The Needle and the New Zealander
Cleopatra's Needle as Memento Mori for Empire

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To paraphrase the words of the novelist Jane Austen, in the nineteenth century it seemed to be a truth universally acknowledged, that a nation in possession of an empire must be in want of an Egyptian obelisk.[1]

Although the obelisks transported to Rome by its Emperors in ancient times had all, with one exception, fallen and been buried in its ruins, they had been located and re-erected since the Renaissance, and were well known in Europe.[2] Following the unsuccessful Egyptian campaign of Bonaparte, who subsequently declared himself an Emperor, it was suspected by the British that the French had planned to bring one of the two obelisks at Alexandria, both referred to as Cleopatra's Needle, back to France as a trophy. These suspicions were confirmed by the publication of Vivant Denon's account of his experiences with the French in Egypt, which was soon translated into English and was widely available in a variety of editions.[3] In fact, although an unsuccessful attempt to bring one of the obelisks to England was made by the British in 1801 after the defeat of the French, it was not until 1833 that the first obelisk to leave Egypt since ancient times, one of the two in front of the Temple of Luxor, was transported to France and re-erected in the Place de la Concorde.[4] When that occurred, the fact that the French had an obelisk while the British did not was seen in Britain as a shortcoming that needed to be remedied. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* felt that the British should not be "behind the French either in power, in ability, or in zeal, to adorn our cities", and referred to the Needle as

[1] The opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* are "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."
[2] For information on these and the other obelisks now outside Egypt, see Brian Curran et al., *Obelisk. A history* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009) and Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
[3] Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, 2 vol., trans. Francis Blagdon (London: James Ridgway, 1803), 105–6 and plate 4, figure 4.
[4] Confusingly, this was also sometimes referred to as Cleopatra's Needle by English speakers, and the term could be used to refer to other Egyptian obelisks as well.

"a trophy – it would be an abiding memorial of the extraordinary country from which civilisation spread to the whole world".[5]

The transport in 1877–78 of Cleopatra's Needle to London, the capital of a great empire, can easily be seen as celebrating the military victories and political power of Victorian Britain, evoking comparisons between it and the previous empires of Rome and Egypt. Just as the Romans had conquered Egypt and taken its obelisks to their capital, so Britain, which within a few years was to turn Egypt into its own protectorate, could do the same. The Romans had associated themselves with the power and antiquity of Pharaonic Egypt, while demonstrating that they had supplanted it; and Britain, already approaching the apex of its imperial power, could emphasise this power by accepting an obelisk as a gift from Egyptian rulers anxious to promote good relations with a leading European state.[6] The acquisition of the obelisk was also a celebration of the technological and engineering developments that helped to make it possible, and the vigour of Victorian capitalism which eventually funded its transport.[7]

Less often considered, however, is the way in which the Needle and its antiquity could represent another aspect of empire, its decline and fall. The Egypt that created it had been invaded by Assyria, and subsequently fallen to the Persian empire, then to Alexander the Great.[8] His successors, the Ptolemies, had in their turn been swept away by the power of Rome, but the empire of Rome itself had first fractured into two parts and then been replaced. Even the Ottoman empire which had conquered Egypt and toppled Byzantium was seen by the late nineteenth century as being in terminal decline. Egyptian obelisks were therefore not only symbols of the legendary wealth, power, and antiquity of Pharaonic Egypt, but a reminder of how it, and its successors, had eventually succumbed to the inevitable fate of all empires.

The idea of ancient Egyptian monuments in general as mute witnesses to the passing of the civilisation that created them was well enough established by the

[5] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, September 1851, 313–14.
[6] The political and cultural background to the acquisition of the London and New York Needles, and how they relate to the general reception of Ancient Egypt, will be dealt with in: Chris Elliott, *Needles from the Nile – Obelisks and the Past as Property,* (Liverpool University Press: Liverpool), forthcoming.
[7] The transport of the obelisk was initially underwritten by Erasmus Wilson, who was an extremely successful surgeon and dermatologist, but owed much of his wealth to investments in gas and railway shares, and the balance of actual costs was paid by John Dixon, a leading civil engineer, who led the removal process.
[8] Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 1996), 110–29.

early nineteenth century to be drawn on by Lord Byron in 1818 when he added a stanza (219) to "Canto I" of his poem *Don Juan* after the discovery by Giovanni Belzoni of the entrance to the pyramid of Khafra at Giza;

> What are the hopes of man? Old Egypt's King
> Cheops erected the first pyramid
> And largest, thinking it was just the thing
> To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid:
> But somebody or other rummaging,
> Burglariously broke his coffin's lid:
> Let not a monument give you or me hopes,
> Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.

It was also the theme of Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet *Ozymandias*, first published in 1818, whose main inspiration was most probably a passage from Diodorus Siculus describing a colossal statue of Ramses II and the inscription on its base.[9] Shelley's poem is believed to have been written as part of a sonnet writing competition between him and the poet, novelist and stockbroker Horace Smith when Smith was a guest of the Shelleys in late 1817, and both he and Shelley took for the theme of their poem the vanity and transience of worldly power, as did Byron. In Shelley's poem, the statue is described by "a traveller from an antique land", and simply stands in "the desert", where "boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away".[10] Smith's poem, however, also first published in 1818, rejoiced in the possibly ironic title, *On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below*, which specified its Egyptian location. In both poems, the fragments of the statue are all that remains of the ruler it depicted and the mighty city to which it belonged, but Smith goes on to observe,

> We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
> Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
> Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
> He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess

[9] See citations in: Stephen Hebron, "An Introduction to 'Ozymandias'", *British Library*. Accessed 15 April 2020: http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-ozymandias.

[10] *The Examiner*, January 11, 1818. Text widely available online, but see also Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, eds., *The complete poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. (Baltimore, Md and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

> What powerful but unrecorded race
> Once dwelt in that annihilated place.[11]

Here, the monument suggests that even as the empires before it had faded and fallen, the same fate awaited the British Empire, and London as its capital. The image of a ruined future London was to be drawn on again in 1840 by the Whig politician and historian Lord Macaulay.[12] Reviewing an English translation of Leopold von Ranke's *The Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, he alluded to the longevity of the Catholic Church as an institution by suggesting that it,

> may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.[13]

This image became so popular, that by 1865 *Punch* magazine included Macaulay's New Zealander in a list of overworked and clichéd literary devices;

> The retirement of this veteran is indispensable. He can no longer be suffered to impede the traffic over London Bridge. Much wanted at the present time in his own country. May return when London is in ruins.[14]

Macaulay's choice of a New Zealander as witness to the ruins of London was significant on a number of levels. New Zealand was geographically on the other side of the world to England, literally and figuratively at the ends of the earth.[15] It had been discovered by Europeans in 1642, but until the mid nineteenth century there were only about two thousand European settlers. After the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, however, the islands became a British colony, and large scale settlement followed.[16] Not only the location of a new frontier, but like Britain an island land mass, New Zealand could be seen as the site of a

[11] *The Examiner*, February 1, 1818. Later published in Horace Smith, *Amarynthus, the Nympholept: a pastoral drama, in three acts. With other poems* (London: Longman & Co. 1821).
[12] *Edinburgh Review 72, October 1840,* 227–58. See also Skilton, David. *The London Journal.* March 2004. Web. 23 April 2017: http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/london-journal/march2004/skilton.html.
[13] *Edinburgh Review* 72, October 1840, 227–58.
[14] "A Proclamation", *Punch* 48, January 7, 1865, 9.
[15] The antipode of the centre of Britain, the point on the globe exactly opposite it, is approximately 625 miles south-east of New Zealand. Geographer-at-large. Web. 23 April 2017: http://geographer-at-large.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/where-is-your-antipode.html.
[16] "New Zealand Colonisation". New Zealand Tourism Guide. Web. 23 April 2017: http://www.tourism.net.nz/new-zealand/about-new-zealand/colonisation.html.

future empire that would succeed the British Empire. In 1872, not long before the Needle arrived, Blanchard Jerrold's *London – A Pilgrimage* was published.[17] Its illustrations, by the French artist Gustave Doré, depicted the extremes of London society, from extreme wealth to absolute poverty, but its final image was not of contemporary London, but of a ruined future London, with Macaulay's New Zealander sketching the ruins of Saint Paul's Cathedral from London Bridge.[18]

Gustave Doré, "The 'New Zealander' contemplates the Ruins of London", in Blanchard Jerrold, *London. A pilgrimage* (London: Grant & co, 1872).

[17] Blanchard Jerrold, *London. A pilgrimage. By Gustave Dore and Blanchard Jerrold* (London: Grant & co, 1872).
[18] Shown on: Vivienne Morrell, "The 'New Zealander' contemplates the Ruins of London", Vivienne Morrell blog. Web. 25 April 2017: https://viviennemorrell.wordpress.com/2015/08/08/the-new-zealander-contemplates-the-ruins-of-london/.

Like the Pyramids, obelisks, as survivals from Ancient Egypt, were symbols of almost legendary antiquity, and it was natural to see this longevity persisting into the far future, and to link it to Macaulay's New Zealander. In 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, there were revived attempts to bring Cleopatra's Needle to London, including a suggestion by the Prince Consort that it could serve as a memorial of the exhibition.[19] As an alternative to this, it was also suggested that an obelisk of British granite could be excavated to serve the same purpose, and commenting on this in 1859, the sculptor John Bell recalled that,

> Mr Robert Hunt suggested to me that if the New Zealander, with whose visit Lord Macaulay threatens us 3,000 years hence to see the ruins of St Paul's, does really substantiate that prediction, he might well as far as analogy teaches us of the duration of obelisks, thus find one relic at least of the present time still erect and unfaded.[20]

Here, because of its origin, it is the form of the obelisk which is seen as a symbol of endurance against the effects of time, rather than its link to Egypt, but it was to be an Egyptian obelisk which was evoked most frequently in connection with the New Zealander.

With the anticipated and then imminent arrival of Cleopatra's Needle in London commentators began to draw on these tropes of endurance and imperial decay. One writer alluded to Shelley's sonnet, and saw the monolith as a sort of moral guardian or messenger when he considered how,

> The hieroglyphs that have kept their clean contour while three Empires rose and fell, while Egypt, Macedon, and Rome played their parts, will make a sort of record of the vanity of greatness in the midst of London. In the thick of modern life the silent inscriptions will speak as impressively as these words on the fragment of the statue of Ozymandias:- "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair" Our works are much the same as those of Thotmes III in kind; and no doubt the monolith will see the end of them, keeping its old message while races that cannot read it pass away.[21]

One writer drew on London's Roman origins to speculate how the Needle might be discovered by some future archaeologist. They wondered how far "The Schliemann who comes to dig on the banks of the Thames" in ages to come

[19] Miscellanea. *Athenaeum*, July 11, 1868, 56.
[20] *Journal of the Society of Arts*, May 27, 1859, 475.
[21] *Saturday Review*, February 17, 1877, 191.

would have to excavate before he reached the tip of the obelisk, by then buried in the mud, and calculated that Roman villas "on the bank of the Walbrook are buried at a depth which would only leave six feet of the obelisk visible".[22]

Even in material aimed at children the Needle was seen not only as an imperial trophy linking the greatest empire of its day with the great empires of the past, but also as a reminder that it too would not last for ever. In the children's section of one magazine, the obelisk was described as;

> destined to find a new and appropriate home in the greatest city of the world. Dug out of the sands of Alexandria, where it has been buried for ages, it will occupy a conspicuous place at the centre of the world's metropolis, and will continue, we may believe, for untold centuries, or at least till the New Zealander gazes on the ruins of London from a broken parapet of London Bridge […].[23]

The obelisk was also seen as one object above all others which was likely to survive not only the political fall of the British Empire, or the physical destruction of London, a metonym for the Empire, but even the obliteration of England itself. Before the Needle arrived the civil engineer Waynman Dixon, who with his brother John was largely responsible for bringing it to London, wrote of how it would be;

> […] a monument which we trust will stand not only for hundreds of years, but which may indicate the site of where London once stood, when England shall have been submerged and rise again from the waves […].[24]

Dixon was writing in a leading London literary magazine, and it could be argued that tropes which originated in the works of writers like Macaulay and Shelley would not be generally employed or understood by all sections of British society, but *Punch*'s satirical reference suggests that their use extended beyond the more educated professional classes, and Dixon's points were even more directly (and floridly) made by a penny pamphlet which came out in the year that the Needle finally reached London and was re-erected. The anonymous author of the breathlessly titled, *Complete History of the Romantic Life and Tragic Death of the Beautiful Egyptian Queen Cleopatra; and all about her Needle, 3,000 Years Old! And the events that led to its arrival in England; with an interpretation of its curious hieroglyphic inscriptions* described the Needle as being:

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[22] *Saturday Review*, September 21, 1878, 366. Heinrich Schliemann had excavated at what he believed to be the site of Homeric Troy in the early 1870s.
[23] For the young: Cleopatra's Needle. *After Work*, April 1878, 66.
[24] *Athenaeum*, December 15, 1877, 781; subsequently quoted in *Builder*, December 22, 1877.

> probably on its last resting place, towering in all its majestic proportions and giant strength; a mighty monument of man's handiwork and skill in ancient and modern times; telling of the grandeur and civilization of past far distant ages, and looking down upon all the present and future stupendous creations of human genius, until the advent of the yet unborn, but surely approaching time, when it and the land whereon it stands, and the ancient life-teeming, wealth-laden Thames shall sink out of sight, and the British Empire be no more.[25]

It was not only the Needle itself that could bear witness to future ages, or to the symbolic New Zealander. An important element in the re-erection of the obelisk was the placing of a foundation deposit in its pedestal. This was an early equivalent to one of the modern time capsules buried under new buildings to leave a record of the era in which they were constructed, and consisted of a hermetically sealed stoneware jar about fifteen inches in diameter and thirty inches long, placed inside a slightly larger earthenware pipe.[26] Inside was an eclectic selection of objects including: ephemera such as contemporary daily and weekly illustrated newspapers and Bradshaw's railway timetable; a portrait of Queen Victoria; a complete set of British coinage; a standard foot and pound; copies of the Bible in several languages; and Chapter 3 Verse 16 of the Gospel of Saint John in 215 languages.[27]

Not everyone, however, was confident that this deposit would be correctly understood by those who would unearth it;

> It must have been a very blessed thought to the members of the Committee [of the Bible Society, who placed translations of John 3, 16 in the deposit] that, if one single soul is able to understand one single language of the 216 [sic] when the obelisk falls, perhaps thirty generations hence, he may may find under it a better revelation than that which Mr. Piazzi Smyth has discovered in the sacred inches of the Great Pyramid. Some Smyth of the future… may, however, like our own instructor, seek for ghostly comfort rather in the standard foot and the standard pound than in the versicles of the Bible Society. The circumference and

[25] Anonymus, *Complete History of the Romantic Life and Tragic Death of* […] *Cleopatra; and all about her Needle* […] *and the events that led to its arrival in England, etc.* (London: W. Sutton, [1878?]), 4–5.
[26] *The Cleopatra Needle: its transport from Alexandria to London, and its erection on the Thames Embankment*. Reprinted from *Engineering*, 1877–78. (London: 1878); and National Archives BT15/15 F/12762.
[27] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

> diameter of the jar in standard obelisk inches, and its weight in standard obelisk ounces, will no doubt convey profound religious impressions.[28]

Such a collection of objects could represent the political, economic, and cultural power of the British Empire. Victoria had become Empress of India in 1877, and as well as the British coins, a rupee was included, and *The Times of India* took up the twin themes of the cyclical nature of empires and the New Zealander as future witness when it asked rhetorically:

> Who shall say what strange eyes shall be the next to gaze upon them [the foundation deposits], or how long shall be the interval before they are again grasped by human hands. London may then be in ruins, the Thames a morass, Britain itself a forsaken isle, and her coast-line changed by an invading sea. Or it may be that all the change will be to a higher grade of civilisation.

Later, it speculated on the puzzlement that the objects in the foundation deposit might cause, and how they might be misinterpreted by "the savants" thousands of years hence who would examine them, who might include "the predicted New Zealander".[29]

More than ten years after the obelisk arrived in London, the same publication could again refer to the foundation deposit, and foresee it surviving the decay of the city in which it was placed; "It is probable that nothing now existing in England will be in existence two thousand years hence."[30]

By its very nature, the foundation deposit could not be viewed without the removal of the obelisk, and significantly it included a hollow bronze model of the obelisk itself, with an account of its transport from Alexandria to London and a translation of its inscriptions, so that if the obelisk was ever removed, its image would remain in London, and the foundation deposit would function as a sort of Rosetta Stone for its texts. Relocating an Egyptian obelisk not only invited comparison with the Roman Empire, which had moved the Needle to Alexandria and other obelisks to Rome and Constantinople, but was a reminder of that empire's eventual decay, and implied a cyclical view of history in which the passing of the British Empire was also inevitable. The idea that after the passing of the British Empire its monuments might find their way to future civilisations in remote parts of the world was one explored by a number of Victorian writers. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem *The Burden of Nineveh*, written

[28] *Saturday Review*, September 21, 1878, 366.
[29] *Times of India*, October 28, 1878, 3.
[30] *Times of India*, May 2, 1889, 6.

around 1856, had envisaged one of the winged bull statues from Ancient Assyria now in the British Museum being taken away in the far future by visitors to the ruins of London from Australia, just as the statues had been excavated from the ruins of ancient Nimrud in the nineteenth century;

> So may he stand again; till now,
> In ships of unknown sail and prow,
> Some tribe of the Australian plough
> Bear him afar,- a relic now
> Of London, not of Nineveh![31]

In the same year that the Needle arrived in London a weekly magazine mused that:

> If at some remote time an Eleanor Cross is taken from England to Tierra del Fuego, and there set up in the busy capital of a highly prosperous community, its fate will not be more strange than that which has befallen the obelisk of Thotmes III known as Cleopatra's Needle.[32]

A character in a short story in 1882 compared the actions of those who brought Cleopatra's Needle from Egypt to those from future empires, including the New Zealander, who might carry away the monuments of Victorian England;

> Yes; a few centuries hence; people from the other side of the globe will come to mourn over our departed grandeur; they will make pilgrimages to the sepulchres of Bismarck, Beaconsfield and the "People's William"; I can imagine the enterprising New-Zealander speeding over the sea, to carry off our most cherished national monuments, even as we are now doing with Cleopatra's Needle […].[33]

In these variations on, or alternatives to the trope of the New Zealander, monuments other than the Needle, such as the Assyrian statues, or the medieval English Eleanor Crosses were seen as the trophies which might be carried away by future visitors to the ruins of London. The visitors might be Australian rather than New Zealanders, and other empires than the British might be alluded to

[31] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Burden of Nineveh. Web. 25 April 2017: http://www.bartleby.com/270/11/195.html.
[32] *Saturday Review*, February 16, 1878, 203. The Eleanor Crosses were a series of twelve monuments set up by Edward I of England to commemorate his wife Eleanor of Castile, and the route of her funeral cortege. The best known gave its name to the Charing Cross area of London.
[33] *Temple Bar*, September 1882, 90. "Beaconsfield" was a reference to the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, ennobled as Lord Beaconsfield, and the "People's William" a probable reference to the British Monarch William IV.

(Bismarck's policies had led to the unification of Germany with Wilhelm I of Prussia as its first Emperor in 1871), but the key elements of the trope remained; the decline of empire, the examination of its ruins in the far future by visitors from new empires at the ends of the earth, and the removal of trophies (possibly including the Needle) in the same way that they had previously been brought from the ruins of ancient empires. One writer, although not specifically referring to the New Zealander, even linked these visitors back to Ancient Egypt when they speculated what would survive of the British Empire in the far future, and wondered, "what evidence would be forthcoming, say, in eight thousand year's time, for some future Flinders Petrie digging among the buried cities of the British Islands."[34]

The New Zealander trope was still being used as late as 1898, when the comic magazine *Judy* listed literary "log-rolling" as "one of the principal features of the Victorian era" which would be noticed, "When the New Zealander squats on London Bridge to reflect upon the Decline and Fall of the British Empire […]."[35]

It had spread through the British Empire to India, and almost inevitably to New Zealand itself, where in 1882 William Colenso read to the Hawke's Bay Philosophical Institute his paper, "A Few Remarks on the Hackneyed Quotation of 'Macaulay's New Zealander'", in which he reviewed Macaulay's sources.[36]

It was even used outside the British Empire. The second obelisk from Alexandria was removed to America in 1880, and re-erected in Central Park, New York City in 1881. In 1894 a speaker at a meeting of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers foresaw "Macaulay's New Zealander, who has sketched the ruins of England's power and greatness", coming to the New World, and seeing the ruin of its great buildings and bridges.[37] The reference would have been reasonably widely understood, as *London A Pilgrimage* was serialised in thirteen parts in *Harper's Weekly*, with the final part including Doré's image of the New Zealander appearing in its Supplement on May 31, 1873.

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[34] [The Egyptologist Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, 1853–1942.] David Walsh, "A Scheme for a Great National Monument", *The Strand Magazine* 148, April 1903, 404–9, 405.
[35] *Judy*, February 2, 1898, 57. "Log-rolling" in a literary context is the mutual praise of each other's works by authors.
[36] William Colenso, "A Few Remarks on the Hackneyed Quotation of 'Macaulay's New Zealander.'" *The Pamphlet Collection of Sir Robert Stout* Volume 65, Paper III. Web. 13 May 2017: http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz//tm/scholarly/tei-Stout65-t2-body-d2.html.
[37] *British Architect*, September 21, 1894, 211.

No one writing about the Needle seems to have explicitly referred to the proverbial Curse of the Pharaohs, but one reviewer of Erasmus Wilson's book *Cleopatra's Needle and Egyptian Obelisks* seemed to suggest that the obelisk should have been left where it was, and that the very act of bringing it to England might somehow provoke or precipitate the fall of the Empire;[38]

> Perhaps, after all, Dr. Wilson ought to have considered that there may have been a special Providence in the callousness with which the English Government allowed Cleopatra's Needle to lie buried in the sand at Alexandria. There may be something uncanny in bringing to our shores a scornful indestructible object which has seen so many "strange mutations." While there is yet time, he should bethink himself whether it is not the hand of Fate that is guiding the mysterious "silent spectator" to the Thames Embankment, so convenient a station from which to see the contemplative New Zealander perched on the ruins of London Bridge.[39]

It is easy to see the transport of Cleopatra's Needle to London as the acquisition of an imperial trophy, an act emulating those of Roman emperors, and simultaneously maintaining parity with France, a political and often military rival. Less obvious is the obelisk's role as a *memento mori* for empire, a reminder not only of the glories of past empires, but of their decay and decline, and of the inevitability of the same fate awaiting the British Empire. That the obelisk could fulfil two such different roles as a London monument, as well as being an archaeological artefact in its own right, is a reminder of the complexity of the reception of Ancient Egypt in the nineteenth century.

[38] Erasmus Wilson, *Cleopatra's Needle: with brief notes on Egypt and Egyptian Obelisks*. (London: Brain & Co., 1877).
[39] *Examiner*, February 23, 1878, 246.