consolidating an intangible, mutable, formless thing into form and pigment. An artist depicting fire, then, inevitably grapples with the incomplete, the inadequate, the in-between while nevertheless laying triumphant claim to cohering the inchoate and making it visible and legible.

Yet Dicksee was singled out for his reactionary qualities. In the year *The Funeral* was exhibited, the Pre-Raphaelite Burne-Jones resigned his Royal Academy membership, which critics saw as an indication that official art had reached its lowest ebb.⁵⁴ *The Nation* decried ‘the failure of the Academy to represent contemporary art’, continuing, ‘you may see on the line the puerile fancies of [...] the pretentious vulgarities of candidates for academical honors [...]. But for the work of the more brilliant younger Englishmen you must go to the New English Art Club.’⁵⁵ Another critic

⁵² Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1893, pp. 858–67 (p. 859).

⁵³ G. Baldwin Brown, ‘What is Impressionism’, *Artist*, 1 February 1892, p. 61.

⁵⁴ ‘Our Academicians and Their Associates’, *New Review*, June 1893, pp. 665–74 (p. 665).

⁵⁵ N. N., ‘The Royal Academy’, *Nation*, 25 May 1893, pp. 382–83 (p. 383).



Fig. 21: Anne-Louis Girodet Roussy-Trioson, copy (1786) after Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, oil on canvas, Toledo Art Museum, Ohio. Wikimedia Commons.

more explicitly included Dicksee as among the offenders: ‘The Hanging Committee seems to develop, especially when Mr. Dicksee is on it, fresh hatred of all that is new or distinguished.’⁵⁶

Following his election as a full Royal Academician in 1891, Dicksee’s project was in part to assert both his own and his institution’s relevance. As with the cremation debate, the body, particularly, in this case, the male body, matters here. Art historian Siddhartha Shah commented that *The Funeral* nods towards Jacques-Louis David’s neoclassical *Oath of the Horatii* of 1784 in the upraised swords and spread-legged stance of the men pledging their loyalty and paying tribute to their leader (Fig. 21).⁵⁷ A subject made potent through its depiction of male loyalty and bonding, underpinned by Viking tales of fealty unto death and sworn blood-brotherhood, may well have suited Dicksee’s feeling of relationship with the men of the Academy. Dicksee visibly insists on his own academic training through the strutting stiffness of masculinity in its excessive form — as art historian K. Dian

⁵⁶ ‘Our Academicians and Their Associates’, p. 665.

⁵⁷ Siddhartha Shah, comments on Nancy Rose Marshall’s Facebook page, 29 December 2015. Joseph Kestner arrived at this conclusion (p. 13).



Fig. 22: Belvedere Torso, 1st century BCE, marble, Vatican, Rome. Yair Haklai, Wikimedia Commons. CC-BY-SA 3.0.

Kriz has suggested, he went ‘all Belvedere Torso-y’ with his plethora of muscular male backs (*Fig. 22*).⁵⁸ Contemporary reviewers also commented on the pumped-up aspect of the picture, describing it as ‘far more virile

⁵⁸ K. Dian Kriz, comments on Nancy Rose Marshall’s Facebook page, 29 December 2015.

and solid than any painting Mr. Dicksee has painted for some years'.⁵⁹ In contrast to the bright softness and feminine excess of *Startled*, in which bathers spring nymph-like from the water in advance of the Viking-style ship making its way up the river, male hardness and rigidity dominate *The Funeral*. One reviewer notes that all the figures were studied from the nude, further suggesting the significance to the artist of the bodies on which this picture was built.⁶⁰ The nude in question was in fact Angelo Colarossi, better known as the perfect specimen of male anatomy chosen by Dicksee's teacher Frederic Leighton to model for his *Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1877) (Toll, p. 94).

The physical prowess of the artist himself in taming his medium was a part of the story of the picture, and reviewers admitted his 'capacity for strenuous effort'.⁶¹ He commissioned a specially crafted shield as a model from which to paint the Viking's armour and went to great lengths to observe the atmospheric effects from life.⁶² A narrative about his stint at Seaton on the Devon coast emphasizes his 'painting under difficulties indeed!', and the similarity between Dicksee's description of his struggle with the elements and that of his depicted Vikings is likely not coincidental; at first he resorted to a bathing machine and then a plank to try to capture the effects of being in the midst of sea foam but was almost washed away. The boat he secured as a solution also disappointed, as it 'rolled and swayed in the most inconvenient manner'. Notably, this boat was held between struggling male bodies, placing the artist in the position of the dead Viking chief.⁶³

The insistence on form only serves to call attention to formlessness, as Dicksee recognizes his academic fathers while learning also from his brothers. Acknowledging the looser paint handling of many of his contemporaries, the artist's own anxiety of influences here can be seen in the conflation of the well-defined male academic forms with some of the painterly elemental swirl of Joseph Mallord William Turner, whose unique mastery of pigment handling in works such as *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* of 1835–40 impressed Dicksee's generation (*Fig. 23*).⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 'The Royal Academy Exhibition-II', *Magazine of Art*, 16 (1893), 253–58 (p. 258).

⁶⁰ 'Studio and Personal Notes', p. 117.

⁶¹ 'The Royal Academy Exhibition-II', p. 258.

⁶² 'Studio and Personal Notes', p. 117.

⁶³ Mary Angela Dickens, 'A Popular Painter: Mr. Frank Dicksee, R.A.', *Windsor Magazine*, December 1896, pp. 385–91 (p. 390).

⁶⁴ In the picture's yearning towards the Romantic sublime is also a potential acknowledgement of the fragility of the male body and the threat of its fragmentation. Shah has also remarked on what he called a 'boatiness' and love of beautiful male form shared by *The Funeral of a Viking* and Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), a work Dicksee may have seen at the Louvre on trips to Paris. Indeed, the visual rhymes are striking: powerful diagonals, seething waves, tumultuous wind and sails, and communities of dramatically gesturing, partly nude



Fig. 23: J. M. W. Turner, *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck*, c. 1835–40, oil paint on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-stormy-sea-with-blazing-wreck-no4658>>.

Yet, despite his evocative veils of paint, Dicksee's academicism precluded, for many viewers, the element of mystery requisite for Viking narratives. As Haggard asserted, a saga had to 'partake both of truth and of fiction'; *The Funeral of a Viking*, described as 'a fragment of an epic' by one reviewer, likewise required a balance of realism and fantasy.⁶⁵ Du Chaillu subtitled his own *Ivar the Viking* 'A Romantic History Based Upon Authentic Facts of the Third and Fourth Centuries'. To be effective, this sort of historical recreation had to blend plausible tangibility — 'authentic facts' — and a degree of ineffable charm or enigma — 'romantic history'. The *Saturday Review* perceived the artist's attempt to generate a sense of the shadowy or mystical: 'his idea was a great romantic effect; it hung on the glowing lit-up centre of the burning ship and its load [...]. These lights

men. Géricault's image, based on a historical event, portrays the victims and the few remaining survivors of a horrific shipwreck, mutiny, cannibalism, and dehydration; David's confident warrior bodies of the academic tradition are here thrown into disarray and death. Shah, comments on Nancy Rose Marshall's Facebook page, 29 December 2015; Darcy Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 165–235.

⁶⁵ Haggard, p. vii; 'Studio and Personal Notes', p. 117.

are meant to float mysteriously', but felt that Dicksee had been overly explicit in displaying a 'certain research of quality in the darkness, an over-realization of subordinate forms, and a slight want of frankness in the touch'. The critic concluded, 'We see, but insufficiently feel, the mystery of the scene.'⁶⁶ To the extent, then, that narrative pictures were assessed by literary criteria, *The Funeral* lacked the ability to evoke rather than to explicitly delineate. Indeed, Arthur Tomson had stated flatly that the picture 'lacks also imagination' (p. 78).

Reviewers registered that the persistence of academic tradition endowed *The Funeral* with a showiness that detracted from its serious aesthetic claims: 'the very academic inspiration [...] does not altogether escape from the taint of the artificial, or, at least, the stagey.'⁶⁷ *The Athenaeum* saw it as a 'show-piece pure and simple' and 'easy to read', which, in its emphasis on 'clever points of a spectacular kind', laid claim to spectacle over substance.⁶⁸ In so doing, its aesthetic moved from sincere tragedy to sheer histrionics, and indeed, the *Studio* dismissed the picture in just these terms, as, 'trivial in sentiment and in workmanship', adding that 'its drama is pure melodrama, worthy of the Adelphi or the Britannia' (Tomson, p. 78). Other reviews likewise commented on the empty theatricality of the work, with the *New Review* labelling it an 'effectively arranged stage picture' — an anachronism in an era which had decided that, on the contrary, 'the only thing lasting in art ought to be the harmonious arrangement of tone and line.'⁶⁹

The melodrama lay in part in *The Funeral's* visceral appeal to the viewer's senses. The burning brands, boat, and body suggest acrid smells. Reviewers also ascribed sound to the work, calling it a 'stirring war-song' or a 'savagely shout', suggesting the connection to other artistic forms such as poetry and saga.⁷⁰ Fire itself provokes physical reactions, its lurid brilliance causing pupils to contract and its eye-catching qualities signalling possible physical danger. Reliance on dramatic lighting and the powerful visual effects of the complementary colours of orange and blue, echoing the contending elements of fire and water, also positioned the work as artistic trickery, forcing the viewer's body into an instinctual rather than an intellectual or imaginative response; the imagined process by which

⁶⁶ 'The Royal Academy', *Saturday Review*, 6 May 1893, pp. 487–88 (p. 488).

⁶⁷ 'The Royal Academy Exhibition-II', p. 258.

⁶⁸ 'Fine Arts: The Royal Academy: Second Notice', *Athenaeum*, 13 May 1893, pp. 609–12 (p. 611).

⁶⁹ 'Our Academicians and Their Associates', p. 669. For more on the counterpoints of drama and theatricality in critical commentary around Victorian history painting, see Imogen Hart, 'History Painting and Its Critics, ca. 1870–1910', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 14.2 (2015) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer15/hart-on-history-painting-and-its-critics-ca-1870-1910>> [accessed 26 September 2017].

⁷⁰ Baldry, p. 325; Dibdin, p. 12.

modern styles of paint application provoked the body into a transcendent experience. Beauty became in this way too obviously rooted in mere instinctual somatic sensation. Late nineteenth-century colour theory was based on the idea of vibrations or waves striking the eyes. The orange and blue of Dicksee's composition worked so forcefully to create a contrast because their complementarity vibrated in ways that enhanced the effect of each colour.⁷¹ Also, as 'blue is the *coldest* and most *retiring* of all colours, its complementary, orange, the warmest and most advancing; their contrast is both as to advancing and retiring, as to hot and cold'.⁷² With the vibrations produced by orange and blue pigment placed alongside one another, the picture attempted to make its very forms activate somatic selves, producing the 'impressive' qualities reviewers saw — or did not see — in the work. Involuntarily feeling 'impressed' by the work, however, detracted from its being truly 'impressive', as its machinery was laid bare by the viewer's awareness of the physical sensations experienced. As a non-verbal art form, painting possesses the capacity to affect and even produce the bodies of its viewers in ways that can be only partially expressed in language, and so attending to the function of the visual — and how the visual is understood — reveals the unique contribution of art to its moment, in this case, the body/spirit debates of the period. Art such as Dicksee's, still too attached to academic tradition, could not fully transport the spectator to an intellectual or purely aesthetic plane.

The Viking body, notably, is not yet dissolving, clinging rather to its linear certainties. In its mechanical and material effects, the painting lacked the ability of the literary 'pyre narrative' to suggest uncertainty about the physical and spiritual fate of the dead. One key mode of preserving mystery in the Viking tale was to situate the resolution of what happened to the body beyond the certainty of the spectator's sight. Haggard, for instance, concluded the Viking funeral of Eric Brighteyes in this manner: 'For swans and ship, and Swanhild, and dead Eric and his dead foes, were lost in the wind and the night. Far out on the sea a great flame of fire leapt up towards the sky' (p. 319). Robert Ballantyne similarly portrayed his burning ship disappearing from view:

Ere long it could be seen in the far distance, a rushing ball of fire. Gradually it receded, becoming less and less, until at last it vanished, like a setting star, into the unknown waste of the great western sea. (p. 392)

⁷¹ George H. Hurst, *Colour: A Handbook of the Theory of Colour* (London: Scott, Greenwood, 1900), p. 75.

⁷² R. W. D. Nickle, *Light and Colour: Emblematic of Revealed Truth*, ed. by Sarah Sharp (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), pp. 27–28, emphases in original.

While the flaming craft in Du Chaillu's *Ivar the Viking* did suffer a visible end, less clear is what happened to its contents: 'Then the lurid glare of the flames became less and less brilliant, and, on a sudden, the ship went down into the deep. But Haki and his warriors had sailed to Valhalla' (pp. 142–43). 'Far out'; 'far distance'; 'receded'; 'less and less': in Victorian Viking funeral narratives, the body disappeared from human ken to an obscure conclusion, vanishing into the horizon. Arguably, cremation on a launched boat created narrative ambiguity, a gap for the reader-viewer's insertion of belief as to the truth of events. This indeterminacy allows for a space of mystery and unknowability about the final end of both body and soul, part of a late nineteenth-century openness to new relationships between the two, as well as to new religions and practices. As with the fact of King Arthur's body in Tennyson's *Idyll*, the witness loses grip on certainties as the scene vanishes into the horizon of the ability of sight itself: Sir Bedivere watches the king's barque float away to 'Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go | From less to less and vanish into light'.⁷³

In its retention of the crucially signifying intact male body and its stubborn materialisms, *The Funeral of a Viking* at first appears obdurately to resist a destabilization of any fixed truths of the Victorian patriarchal order. Yet the whorls of paint betokening fire and smoke on the left side of the painting, countering the tightly rendered pebbles on the beach on the right, produce both formal and narrative ambiguity; the implication for the immediate future is therefore of matter's sublimation from solid to gas, from bounded form to airy spirit. The work gestures to the conflicted, fallen state of academic painting in the same way it signals other modern nodes of hybridity, such as the assimilation by contemporary Anglicanism of practices formerly condemned as pagan. As indicated by the formlessness and dissolution instantiated by the representation of fire, previously rigid binaries are here set into fluid motion: realism and Impressionism, pagan and Christian, Viking and Briton, Valhalla and heaven, bodily resurrection and spiritual ascension, cremation and burial, and even death and life. In a new world in which a cremated body might immediately metamorphose into ash and air in a manner that was now also understood as a metaphor for the elevation of the soul to heaven, matter and spirit, and all their entrained associations, have become dizzyingly inextricable.

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⁷³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Passing of Arthur* (London: Macmillan, 1884), p. 24.