

The Mons Meg Model of 1858

Ed Dittus

I wager that when the average person thinks of cannon, particularly in the context of the UK, they would conjure up Mons Meg. No? Maybe not. Nice thought though.

Anyway, there is a story here. It involves cannon, the birth of photography in Scotland, mistaken identity, Christmas and a treasure rediscovered.

Settle in, I am going to tell you a story ...

I have had an interest since childhood in cannon and at an early age I became familiar with the muckle-mouthed Murtherer, Mons Meg. I do not know why but she had always fascinated me. So, you can imagine my delight when I came across a model of Meg on ebay sometime before Christmas. It was just possible that, if I prevailed in the auction and the seller was a good guy, that I could have it for Christmas. Well, I won it and the seller was wonderful but, things being what they are, it arrived the day after.



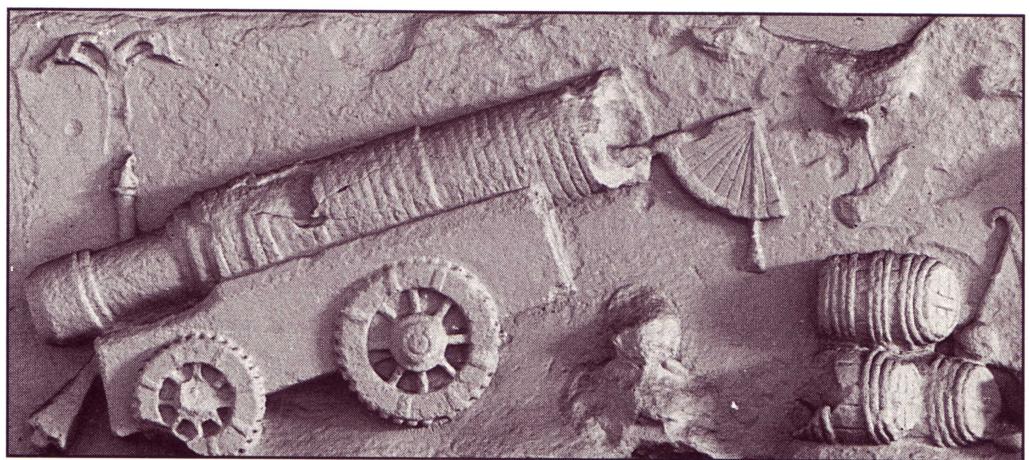
The pictures show it.

It is about 13 inches long with a bore of 1.25". It was cast as a tube and has a brass plug in the breech. To fire her, alas,



would be to destroy her. She did have a look of age about her. You know when wood sort of gets a patina and shrinks and just starts looking old? Well, that is the way she looked. Thinking about her, I realized that, while the carriage was a reasonable approximation of what the real Mons Meg currently rests upon, the model was older than that carriage which was only made in 1930's. How much older though?

There is an incised stone from the 1500's set in Edinburgh Castle that show Mons Meg on a carriage that closely resembles mine and served as a model for carriage that she is currently on.



It seemed to me that my model might be much older than I had thought and was certainly, upon inspection, made with a lot more care than the ebay pictures displayed. Clearly, research was called for.

Feeling that my Google-fu was strong, I began searching. I rapidly came across a reference to a photograph that was part of an early photography exhibition in Scotland, hosted by the newly created Photographic Society of Scotland. The date? 1858!! The name of the picture in question???

"Model of 'Mons Meg' on Ancient Carriage"

Exhibition:	1858, Edinburgh, Photographic Society of Scotland
Exhibit number:	749
Photographer:	Mackinlay, Rev. Thomas George (1809-1865)
Full title:	Model of 'Mons Meg' on Ancient Carriage
Process:	Collodion [Collodion]
Original price:	
Exhibitor:	T. G. Mackinlay

Good lord. Could this be the model used for the photograph? Only one way to tell ... find the photo.

Here we enter into a tedious multi-month period wherein I contacted many, many museums, collections, colleges and so on. Guess what? The picture is not (knowingly) in any collection that I accessed. I say "knowingly" because the average MFA (examining a picture of a "cannon" in their collection) would probably not be able to differentiate Mons Meg from Anzio Annie (no offense to any MFA's out there) and therefore would not search "Mons Meg" and would, therefore, not come up with this exhibition and the good Rev. Mackinlay. I would not be surprised if the image is misfiled somewhere.

Hmmmm....

Well ... what about the model itself?

I came across this entry in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (of which I am proudly a member):

Monday, 2d July 1860

The Donations to the Museum (n.b. of the Society) were as follows :

Model in Iron of "Mons Meg," the large cannon in Edinburgh Castle ; 10 inches long, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in diameter ; and also of the Wooden Carriage and Iron Wheels, which are copied from a sculptured stone now placed over the entrance to the Armory of the Castle ;

Bequeathed to the Society by the late J. MACKINLAY, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

So, to summarize:

- 1) a model of Mons Meg on an "ancient carriage" was photographed and the image appeared in a photography exhibition in Edinburgh in 1858 and is thus of great interest to historians of photography and ordnance.
- 2) the model was donated to the museum of the Soc. Ant. Scot in July of 1860 by the photographer..
- 3) the picture is not obtainable.

At this point I had an objective at least, and that was the collection of the Society. There were references to the model beyond the one cited above:

LH 209 Model of "Mons Meg," in iron, on wooden carriage, copied from sculptured lintel in Edinburgh Castle. J. Mackinlay (!!), 1860.
Catalog of Antiquities in the National Museum

Well well. The model and (presumably) the photographer and the correct

date, twice.

Now, the issue is where is the model? If it is "missing" there might be a knighthood for a certain young antiquarian who could find it. More seriously, it would help to identify the Mackinlay photo (if it ever surfaces) and it would connect the dots for me.

I contacted the Director of the Society who informed me that the Society's collections had been incorporated in the National Collections some time ago. He also, kindly, provided me with a contact.

Every now and then you catch a break. Mine was that the inventory numbers had not changed!! The curator was a delightful guy who sent an assistant person off to the bowels of the storage area to find the model.

She did. Scotland's gain was my loss.

However, the model did see the light of day again, however briefly. And we can see what Rev. Mackenzie saw and photographed 150 years ago.



The end (?).