



Published by Goulet & Duvivier, Aug 17 1797.

*Petistriens attacking a bull.*

Plate XII.



Published by Goulet & Duvivier, Aug 17 1797.

*A Caraboe attacking a bull.*

Plate XIII.

# An Irish artist at the bullfight in 1789

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THE TRAVELS IN PORTUGAL OF THE ARCHITECT AND DRAUGHTSMAN JAMES CAVANAH Murphy (1760-1814) were discussed by the present author in the *Irish Arts Review* of summer 2002, illustrated with engravings from his book *Travels in Portugal* (1795).<sup>1</sup> Watercolours from a related album the artist had prepared for presentation to the sponsor of his travels, William Burton Conyngham, which had recently been accessed by the National Library of Ireland, were published for the first time in that article. The principal objective of Murphy's tour of the country was an account of the architecture of the royal monastery, published in 1795 as *Plans, elevations, sections and views of the church of Batalha*. A third book by the artist and author published in 1798, *A general view of the state of Portugal*, has received less attention, though it too was illustrated with engravings 'from sketches I had made during my residence in the country'.<sup>2</sup>

The dedication of *A general view of the state of Portugal* was to the ambassador of Portugal in London, Don John d'Almeida de Mello e Castro, who had made possible its compilation 'from the best Portuguese Writers' by making his library available to Murphy. The publication was opportunistic on the part of the publishers Cadell & Davies, since there was a surge of interest in Portugal following its alignment with England and Spain against France after the outbreak of the French Revolution. It was not as successful as *Travels in Portugal* however, since it is so disjointed and lacks its narrative, or at least episodic, structure; nor was it translated into German and French as *Travels* had been.<sup>3</sup> Although it does not repeat the content of the earlier book, either in text or illustrations, it does complement it in some respects, most interestingly in its visual and written description of Portuguese bullfighting, described here. The discussion of the first two plates is quoted from chapter XXIV, entitled 'Manners, Customs, Dresses and Diversions', which Murphy prefaces with the statement that, as the subject had been described so frequently, he would offer only a few words on it (Plate 1).

Plate XII is a representation of a scene considered among the pedestrian combatants, the most masterly and perilous of the arena. The principal actor is he who

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1, 2 – James Cavanah Murphy, *A GENERAL VIEW OF THE STATE OF PORTUGAL* (1798), plates 12 and 13 (courtesy National Library of Ireland)

rushes between the horns of the bull; an art that requires no less courage than muscular strength of arms to perform with safety, so that the animal can neither pierce nor throw him. In this posture he is carried about the ring, amidst the shouts of the audience, till the rest of the combatants rescue him, by overthrowing the bull; which in this instance, agreeably to the rules of the circus, becomes their property.<sup>4</sup>

The engraving after James Cavanah Murphy's drawing is of a lively contest between four uniformed figures, two of which, through their exertions at the head and tail of the bull, have lost their headgear of tricorne hat with bulky tassel. These are flourished by the rider astride the bull, seen pawing the ground vigorously in the centre, and by the figure to the left of the animal, who flourishes in his right hand the arrow with which he has presumably pierced the hide of the bull. No evidence of the hurt inflicted on the victim is apparent in the illustration, in which the cruelty is reduced to a merry prank for the entertainment of spectators of both sexes, crowded against the encircling fence of spiked rails. The author is not so reticent in the account of the scene, given without illustration, in *Travels in Portugal*. The account is substantially that quoted above, but it is followed by a graphic emphasis on the cruelty of the sport:

When they found a bull that was stronger and wilder than the rest, they protracted his existence longer than usual, amidst the most excruciating tortures that ingenious cruelty could devise. The body was pierced in various parts, and a number of broken spears stuck into the flesh. Whilst the poor animal was thus bleeding at every pore, several tubes, filled with squibs and rockets, were fastened to darts and plunged into the body. As soon as these were set on fire he stood in the midst of the arena, tearing up the ground and bellowing, whilst clouds of smoke, (which he inhaled in breathing) issued from his mouth and nostrils.<sup>5</sup>

One presumes that the Portuguese ambassador approved, if he did not suggest, the less sanguinary account of *A general view*, though Murphy himself mitigated the force of the earlier account with an apologetic addition:

Though there are many enlightened people in Portugal who do not approve of these barbarous entertainments, yet the common people are so attached to them, that it would be very difficult to abolish them immediately. By degrees, however, they may be put an end to, and some manly, generous diversion introduced in their stead: civilization, it must be allowed, would lose nothing by the exchange, and humanity would rejoice at it.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps it was also at the suggestion of the ambassador that Murphy omitted the interesting fact that the profits of the bullfights, for which Leiria was famous, 'go to the cathedral, where they are piously laid out in plastering every stick and stone with massy gold. This I think is the ugliest piece of modern architecture I ever saw, and a lasting monument of the depraved taste and ignorance of the architect.'<sup>7</sup>

Defenders of bullfighting, especially in Portugal, always insist that its objective is not the killing of the bull but the display of the expertise of the horse and rider pitted against the bull. This is the subject of the second illustration (Plate 2):

Plate XIII is a representation of the manner in which the equestrian actors perform their part. The pedestrian at the side of the horse holds a mantelet of red or yellow silk, in order to divert the attention of the bull, should the cavalier be hard set in the combat, or unhorsed; in this case, or should he happen to be thrown out of the saddle, or drop his hat, or be deranged in any respect, he is bound by the laws of chivalry to avenge the affront by encountering on foot, with a short dagger, until he dispatches the animal, or the animal dispatches him.<sup>8</sup>

So sanguinary an outcome can hardly be imagined for the healthy bull, cast as the aggressor in this conflict, despite the title of the plate, 'A Cavalier attacking a bull'. Here, the dapper cavalier, with his tricorne firmly in place and his spear in his right hand, prances on a rocking horse and seems to anticipate no need for the services of the mantelet-bearer at the head of the immaculately groomed mount. The setting is almost the same as that of both the preceding plate and the one that follows, but that too is a conventional rather than a realistic representation. We learn from *Travels in Portugal* that these scenes were witnessed in Leiria at the end of May 1789, not in a fenced oval or circle but 'a quadrangular area, or square, formed by the houses in the middle of the city. The spectators

2b – James Cavanah Murphy,  
A GENERAL VIEW OF THE STATE  
OF PORTUGAL (1798), plate 13  
(detail) (courtesy National Library of  
Ireland)





were accommodated with seats gratuitously in the balconies of these houses, whence they had a complete view of what was passing in the arena.<sup>9</sup> Murphy's account is fortunately corroborated for us by the naturalist Henry Frederick Link in his account of Leiria published in English in 1801, but based on a journey made in 1798:

Here we had an opportunity of seeing a bull-fight (as had Mr Murphy), to which the inhabitants of the surrounding country came, and the spectators filled the houses and benches round the spacious square where it was exhibited. The fight was here far more dangerous than at Lisbon. Before the bull was let out, a number of persons in masks, merry Andrews and dilettanti appeared in the square, which only part of them quitted when the beast came out, the rest taking a pleasure in provoking and irritating him. It happened not unfrequently that these inexperienced and unskilful combatants were seized and severely hurt by the bull, who however had knobs upon his horns. One of them was tossed over the bull's back, and another, who had made himself a big belly, was caught just as he was going over the balustrade by the bull, who gave him several severe thrusts, but he was fortunately helped over the fence quick enough to save him. At one part, however, were once no balustrades; here, before the passage through a house, stood a number of peasants with no other defence than club-sticks, with which, if the bull approached, they all fell upon him, crying aloud, and thus with the provocations of the combatants generally made him retreat. Once however a bull made a desperate attack on this crowd, thre them all into confusion, and would certainly have done great mischief, had he not been frightened by the attack of the Capinhos, and probably the cries and confusion of the people tumbling over each other, by which he gave them an opportunity of escaping through the house. Some of them however received considerable hurts. If the bull falls, every one rushes upon him, and they dispatch him by all possible means. The cowardly conduct of the populace, who took a pleasure in tormenting the dying animal, was truly shocking; they jumped upon him, beat him, and one fellow irritated his wounds with a prickly aloe leaf; at which I felt so much indignation, that I almost rejoiced, when one of the beasts sprung up and furiously attacked his tormentors. In short the bull-fights of the provinces appeared to me incomparably more injurious than in the capital, and I often reflect that the love of pleasure stupefies the people, and renders them insensible to every other feeling.<sup>10</sup>

The generic nature of the arena is evident from Murphy's transposition of it from Leiria to Lisbon for his third plate on the subject, titled 'A Brazillian attacking a bull', though once more the bull seems to be the aggressor as it paws the earth in pursuit of the elegant horse and its placid rider (Plate 3). The scene is referred to but not described in *A general view*, and the following description is from his *Travels in Portugal*:

The Circus was very crowded on this occasion: about five in the afternoon a native



and made the horse caper on his hind feet; nevertheless he clung to him by his knees, and in this reclined posture, held the cord in both hands and the bridle in his mouth. The bull at this time was entangled by the rope, with his head drawn in between his fore-feet, and incapable of motion. The Brazilian dismounted, approached, and drew from beneath his mantle a short hunting spear, which, with an apparent slight force, he darted into the head of the animal, in consequence of which he instantly fell down and expired.<sup>11</sup>

None of the combatants of this scene show any trace of blood or of being in danger of a violent end, and the spectators, who are shown closer and less crowded than in the two earlier plates, are less engaged in the spectacle. Their depiction may be intended to reinforce the paragraph that prefaces the description, which also pre-empts the criticism to be anticipated of an English reader:

This amusement is declining very fast in the capital. The performances here I witnessed were inferior to what I saw at Leiria, but not quite so cruel. And after all, perhaps the manner of tearing the bulls with mastiffs, as in England and other parts of Europe, is not less barbarous than the manner of tormenting them in Spain and Portugal; but we are apt to see defects in our neighbours, whilst we are blind to our own, like the Lamian Witches, who, according to the facetious Rabelais, in foreign places had the penetration of a Lynx, but at home they took out their eyes and laid them up in wooden slippers.<sup>12</sup>

The comment characterises Murphy's manner of observation in his travels, being both even-handed and uncritical of the beliefs and practices of the inhabitants, and appreciative of their kindnesses to him. The plates reproduced here are dated 17th August 1797, but no indication of identity of the engraver is offered. The drawings by James Cavanah Murphy are not among those in the National Library of Ireland album from Portugal, but it is quite possible that they were in a so-far untraced quarto manuscript of eighty pages titled 'Journal of Travels though Portugal with neat pen sketches by Murphy (James), author of *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain*', recorded as lot 62 in the *Catalogue of the greater part of the library of the late Thomas Crofton Croker* (London, 1854).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the publication of these images will prompt the recovery of that album.

In the absence of the drawings, no comment can be offered on the skill or style of the artist, whose fame rests on his architectural rather than figurative and narrative art. But to provide a context for these plates in terms of the history of bullfighting and its depiction at this time, one may instance the *tauromaquia* etchings of Goya, published between 1816 and 1824. They constitute a retrospective view of the artist's experience of the sport through the course of his life, as far back as the 1770s, when Mariano Caballos, a South American whose career resembled the exploits of Murphy's Brazilian circus performer, flourished on the Spanish, and probably also the Portuguese, circuit. The Goya series and the state of the art of the bullfight at that period is best discussed in Robert Hughes's

biography of the artist.<sup>14</sup> As the author explains, the bullfight, originally a royal sport and one practiced by the nobility, had been partly banned in Spain in 1785 and was completely banned in 1805. Nonetheless, it evidently continued in various populist forms, and this is the form of the sport witnessed and recorded in Portugal by James Cavanah Murphy in the final decade of the eighteenth century.

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Michael McCarthy, 'Unpublished drawings by James Cavanah Murphy', *Irish Arts Review*, XIX, 1, 2002, 114-17.
- <sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the books of 1795, their editions and translations, see Paul Nash et al., *British Architectural Library: Early Printed Books 1478-1840, Vol. 3, M-R* (London, 1999) 1197-202. The most recent discussion of Murphy's work is Michael McCarthy, "'Three Mausolea and a Church": the drawings of James C. Murphy for his book on Batalha of 1795', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, XI, 2008, 163-99. The most recent biography is the entry by Daniel Beaumont in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge, 2009), available online at [dib.cambridge.org](http://dib.cambridge.org). A photographic copy of the book on Batalha, with bilingual introduction by Professor Maria Joao Battista Neto, was published by Alatheia, Lisbon, in 2008. An edition of *Viagens em Portugal*, in Portuguese with preface and notes by Castelo Branco Chaves, was published by Livros Hirozonte, Lisbon, in 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Murphy's *A general view of the state of Portugal* was not issued in a second edition, as his book on Batalha had been in 1836. It was, however, extensively reviewed in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, XLV, 960-96, and in *The European Magazine*, XXXIV, 107-09, and XXXV, 180-84.
- <sup>4</sup> James Cavanah Murphy, *A general view of the state of Portugal* (London, 1798) 145-46.
- <sup>5</sup> James Cavanah Murphy, *Travels in Portugal* (London, 1795) 82.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> This quotation is from W.H. Harrison, *Tourist in Portugal for 1839* (London, 1839) 170. Harrison made extensive use of an unpublished journal of James Cavanah Murphy, to which he was given access by Thomas Crofton Croker.
- <sup>8</sup> Murphy, *A general view*, 146.
- <sup>9</sup> Murphy, *Travels in Portugal*, 80.
- <sup>10</sup> Henry Frederick Link, *Travels in Portugal and through France and Spain* (London, 1801) 283-85. The only major disparity between the two accounts is the interesting detail of placing the knobs on the horns of the bulls, not mentioned by James Murphy and omitted from the illustrations.
- <sup>11</sup> Murphy, *Travels in Portugal*, 160-61.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>13</sup> This is possibly the unpublished manuscript referred to in note 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Hughes, *Goya* (London, 2003) 350-65. Mariano Caballos can be seen in action in plate 24 of the series, reproduced on p.362. See also Andrew Schulz, 'Moors and the Bullfight: History and National Identity in Goya's Tauromaquia', *The Art Bulletin*, 90, 2008, 195-217.



## AFTERWORD

*A note on the James Cavanah Murphy research undertaken by Michael McCarthy, prepared by Lynda Mulvin, Karina O'Neill and Conor Lucey*

Professor Michael McCarthy (1939-2010) was a renowned scholar of architectural history with a particular interest in the Gothic Revival; his *Origins of the Gothic Revival* (Yale University Press, 1987) remains a pivotal work. His research inevitably led him to the subject of artists and architects of the Grand Tour, and his untimely death has left a number of areas of his research incomplete. He was equally well known for his enquiries into often forgotten talents, such as Sir Roger Newdigate, Sir Richard Pococke and Robert Wood, and his principal files are now held in the Irish Architectural Archive. His most recent research was concerned with the professional life and published works of James Cavanah Murphy (1760-1814), which he had planned to publish as a definitive monograph.

In his last years, Professor McCarthy was particularly concerned with three major sources of Cavanah Murphy material: a collection of drawings and prints now held in the National Library of Ireland; the annotated volume of Murphy's *Plans, elevations, sections and views of the church of Batalha* (1795) held in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin; and a particularly important copy of Murphy's *Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (1816), held in the collection of the Gennadius Library, Athens.

As part of his ongoing project, Professor McCarthy catalogued and created a list of engraved plates among the collection of material in the National Library, Dublin. These plates, together with Cavanah Murphy's *Travels in Portugal* (1795), represent the single most important source for antiquarian research in this field. The first fruits of this research were published as 'Unpublished drawings by James Cavanah Murphy' in the *Irish Arts Review* (Summer 2002). A second, completed extract, on the bullfights at Leiria, is published here for the first time and was described by McCarthy in a prefatory note: 'The plates are from his rare book of 1798, *A general view of the state of Portugal*; but to make sense they have to be put with descriptive passages from his *Travels in Portugal* of 1795.'

James Cavanah Murphy's book on Batalha, together with his accounts of his travels in Portugal, remains a seminal work in the history of architecture in that country. Professor McCarthy travelled extensively in Portugal, following in the architect's footsteps, and gathered a large collection of books and notes on the regions of both Portugal and Spain where Cavanah Murphy was based. McCarthy extensively researched and lectured on the copy of Cavanah Murphy's *Plans, elevations, sections and views of the church of Batalha* in the Chester Beatty Library, publishing the corresponding article, "'Three Mausolea and a Church": the drawings of James C. Murphy for the book on Batalha of 1795', in volume XI of *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* (2008). A paper entitled 'Building a book: the visual composition of James Murphy's Batalha' formed a central component of the 'Fusion of Neoclassical Principles' conference held in

Dublin in May 2009, and was published in 2011 as ‘Neoclassical and Gothic in James C. Murphy’s Introductory discourse to Batalha’ in the proceedings of that event. Another related paper on this topic was produced for an associated conference, entitled ‘Orientalism and Anglo-Irish scholarship 1740-1810 in the Gennadius Library’, held in Athens in June 2010. The proceedings of that conference were published in 2012 as volume 13 of *The New Griffon* imprint of the Gennadius Library and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

A final component of Professor McCarthy’s unpublished research was concerned with the hand-painted and annotated plates of *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain* in the Gennadius Library. Professor McCarthy produced a catalogue of the plates and an insightful review of sources, and was working towards contextualising the volume within Cavanah Murphy’s life-long oeuvre. He described the significance of this volume in a draft address, sadly never delivered:

The survival of James Murphy’s drawings for his posthumous book, *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain*, was unnoticed till it featured as entry 29 by Leonora Navari in the catalogue to mark the 75th year of the Gennadius Library in 2001. It is a precious volume for a greater understanding of the Irish draftsman and his legacy, which has been misrepresented by the content of the book published under that title two years after his death in 1814. It is not merely an extra-illustrated version of the book, but one which contains drawings of subjects foreign to its content though intimately related to it.

Intended to form the central feature of the monograph on James Cavanah Murphy, this project remained incomplete at the time of his death. It is hoped that by drawing attention to this research undertaken by Professor McCarthy, and the welcome decision to make his files and notes available to scholars at the Irish Architectural Archive, that his most important contribution to this significant aspect of Irish architectural history will be dutifully acknowledged.