

From Fakes to Folk Art

by: Tom Wood

The second half of the 19th Century was only a few years old — Victoria was in the midst of her glittering reign. The great exhibition of 1851 had kindled a strong interest in arts, history, technology and antiquity. The British Museum had moved into its new quarters and by 1857 annual visitation to this mecca for antiquarians had risen to over two million.

London, the most civilized city in the world, was in its glory. Two groups made up most of the population of London: the very rich and the very poor. The rich were looking for ways to fight boredom. The socially acceptable pursuit of antiquities was a logical answer. The poor were simply trying to live.

In the 1850s the City of London was undergoing a transition. Many new buildings were under construction. The commercial demands of the city required more docks and warehouses. 19th Century London, the city of Charles Dickens, Fagin, Poor Nancy, and Jack the Ripper, was alive with activity. Out of this London of storybook history came two of the most overlooked and unique characters of an era that had more than its share of characters.

William Smith and Charles Eaton were at the bottom of London's social scale. They were poor even among the poor. They made a precarious living cleaning up the docks and shore of the Thames as the tide receded. The bits of coal, iron and lumber that they retrieved supplemented their wages of less than \$2.00 per week.

Little is known about the beginning of the era of Smith and Eaton. They lived in Rosemary Lane, a street of tenements behind the Tower of London. They apparently worked on the excavation of the Shadwell Docks because in 1857 during this excavation an early Roman metal was found. One of the pair quickly sold it for 2 pounds and the wheels of a fertile mind began to turn.

William Smith and Charles Eaton had started a career that was to carve their niche in history as Billie and Charlie, Fakers Extraordinaire.



What little we know of these two comes from the records of a libel suit, the minutes of two antiquarian societies and some liberal guessing.

Neither of these talented fakers is known to have had any training as a foundryman or metal worker. Court records state that they could neither read or write, yet they fooled the best experts of their era and even had the court give a secondhand authentication to their products.

As the Shadwell Docks progressed, the London elite came in droves to view the site. They had heard that many early art objects were being discovered. The men working in the mud of the Thames were finding a large and varied selection of relics of the past and these items were being bought by the amateur antiquarians as fast as they came to the surface.

In 1858 the inevitable happened. Two eager collectors compared their latest finds. To their dismay they found them identical.

When the flood of relics reached the antiquarian scene Syer Cummings, vice president of the British Archaeological Association, pronounced the finds spurious. He





claimed to have examined over 800 and was sure they were forgeries. He further stated that a certain London businessman was profiting by their manufacture.

Cummings' remarks were quoted in a London Newspaper on May 8, 1858. As a result an antique dealer named Eastwood filed suit claiming that he had been slandered by the remarks. He advised that he was the foremost expert on this type of relic and further stated that he had purchased approximately 1600 various artifacts from Billie and Charlie.

The case was heard in Guilford Council in August of 1858. Both sides brought their expert witnesses. The best known names in the antiquarian world were represented in the witness box and the audience.

Things got off to a slow and somewhat confusing start when Charles Eaton sent word that he could not come to court. He had recently married and his wife would not let him come to testify.

William Smith took the stand and stated he had found the relics during his activities along the river. He claimed to have sold 2000 items for the princely sum of 400 pounds. Billie went on to say that he and Charlie made as much as 2 pounds a day from their "Lucky Finds."



Charles Roach-Smith, John Price and Charles Layton, the recognized authorities of the Society of Antiquarians testified that the items exhibited were indeed old. Roach-Smith stated that he was one of the foremost authorities in Europe and that the relics were early 17th Century. The other witnesses claimed that they were even older.

Before further testimony could be offered the presiding Judge ruled that the paper had simply reported Syer Cummings' remarks without editorial comment and the case was dismissed on the technicality.

While the court failed to rule on the authenticity of the objects, some of the most respected names in the field of British Antiquity had spoken in their favor. No one had the opportunity to speak against their genuineness.

Cummings was not one to give up easily, and in cooperation with Charles Reed, a fellow of the Society of Antiquarians, a plan was devised: Cummings and Reed found a spy. A laborer, who was engaged in laying sewers in London, had approached Reed with some bits of pottery and medallions that he claimed to have found in East London. After being questioned he finally admitted the medallions came from Smith and Eaton.

Cash talked in the 19th Century London. The laborer agreed to work for the good guys. He was finally able to secure several of the 2-part moulds used to manufacture the medallions and even succeeded in getting into the workshop of the fakers.





Even after concrete evidence of fraud and public exposure, the enterprise of Billie and Charlie died slowly. Some examples are found today with faded labels that testify to their being found during excavations of the Temple Bar Black Friars Bridge, Kew Gardens and even as far away as Hampton Court.

Cummings reported to the British Archaeological Association that Charlie died in 1870, but when a new form of forgery appeared in London he remarked that "Charles Eaton, bad as this fellow was — he was an honest man compared to his copartner William Monk." Monk was apparently an alias of William Smith or probably a later partner of one of the two founders of this new nefarious endeavour.

My first exposure to Billie and Charlie was in a small antique stall in North London. I saw a dagger and when I asked about it I was told that it was a Billie and Charlie. Not wanting to show my sheltered American upbringing, I expressed my thanks and went on. Several days later I looked at a medallion at a flea market and again Billie and Charlie came up. This time the proprietor was less formidable and I asked "What is a Billie and Charlie?"

After purchasing the piece for 10 shilling (\$1.10) I was hooked. I went back and splurged. The dagger was mine for 3 pounds, ten, and I was a collector. Only three years later a similar dagger was offered to me for the equivalent of \$90.00. Fakes were becoming expensive.



The rise in price of these orphans of antiquity has become a phenomenon. They are now recognized as true 19th century folk art. Museums exhibit them without embarrassment, a learned scholar is writing a book that will expand our knowledge of them, and they are listed in the auction catalogues of prestigious Christie's and Southbey's.

From fake or forgery to recognized folk art; from junk in the flea market to respectable collectibles.

Why? Frankly, I do not know. I deplore faking in antiques yet I have to admire William Smith and Charles Eaton. Again, why? Maybe they did not fake: maybe they created something. They certainly overcame formidable obstacles to do what they did.

I guess they finally achieved what they started to do when the United States Customs Bureau recognized their products as antiques, or better yet the ultimate mark of acceptance: to be copied, to be reproduced.

In 1963 a British magazine illustrated and offered for sale an exact reproduction of "what the crusaders wore." They called it an up-to-the-minute fashion — and so versatile. And what stared back in the best Madison Avenue tradition was a fine crusader medallion by Billie and Charlie!



BILLY AND CHARLEY

ABOUT the middle of last century two illiterate mud-rakers living in the East End started to manufacture spurious antiquities in base metal, purporting to have been discovered during the excavation of a new dock at Shadwell. As the idea proved lucrative, it was taken up in about 1857 by two men known as Billy and Charley living in Rosemary Lane, Tower Hill, who began to make bogus mediæval antiquities on an extensive scale. They made a large variety of objects, the appearance of most of which suggest no very obvious use. Their work is invariably cast in lead or cock-metal (an alloy of lead and copper) and is artificially aged by pitting with acids. Though they succeeded in imposing on numerous unwary purchasers, their inventions were too grotesque and full of anachronisms to deceive serious antiquaries. Their activities were first publicly exposed at a meeting of the British Archaeological Association in 1848 by Sney Cuning who claimed to have examined over 800 examples of their work.

