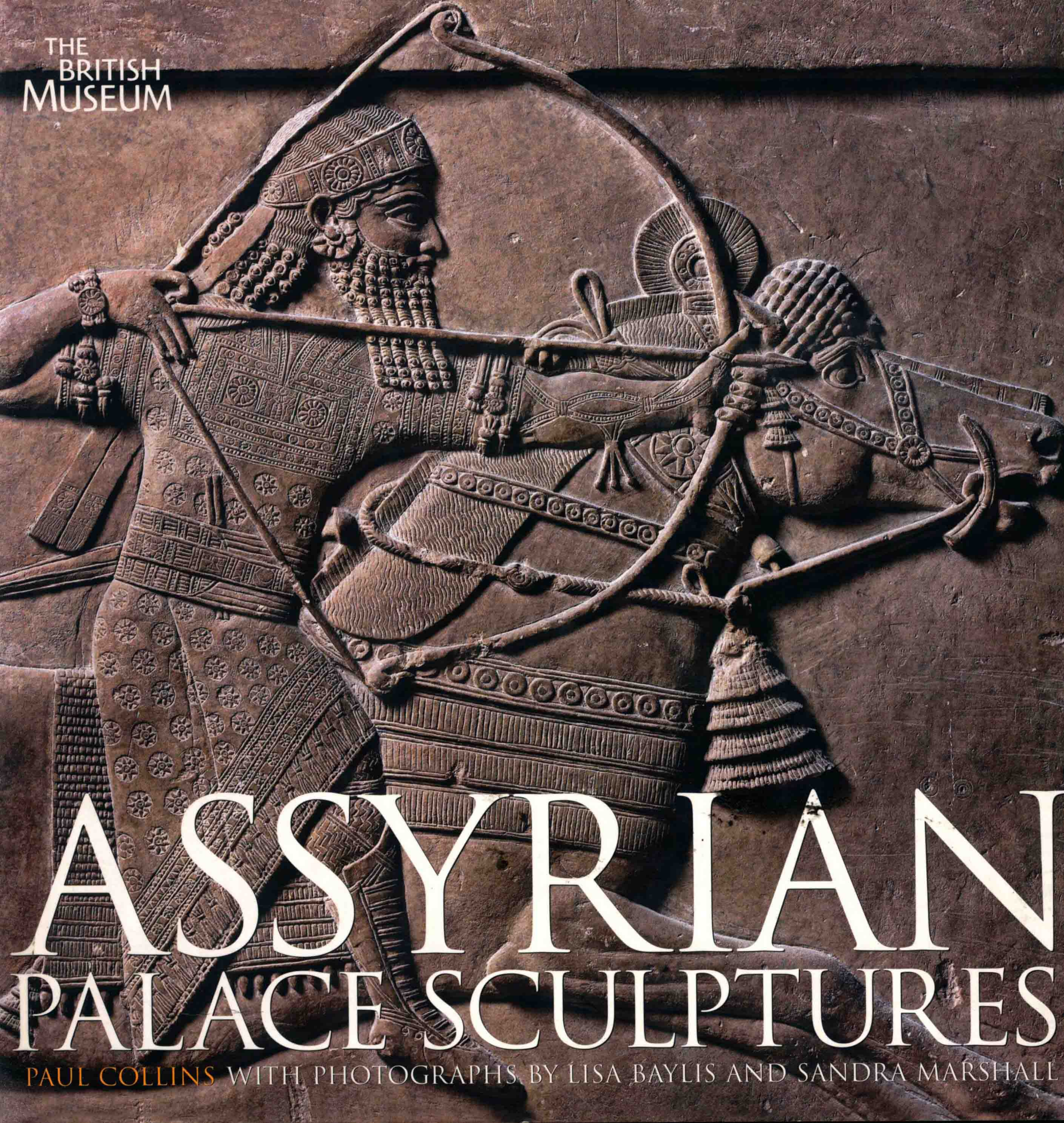

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

ASSYRIAN PALACE SCULPTURES

PAUL COLLINS WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA BAYLIS AND SANDRA MARSHALL

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I would like to thank John Curtis for inviting me to write this book, Lisa Baylis and Sandra Marshall for their superb photography, and Carolyn Jones of British Museum Press for expertly guiding the book to completion. I am especially indebted to Ian Jenkins who read an early draft of the manuscript; it benefited enormously from his unrivalled knowledge of the acquisition, arrangement and interpretation of the sculpture collections of the British Museum.

KING ASHURNASIRPAL II wears the distinctive Assyrian crown. His luxuriant beard and hair symbolize his virility and power. *frontispiece*

THE PROTECTIVE Sacred Tree consists of streams and palmettes, symbolizing in perfect symmetry the fertile world established by the gods. *right*

ASSYRIAN SCRIBES methodically record captured furniture, vessels and weapons. *page 6*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Published by British Museum Press
A division of The British Museum Company Ltd
38 Russell Square, London WC1B 3QQ

ISBN 978-0-7141-1167-4

Printed in China by C&C Offset Printing Co. Ltd

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FOREWORD

THE ASSYRIAN PALACE SCULPTURES COME FROM IRAQ, A COUNTRY THAT HAS SUFFERED GRIEVOUSLY during the last thirty years. The Iraq-Iran War, the First Gulf War, the period of sanctions, and finally the Second Gulf War and its aftermath have all taken their toll on the Iraqi cultural heritage. The sculptures that form the subject of this book are all now in the British Museum, and so have escaped the depredations of recent years, but what of the comparable pieces that are still in Iraq?

Fortunately, the archaeological sites in northern Iraq, where the major Assyrian centres were located, have not been intensively looted like those in the south of the country, with disastrous consequences for the archaeological and historical records. However, neither have they been spared. Thus, even before the Second Gulf War, the head was stolen from a colossal human-headed winged bull at Khorsabad and cut into sections; the head was recovered and is now in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. At Nineveh, the modern corrugated iron roof protecting the excavated sculptures in the Palace of Sennacherib was looted soon after the invasion, leaving the sculptures beneath at the mercy of the elements. Although the roof has been replaced, the sculptures remain in a parlous condition. At Nimrud, thieves broke into the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in the period 10–11 April 2003, at the same time that the museums in Baghdad and Mosul were being looted, and a relief showing a kneeling genie was stolen. Some three weeks later, on 3 May, a fragment of relief showing the top of a sacred tree and a winged disc was also stolen. On the next day, however, a small American military detachment set up camp at the site, which was enough to deter, for the time being, further attempts at theft. At the time of writing, the security situation in the Nimrud area has sharply deteriorated, which makes it very difficult to visit the site.

Assyrian material in museums in Iraq was also damaged in the looting of April 2003. Thus, the bronze gates of Ashurnasirpal II from the Mamu temple at Balawat were mostly looted from the Mosul Museum, and in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad several Assyrian statues were smashed. Happily the latter have now been repaired, and in fact the Assyrian gallery in the Iraq Museum was reopened in December 2007. On a further positive note, Assur has now been made a world heritage site, but not yet Nimrud or Nineveh. We look forward to the day when they will both be accorded this status, giving recognition to the fact that the sites themselves are just as important as the remarkable relief sculptures that have been found at them.

Dr. John Curtis

KEEPER, DEPARTMENT OF THE MIDDLE EAST

APRIL 2008

ASSYRIAN PALACE SCULPTURES

NEARLY THREE THOUSAND YEARS AFTER THEIR CREATION, THE ASSYRIAN SCULPTURES RETAIN THEIR power to astonish. They demand attention, and can even intimidate a viewer by their scale, authority, carefully observed treatment of animals and exquisite details of ornamentation, or the drama of a narrative that compels the eye to move from one image to the next. The emotional impact of the reliefs and the excellence of their design and carving easily qualifies them as great works of art. Even though their surfaces have been dulled by the passage of time, we can marvel at the artists' skill in creating a clear and vivid message: the Assyrian king, supported by the gods whose high priest he was, brings abundance to his land and defeats dangerous forces that disturb the divine order of the world.

It is perhaps the representations of the king as huntsman and warrior that are most disturbing for a modern audience; the pain of the hunted animals and the cruelty inflicted on those overwhelmed in battle has suggested to some that they are the product of a blood-thirsty people. Before reaching such a conclusion, however, we should pause to consider whether these scenes are any more barbaric in content than those portrayed in the countless representations that glorify wars and warriors decorating palaces, churches and government buildings around the world, as well as in more recent cinematic depictions. The reliefs certainly can serve to remind us of the brutality, cruelty and atrocities of war, and the pain inflicted on animals and humans across the globe, both in ancient and modern times. Indeed, what helps to make Assyrian imagery so compelling is that it presents a very believable world; conflict is not masked by treating it as set in mythological time and place as in the imagery of classical Greece. The violence of the Assyrians was considered a means to an end – it resulted in order. It is a concept that still resonates in the contemporary world, often with catastrophic consequences.

ASHURBANIPAL effortlessly thrusts a spear towards a wild lion. The king's strength, indicated by the delicately modelled muscles of his arm, is granted by the gods.

These magnificent sculptures were carved on huge panels of gypsum and limestone between about 875 and 620 BC. During this period the kingdom of Assyria, located in the fertile valley of the River Tigris in what is now northern Iraq, came to dominate a geographical area that stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. As an expression of their piety and power, a number of Assyrian kings undertook vast building programmes at a series of royal centres. Although constructed of mud brick, palaces were made majestic by lining the walls of principal rooms with carved stone slabs which formed part of much wider schemes of decoration that included glazed bricks, wall paintings, textiles and furniture. The imagery embellishing the palaces was rooted in the artistic traditions of Syria and Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq) but had developed from the late second millennium BC as a distinctive Assyrian visual language intended to glorify the king. The earliest scenes are summaries or symbols of royal achievements. By the seventh century BC, however, compositions, sometimes consisting of multiple narratives, might occupy entire rooms. This artistic tradition was brought to a violent end with the destruction of the Assyrian empire in 612 BC, when the palaces were abandoned and the sculptures were buried under decayed mud brick and debris for over two thousand years.

RECOVERY OF THE ASSYRIAN SCULPTURES

The story of the recovery of the Assyrian sculptures begins in the early nineteenth century when most of the Middle East belonged to the Turkish Ottoman Empire. At this time most educated people in Europe were schooled in the Bible and classical authors, and they recognized that many of the sites in Iraq represented the remains of some of the oldest civilizations in the world, including Assyria. Indeed, European merchants, diplomats, and adventurers who had earlier journeyed through the region had returned with tales of the ancient ruins. However, opportunities for direct European exploration of these sites only became possible as a result of the widening interests of the British and French empires following Napoleon's expedition to Egypt and Palestine. Some of the earliest archaeological research was carried out by Claudius James Rich, British Resident in Baghdad from 1808 to 1820. The antiquities he gathered before his untimely death formed the basis for the Mesopotamian collections in the British Museum. It was, however, a Frenchman, Paul-Émile Botta who undertook the first major excavations in 1842. He started digging at Nineveh, but a lack of major discoveries led him to move to the site of Khorsabad where he started to uncover the palace of Sargon II (721–705 BC) and its superlative sculptured monuments.

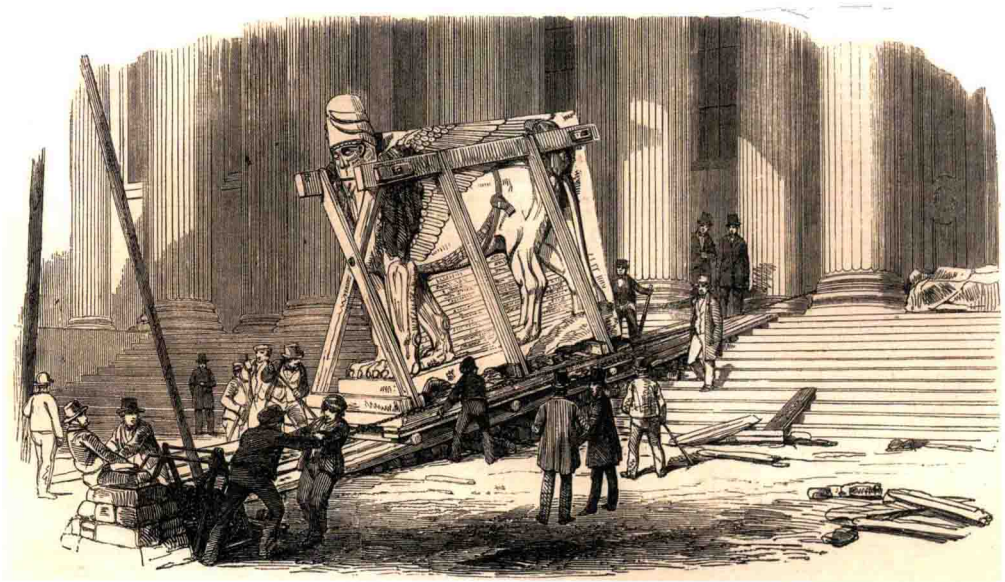
These French discoveries had a profound impact on Austen Henry Layard, an Englishman who had trained as an attorney, but who had spent several years from 1839 exploring the Middle East including visiting some of its ancient sites and expressing a desire to see them excavated. By 1845, at the age of twenty-eight, he was attached to the staff of Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador at the Ottoman court in Constantinople. Writing in the

MAP OF ASSYRIA and neighbouring regions.

Malta Times, which had been founded by Canning to foster British interests in the eastern Mediterranean, Layard revealed his passion for the newly discovered Assyrian sculptures. With the support of the British Resident in Baghdad, Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, whose own interests lay in the cuneiform writing system of ancient Iraq, Layard persuaded Canning to provide funds for two months of excavations at the site of Nimrud. Sir Stratford needed little encouragement. He had already acquired some fragments of Assyrian sculptures from Botta's excavations at Khorsabad and these had been forwarded to London as curiosities for Lord Lansdowne who owned a famous collection of classical sculptures.

In November 1845 Layard began to excavate and, almost immediately, his workmen found inscribed stone panels. Within weeks, sculpted slabs were being uncovered in the ruins of the so-called Southwest Palace of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC). Rawlinson was unexcited by the carved scenes, writing, 'I regard inscriptions as of greater value than sculptures'. Canning too doubted the works' aesthetic worth but nonetheless valued the finds because they allowed England to rival and even surpass the achievements of France. In this spirit of competitiveness, by 1846 arrangements were made for the British Government to take over responsibility for funding the excavations and Layard became the agent of the British Museum. The excavations now began to uncover outstanding reliefs in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC). Agreements were made with the Ottoman government, which

'RECEPTION OF THE Nineveh Sculptures at the British Museum', *Illustrated London News*, 28 February, 1852: 184



had little interest in antiquities at this time, to have the sculptures shipped to England. With the help of his assistant Hormuzd Rassam, Layard set to work copying inscriptions, drawing the reliefs, making casts, and having the slabs crated for transport or reburying any that could not be moved.

Layard closed the excavations at Nimrud in May 1847 and briefly turned his attention to Nineveh, where he located the greatest of the Assyrian palaces belonging to Sennacherib (704–681 BC). However, by now his funds were exhausted and Layard returned to England; the first reliefs arrived in London in June. They had been transported on carts to the Tigris, loaded onto barges which carried them to Basra, where they were transferred to a steamship and taken to Bombay. From India, they were sailed around Africa to Chatham before being transported to the British Museum. This great achievement was acknowledged in popular publications such as the *Penny Magazine*. Intended to serve the education of the British working classes, these periodicals eagerly endorsed Layard's positive descriptions of the reliefs. The rhetoric had great appeal and people could appreciate the finds from Layard's descriptions without recourse to a classical education:

> *they are immensely superior to the stiff and ill-proportioned figures of the monuments of the Pharaohs. They discover a knowledge of the anatomy of the human frame, a remarkable perception of character, and wonderful spirit in the outlines and general execution.*

RECEPTION OF THE ASSYRIAN SCULPTURES

The rapid discovery of so many reliefs took the British Museum by surprise. The Museum's Greek-revival building, designed by architect Robert Smirke, was reaching completion but no one had foreseen the need of space for the Assyrian sculptures. Many of the Museum's Trustees, staff and their advisors were less than enthusiastic about the aesthetic merit of the reliefs as

they considered Greek art to be superior to all other. Nevertheless, viewed as historical documents for illuminating the world of the Bible, the Assyrian sculptures immediately went on show in temporary accommodation. Reliefs carved with narrative scenes from the throne room of the Northwest Palace as well as two slabs depicting protective spirits and a further fragment were placed in a room devoted to miscellaneous antiquities (the first room on the left on entering the front door) together with a range of sculptures including British antiquities.

The excitement generated by the discovery of the sculptures created a demand for public access to the Assyrian monuments that continued to arrive. In 1849, the Museum responded by opening the so-called 'Nimroud Room'. This was a basement space which one contemporary museum officer described as a 'dark vault where they [the sculptures] cannot be seen at all'. Entered by a temporary wooden staircase, in this small space visitors were unable to stand in front of the reliefs which were cordoned off.

Perhaps more than any other factor that caused the public to flock to view the Assyrian sculptures at the British Museum was the publication in 1849 of Layard's best-selling *Nineveh and its Remains* which ultimately went through six different editions. Although the book gives only a limited account of the Assyrian excavations, it contains a story which combines adventure, romance, discovery, the exotic, and the ability of one man to overcome adversity.

T. CRANE AND E. HOUGHTON, *London Town*, London 1883, pp. 26-7.