

Top: J.M.W. Turner, British, 1775–1851. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834, 1835.* Oil on canvas, 92.7 x 123.2 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of John L. Severance, 1942.647.

Bottom: J.M.W. Turner, British, 1775–1851. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834, 1834 or 1835.* Oil on canvas. 92.1 x 123.2 cm. © Philadelphia Museum of Art, The John Howard McFadden Collection, 1928.



On the Record: J.M.W. Turner's Studies for the *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* and Other Uncertain Bequests to History

EDWARD EIGEN

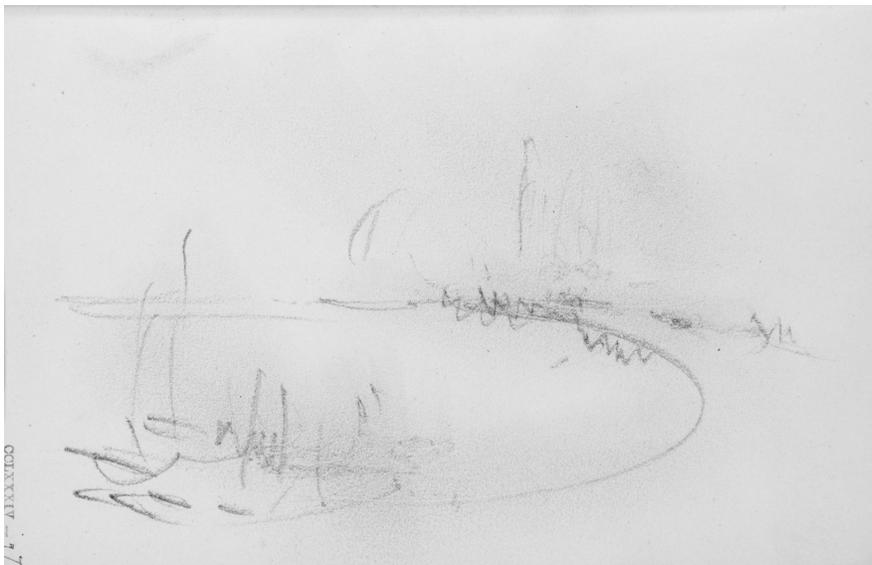
“Beautiful accidents.” The phrase is from Dryden, his essay on the “famous rules” that govern the imitation of nature, the so-called unities of time, place, and action.¹ “Beautiful accidents,” rather like the “Kindly Ones,” by which name the Greeks ironically sought to appease the Furies, those bringers of despond. “Beautiful accidents.” How apt a description for J.M.W. Turner’s votive offering, the two canvases of 1835 entitled *Burning of the Houses of Parliament*.² What Turner witnessed on the evening of 16 October 1834, from a barge on the River Thames and along its embankment, and what he perhaps recorded in his sketchbooks then and there with exceeding haste, was a sublime conflagration. Investigating soon after the fact, a Parliamentary Privy Council sorted through allegations of incendiary designs and other ill-laid plans, heard lengthy testimony expert and otherwise, all to admit the explanatory probability of an accident. Its causes made tolerably scrutable, the fire thus became a matter of record.

But more and other possibilities were present not only in the events of 16 October but in the afterlife of Turner’s historical renderings. The startling immediacy of his pencil sketches and watercolors—if in fact they were made instantly—justify the work of the following essay, which is to lament the accidental fate of historical records. For it was history, the material mass of it, millennial in its span, and finally fit only as worm-food, that proved fuel for the fire. Exchequer tallies, notched wood markers of funds paid and received, had been in continuous use for nearly eight centuries when they were suspended as a record form in 1826. The remaining specimens of these “rude contrivances,” which were seen to possess no enduring official or historical value, were committed to an ashen posterity on 16 October 1834. The fire by which they were disposed was not well kept, indeed catastrophically so.

Are Turner’s sketchbooks the serendipitous recording of a historical

accident in its full immediacy? Such at least is the stuff of legend. Or are they representative of the accidents that befall the stuff of which history is made? To be in the right place at the right time is the superficially unobjectionable qualification of eyewitness. Yet not only is there reason to doubt that Turner recorded the event in the instant, but there is also reason to suspect that his sketches subsequently suffered from damage, neglect, and accident. Evidence of this fact does not so much diminish the eloquence of the sketches as it offers an opportunity, still more rare than the fire itself, to examine the transmission, reception, and use of historical records. The present attempt is to examine the norms and forms in and by which, in the words of one historian, a society “organizes rational self-knowledge by controlling its records, instead of depending on calamities for its information.”³ For while the historian might attend its muse or glimpse history’s windswept angel—the perceived chain of cause and effect become so much wreckage piled at its feet—the rational handling of records unburdens him or her of an undeniable but unadmitted debt to the sparing grace of the “goddess Catastrophe.”⁴

For one jealous keeper of records the events of 16 October serve as a mordant “illustration” of memorial carelessness. In his *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922),⁵ in which he applied an unsentimental managerial ethos to the collection, sorting, and culling of records old and new, Hilary Jenkinson regarded the “unblemished line of responsible custodianship” as the ruling trait of organized self-knowledge. In the responsible employ of the Public Record Office for forty-eight years, the final seven as deputy keeper, Jenkinson held that archivists are responsible for the lineal descent of the material entrusted to them, their unassuming labor accruing to the benefit of future researchers. Yet the care taken by archivists in transmitting documents to posterity has no reasonably predictable relation to the uses that historians will make of them. Such is the essence of the “Corollary” Jenkinson added to his definition of “Archives,” which seems as meaningfully limiting as the necessarily stringent definition itself: “Archives were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of Posterity.”⁶ Jenkinson insists first of all on the record keeper’s vocation to maintain indefinitely the order



produced by the producers of documents themselves. A “document” is deemed any manuscript, type-script, or printed matter that was “*drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.*”⁷ So stated, the historian who would conjure significance from these morsels (or notes) of information is excluded from the legitimate handling of documents. Only after the dust has settled, as it were, may he enter the archive, the nominal home and final resting place of records, and breath life into them as one does a dying flame.⁸

The question presently to be addressed is how Turner’s sketchbooks form a record and by what warrant they might be consulted. Do we study the circumstances attending the fire to understand the immediacy if not also the painterly intentions of Turner’s method of study? Or, by contrast, do we begin with the presumable immediacy of the sketches and watercolors as a (necessary) corrective to received accounts of the fire?⁹ In answering this question, one must look a bit into the nature of accidents in all their irreducible singularity and the strain they put on the attempt to provide a normal ordering of events. Thus a subtending analogy will be established between the handling (or rather the mishandling) of Turner’s Bequest to the Nation—that precious artistic legacy of which the sketchbooks formed a notable part—and Jenkinson’s own “Specimen Example of Archive History”: the disastrous disposal of the records of the Exchequer. Thus, what follows is not an essay in narrative history, which would necessarily rely upon the extant record. Rather, it is history by juxtaposition, in which the “beautiful accidents” that trouble claims of custody, interrupt transactions, rearrange notions of cause and effect, can find a proper if restive place in the story.

To accept Jenkinson’s definition of record keeping without remaining mindful of its essential corollary would be to judge events in terms of the continuities the archivist is charged with maintaining. Instead, this discussion begins from the conviction that records are history’s remains—its residue. The term *residue* presently takes on specific mean-

Opposite: Joseph Mallord William Turner. *Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, 1834. © Tate, London 2007.

Right: Joseph Mallord William Turner. *Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, 1834. © Tate, London 2007.



ing within the intensively record-producing and record-based study of tides; it refers to the fateful difference between observed and predicted events owing to “purely accidental” causes. Why make mention of the tides, the marker in Matthew Arnold’s mournful idiom of time’s “tremulous cadence slow?”¹⁰ In the early morning hours of 7 January 1928 the Thames rose with great suddenness, inundating the basement of the Tate Gallery where Turner’s sketchbooks were kept. The intensive effort undertaken by a duly empaneled Parliamentary commission to study the flood made use of tidal records not only as an index to the past but also as a means of predicting the future. In this arguably generalizable instance, the cadence and intensity of history rather than its perceived form proves the essentially meaningful measure. Turner’s studies for the *Destruction by Fire of the Houses of Parliament* will thus be read as a shorthand epic of history, only in the aftermath becoming an accident illustrated. It was, and still remains, for Jenkinson’s future historian to complete the record of what happened on 16 October 1834.

The First Draft of History: The Art of Shorthand and Contracting Time

For Katherine Solender the sketchbooks offer a valuable opportunity to trace Turner’s translation of direct experience into art.¹¹ Turner was committed to the notion of immediacy, casting himself imaginatively into the vortical storm of energy and matter that was the crowning subject of his work. The culminating moments of this process of translation are captured in the legendary scenes of Turner on “varnishing day,” when he put the finishing touches on his canvases. To his fellow artists at the British Institution exhibition of February 1835, where the Philadelphia Museum of Art version of *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* was first shown, Turner’s fevered brushwork appeared less the masterstroke than the demiurgic creation of form from a seeming chaos of color.¹² Though for all the vividness of this painterly performance, the origins of Turner’s intermediate source material, the sketchbooks, remains obscure. Solender’s discussion is necessarily shot through with supposition—“might,” “maybe,” “perhaps”—all bearing on the crucial question of what Turner recorded on the night of the fire. The sketchbooks were identified as representations of the Parliament fire upon the authority of A.J. Finberg, who was responsible for inventorying the nearly 37,000 works that formed the Turner Bequest of 1856 (the sketchbooks were items CCLXXXIII and CCLXXXIV in Finberg’s enumeration).¹³ Yet Solender notes at least one dissenting Turner scholar who sees in the pencil drawings nothing more than “brief notes of boats along a beach.”¹⁴ Solender asks the reader to look again. “Closer examination of two pages reveals images which, though certainly vague, could as easily be construed as rapidly recorded observations of a great

during the course of the day to which they refer. Failing that, an effort ought to be made to “give the effect of being so recorded.” The value of the diary depends on the “instantaneous transcription of impressions.”¹⁸ Waller’s diary records a missed opportunity. Yet in the train of engines returning from the fire, Waller unwittingly sighted the advanced guard of a large-scale statistical machinery meant to leave no fire unrecorded. The London Fire-Engine Establishment was started in 1832 to consolidate the separate engine companies sponsored by the principal London insurance offices under the charge of a single superintendent. According to the *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, the Establishment also “afforded an opportunity for collecting accurate information with respect to the number, causes, and extent of fires in the metropolis.”¹⁹ In order to calculate risk, the insurance offices also needed to inventory the causes of fires. Despite their efforts to minimize indemnified losses, the greatest number of fires were attributed to “accidents of various kinds, ascertained to be for the most part unavoidable.” Candles, the subject of Joseph Priestley’s magisterial exposition on the substance of fire, were the chief culprits. The attempt by statisticians to legislate the “rules that govern chance” is perhaps not so different from the stenographer’s attempt to take down unscripted actuality.²⁰ In the first case a pattern of regularity is coaxed from the analysis of a carefully classed set of events; the question is at what rate a particular instance will likely recur and under what circumstances. In the latter case, a faithful record of a seemingly singular event serves as the basis for interpretation in all its possible variety; its worthiness of study derives in part from the number of records made of it. Among many others, the chief difference between the two is the point in the inter-

pretive cycle—however eccentric it might be—when the record form comes into use. The actuality of history is but an effect of the subjunctive mood; other possible pasts and futures are latent in the well-made record.

The title of Robert Cabell Roffe’s *Stenographical Accidence, or Byrom’s System of Shorthand Made Easy* (1813), perhaps best reflects the contingent nature of even the most complete attempt at record making. Known as the “Grand Master” of English shorthand, John Byrom sought to rectify the artificiality and arbitrariness of existing systems of shorthand, setting the art upon a “rational and philosophical plan.”²¹ How does “accidence” square with such a rigorous ambition? The *Oxford English*

Arbitrary Characters for Prepositions and Terminations &c.				
at. ob. observe	5	may	1	below
ance-ation	^	been	2	behind
able-ible)	doth	3	covetous
ch. such	^	the thec. they	4	foundation
chr. church	^	thy. of	5	and hand
- charge	e	consequence	6	magnify
sh. she	o	particular. by	=	even. heaven
sat. sub. subject	^	could	7	ought
th. that. thed	,	I	8	between
ver. ever	d	it is	9	betwixt
wt. wt. will	d	it is not	@	about
would	p	is it	^	advance. tage
ward. word	:	to the	~	plaintiff
vad. ved. vid	.	and the	\	defendant
with	:	by the	o	the World
thou	(shall. should	o	this World
after	<	said. side	o	the other World
had. hath	3	not	o	from one end of
might	1	above	o	the World to the other

The “Arbitrary Characters” of Gurney’s Shorthand.

Dictionary—that vast project of lexical note taking—offers the definition of *accidence*: “that part of Grammar which treats of the Accidents or inflections of words; a book of the rudiments of grammar. Hence, by extension: the rudiments or first principles of any subject.”²² The rational basis of shorthand is of a part with its most ungovernable effects. The son of a shorthand writer and newspaper man, Charles Dickens mastered Thomas Gurney’s system of brachygraphy (short writing), but not without travail. Presumably reflecting Dickens’s own fretful apprenticeship, his fictional counterpart David Copperfield rues the “wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like flies’ legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place; not only troubled my waking hours, but reappeared before me in my sleep.”²³ The attempt by reformers to put stenography on a rational and philosophical plan confronted just so many troubled dreams of calligraphic blots.

The Fower-Fould Hurte

What, then, of Turner’s so-called personal shorthand? The rudiments of Turner’s art have been sought in the *Liber Studiorum* (Book of Studies), the series of etchings he conceived as a “kind of visual treatise on landscape art,” which has since been treated as the “central document” of his theory on painting.²⁴ Finberg, for one, sees in them the amplitude of Turner’s inventive power, whereby he “could take advantage of accidental defects, and with sedulous and infinite skill he could enhance any unusually fortunate passage.”²⁵ Turner’s was a masterly handling of the incidents, be they glad or grave, that entered into his working process. These “accidental defects” appear somewhat differently in light of another, and by one account “central,” document of Turner’s legacy. In his extensively documented study of Turner’s will and its contentious probate, Selby Whittingham included two plates from the *Liber Studiorum* as evidence of Turner’s desire “to preserve for ever a comprehensive and collected record of his achievement.”²⁶ In what state would that record be preserved? The final terms of the Turner Bequest were defined by a Vice-Chancellor’s Decree of 19 March 1856 as follows, “all pictures, drawings, and sketches by the Testator’s Hand, without any distinction of finished or unfinished, are to be deemed as well given for the Benefit of the public.”²⁷ The works both finished and tantalizingly unfinished that remained in his Queen Anne Street studio would be, with the lapse of time, marked by more than the “testator’s hand,” as Turner’s characteristic handling of brush, burin, and palette knife came to be regarded in court papers. Having been judged “well given,” in the hands of Turner’s remaindermen his artistic legacy became available to the insuperable effects of time.

The Trustees of the National Gallery, to whom the bequest was entrusted for the benefit of the public, turned to John Ruskin to arrange the great store of material. For Turner's most eloquent champion the exacting role of artistic executor was a regretful business. Here was the chance, in his words, to see "unfolded the whole career of Turner's mind during his life, joined with such sorrow at the state in which nearly all his most precious work had been left."²⁸ It was left for Ruskin to unpack the seven tin boxes, in which he found upward of nineteen thousand pieces of paper, "nearly all rudely flattened out from the bundles in which Turner had finally rolled them up and squeezed them into his drawers in Queen Anne Street." The literal act of unfolding the material proved a source of injury, the perceived effect of which is at once heightened and obscured by Ruskin's picturesque sensibility.

Dust of thirty years' accumulation, black, dense and sooty, lay in the rents of the crushed and crumbled edges of these flattened bundles, looking like a jagged black frame, and producing altogether unexpected effects in brilliant portions of skies, whence an accidental or experimental finger mark of the first bundle-unfolder has swept it away.²⁹

Such effects of *claro-obscuro*—their arbitrary, inconstant, and unequal appearance in nature—originally served to define the "accident" in the picturesque genre of landscape.³⁰ But Ruskin's is a more baleful inventory of the depredations visited on the material. Some of the drawings were "rotten into holes; others (some splendid colored drawings among them) long eaten away by damp and mildew, and falling into dust at the edges, in capes and bays of fragile decay; others worm-eaten, some mouse-eaten, many torn half-way through." In perhaps too literal a sense, here was to be found the traits of what Ruskin, in treating the accidental nature of the picturesque, called "Parasitical Sublimity."³¹

Ruskin's unceasing labors in the autumn and winter of 1857 might have served as another of Jenkinson's "illustrations" of archive history. "Look out for the signs of worm," Jenkinson writes in the *Manual*, referring to telltale clues of documentary wreckage. Ruskin's "capes and bays of fragile decay" are so many romantic ruins compared to the excrement, scraps of bitten paper or parchment, and paw prints that the vigilant archivist is asked to trail to the beasties large and small who made an indifferent diet of records. The keeper of records is entrusted above all with their physical defense. In this Jenkinson finds his moral cause in the writings of Arthur Agarde, the seventeenth-century deputy chamberlain of the Exchequer and distinguished antiquarian, who devoted himself to preparing catalogs for succeeding keepers of the rolls and for students of state papers.³² As if to suggest the uncertain

rest granted progenitors of orderly families, Agarde’s memorial at Westminster Abbey reads *Recordorum regionum hic prope depositorum diligens scrutator* (A meticulous investigator of the royal records lies hereabouts). This servant of posterity warned “there is fower-fould hurte that by negligence may bringe wracke to recordes; that is to say Fier, Water, Rates & Mice, Misplacinge.” *The Compendium of the Records in the Treasury*, compiled and digested by Agarde in 1610, was one of the documents illustrating the history of that repository textually reproduced in Francis Palgrave’s *Antient Kalendars and Inventories of the Exchequer* of 1836. Published with the recommendation of the Committee of the Commissioners of Public Records, Palgrave’s compendium established a basis to consider what further neglect had been suffered by the records in the interim. Palgrave became deputy keeper of the Public Record Office in 1838, which appointment, along with the creation of the Public Record Office itself, put an end to the long, desultory, and costly efforts of the Committee of the Commissioners to bring the state papers into good order.³³

Yet the nascence of a professional corps of archivists did not prevent the disastrous sale and destruction of a large store of Exchequer records in 1840, judged by the Parliamentary Council that subsequently investigated to be an assault on history itself. Recalling the gruesome efficiency of the knacker’s yard detailed in Charles Babbage’s *On the Economy of Manufactures* of 1832, where the meanest bits of a horse’s carcass, including the maggots that fed upon it, were turned to profit, parcels of the disused records were sold to fishmongers to wrap their wares (the paper was so damaged it did not answer the purpose), a pastry cook (the parchment proved too desiccated to extract gelatin), scrap-paper sellers, a bookbinder, and curiosity dealers. Thus was created a paper trail across London, linking diverse trades to a common store of recorded (and discarded) history. During its hearing, the Council was particularly keen to know more about the articles described in Lot 9 of the auctioneer Samuel Leigh Sotheby’s catalogue of sale for 11 April 1840:³⁴ “These national documents are well preserved, and become highly interesting to the Historian.” At the hearing Sotheby was asked, “You consider, do you not, this to be very interesting historically, as being a record of the events?” He replied, “the only



Exchequer Tallies, thirteenth century.

record that we can have.”³⁵ That such a valuable and moreover well-preserved document was found among the discarded records is perhaps not surprising. During his testimony, one Ashburnham Bulley, of the Comptroller General’s Office, reported that when, in 1836, he went to inspect the state of the Exchequer’s records he could find no reliable markings of time or order. “There was no regularity; they were all put into boxes apparently in great confusion; not merely piled, but stuffed in; and there were vast quantities of them that were totally useless; so useless as to be thrown into the dust hole; actual tinder.”³⁶ Accidents lie in wait not where regularity is lacking but where regularity is expected to be found.

Actual tinder was what the tally sticks became on 16 October. In the alarms sounded that evening, the applause given by the thronged spectators when the flames reached ever higher into the sky, the crackle of the ancient oaken edifice consumed by the neglectful disposal of its own store of history, in these were to be heard by some the call for rational record administration. “The destruction of the official collection of old tallies was ordered,” Jenkinson writes, “and according to the well-known story the imprudent zeal with which this order was carried out caused the fire which destroyed the Houses of Parliament in 1834.” The well-known story finds its most succinct and pointed form in the telling of Charles Dickens, at the third meeting of the Administrative Reform Association at Drury Lane Theater on 27 June 1855.

In the reign of George III an inquiry was made by some revolutionary spirits, whether pens, ink, and paper, slates and pencils, being in existence, this obstinate adherence to an obsolete custom ought to be continued, and whether a change ought not to be effected. All the red tape in the country grew redder at the bare mention of this bold and original conception, and it took till 1826 to get these sticks abolished. In 1834 it was found that there was a considerable accumulation of them; and the question then arose, what was to be done with such worn-out, worm-eaten, rotten old bits of wood? I dare say there was a vast amount of minuting, memorandumizing, and dispatch-boxing, on this mighty subject. . . . It came to pass that they were burnt in a stove in the House of Lords. The stove, over gorged with these preposterous sticks, set fire to the paneling; the paneling set fire to the House of Lords; the House of Lords set fire to the House of Commons; the two houses were reduced to ashes.³⁷

“So the tallies perished gloriously,” Jenkinson writes sardonically. The “Report of the Lords of the Council Respecting the Destruction by Fire of the Two Houses of Parliament with Minutes of Evidence” (1835)

would regard the matter otherwise.

From such Blue Books, as Parliamentary reports are called, novelists such as Wilkie Collins and, especially, Charles Reade were committed to exposing “undeniable truths,” extracting the “appalling facts of the day.” More prosaically, the report was the final record of the “representations” made by the twenty-six witnesses called before the Council. As such, the report represents the official version of the events of 16 October, against which all other contemporary accounts may be compared. But the Minutes of Evidence is a case study in the construction of a coherent story from various and variously credible sources. The Privy Council initially attempted to establish the lineaments of an “evil design,” the work of an incendiary, frustrated as it was by the inconsistent testimony of its chief witness. In the “connected story” told by the other witnesses, reliance upon which saved the Council from having to confront an “impenetrable mystery,” was unfolded the original “plan” for disposing of the tallies, the series of miscommunications that gave rise to the “hazardous experiment,” and the fatal results that ensued. On 8 November the Council issued its verdict that the fire was “accidental,” “wholly attributable to carelessness or negligence.”³⁸ The burning of the tallies or, as the Council reported, “the manner in which they were burnt,” caused the historic catastrophe, as Solender has it.³⁹ More justly phrased, what took place on 16 October was a catastrophe of history. The fire was not made on the spot, nor could it be so recorded. The fire was but the most vivid hour in the long history of an accident in waiting. In the events of 16 October an incendiary design was not to be found. Instead, the connected story spoke of a break in “unblemished line of responsible custodianship.”

History Present, Past, and Future

The watercolor studies Turner presumably made on the night of 16 October betray the artist’s characteristic fascination with fire, smoke, contrasts of light and dark. Yet, as Solender notes, their “nebulous forms engender varied interpretations.” For one such as Michel Serres, Turner’s mastery of the nebulous was itself an interpretation of a world (view); thus Turner as gritty realist of Ruskin’s entropic Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century.⁴⁰ A number of generative complications arise from the more prosaic question of whether the watercolors depict *this* fire, the burning of the Houses of Parliament? Andrew Wilton, for one, suggests that the sketches record another fire, at Fenning’s Wharf at Bermondsey, in August 1836.⁴¹ Indeed, what difference does it make which fire serves as Turner’s subject? While the “administrative machinery” that was the statistical organ of the London Fire-Engine Establishment sought a rigorous classification of fires of all types—with

an eye to apportioning risk—the burning of the Houses of Parliament and the destruction of Fenning’s wharf furnish a category unavoidably laden with political, economic, and finally historic resonance. This was the London Establishment’s tabulation of “principal large fires,” which also includes the 1838 fire at the Royal Exchange, the original building bearing that name having perished in the Great Fire of 1666.

As the custodians of narrative, are historians to find a “connected story” in the form, the substance of fire? Or might they better consult such registers that, it was written at the time of their keeping, “may serve, at some future period, as an interesting record.”⁴² An expanded account of the fire at Fenning’s Wharf, though one penned in occasionally unavailing legal parlance, endures in the compendious volumes of the *English Reports*, the collection of nominate cases dating to the thirteenth century.⁴³ The matter of *Gatliffe v. Bourne*, in which the plaintiff sued for damages stemming from the “accidental” fire at Fenning’s Wharf, here briefly enters as an allegory on the fate of record keeping itself.⁴⁴

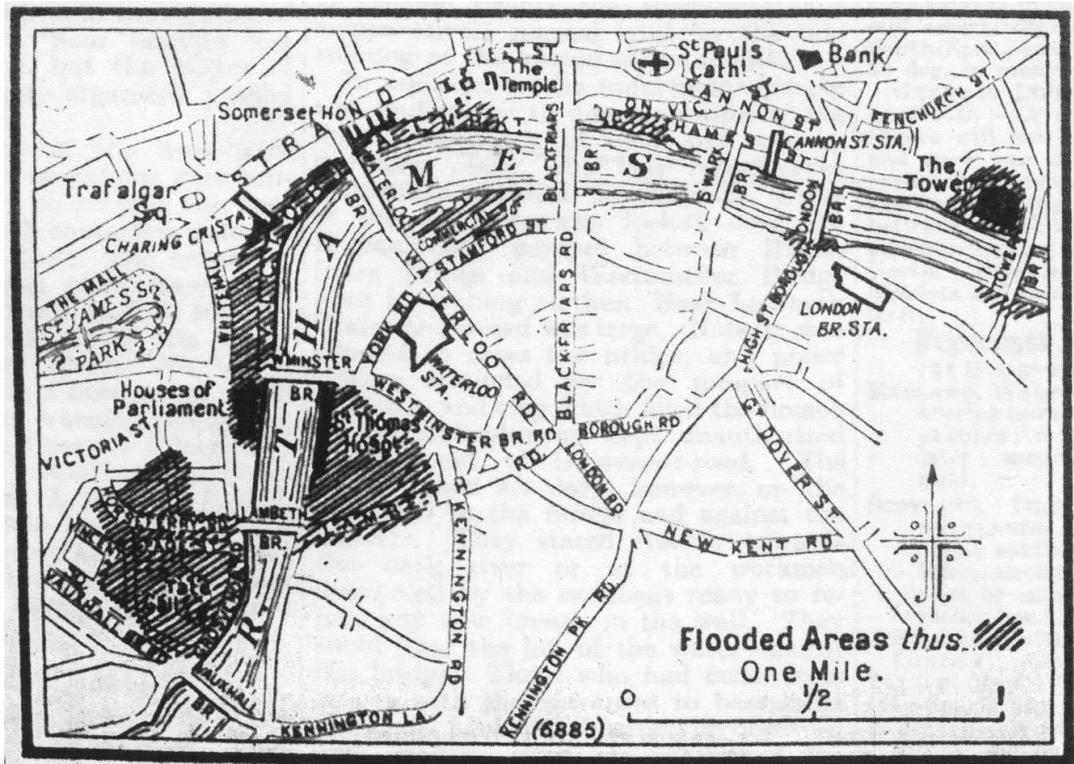
What reckoning is to be made when what is being conveyed is not merely cotton or porcelain china, its destination not London’s docklands; when the store in question is not kept in the hold of a ship but rather in a museum, library, or archive, to be delivered to the attentive gaze of scholars at some future period. Cases such as *Gatliffe v. Bourne*, and many exist, form a mnemonic of things lost. Each requires a reckoning, if not a remedy. Such cases provide so many inventories of accidental remainders to be disposed of. At issue in *Gatliffe v. Bourne* was whether the defendant, a steamship master, fulfilled the terms of a bill of lading—an inventory of wares and the terms stipulating the promise of their delivery—when said wares were unshipped at Fenning’s Wharf. The plaintiff held that “before a reasonable time for delivery elapsed [the goods] were destroyed by a fire, which broke out there by accident.” Accidents do not merely destroy records but often accelerate the production of the same. The defendant pled that it was incumbent upon the consignee to consult commercial sheets such as Lloyd’s Register of British and Foreign Shipping to verify that the ship had arrived safely at port. *Gatliffe v. Bourne* established an important precedent in an area of law where, according to the chief justice, “no general rule governs.” Delivery must be made “in accordance with the practice and custom usually observed in the port or place of delivery,” he held. For to do otherwise would let every species of excuse prevail with reference to delivery of goods at different places: “the state of the tide and wind; interruptions from accidental causes; and all the other circumstances which belong to each particular port or place of delivery.” To apply a general rule—to enforce the unities of time, place, and action, as it

The Flood: Tower Bridge
to Vauxhall. *London Times*
(January 9, 1928).

were—would seek to govern circumstance itself.

Does Finberg's inventory, which first identified the sketchbooks as representations of the destruction by fire of the Houses of Parliament, represent a bill of lading? From the moment Ruskin unpacked the tin boxes containing Turner's bequest, the material bore the markings of an "accidental or experimental finger." The friability of the documentary record is a matter of no mere practical concern. In fact, the physical damage done to Turner's watercolors proves one of the chief objections to counting them as immediate graphic record of the fire at the Houses of Parliament. To be more precise, the Thames flood of 7 January 1928 inundated the Millbank Gallery (now the Tate), in the basement of which the Turner Bequest was (imperfectly) stored. As if made ready for an arduous transit, the sketchbooks were kept in Solander cases, named for the botanist Daniel Solander, who accompanied James Cook on the voyage of the *Endeavor*. Designed to safeguard irreplaceable notes and specimens collected in the field, Solander put them to archival use in his duties as Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. The flood represented one of those "interruptions from accidental causes," to paraphrase *Gatliffe v. Bourne*, that arguably blemished in the most literal sense the "line of responsible custodianship" that was Jenkinson's ideal of good keeping.

In making the stylistic case for Turner's sketchbooks as an immediate visual record of the fire, Solander notes that at this point in his career the artist was long out of the practice of working in watercolors out-of-doors, to say nothing of the difficulties of working at night. However, the sketchbooks seem to bear evidence of an exception in light of the extraordinary nature of the events: the back of the pages facing each watercolor was blotted, suggesting that Turner was working in the open air and rapidly turning over the wet pages. Was this blotting



the graphic record of Turner's rapid commission of his visual ideas? Or was it the residue of the flood?

The graphic trace of the “unprecedented disaster,” as the *Times* deemed it, appeared in the newspaper's pages on 9 January: a map of central London with a laconic key indicating “Flooded Areas *thus* 

Almost as soon as the flood first made news on the morning of 7 January, speculation arose as to whether a pattern—be it historical or meteorological, though the distinction between the two is a fine one—

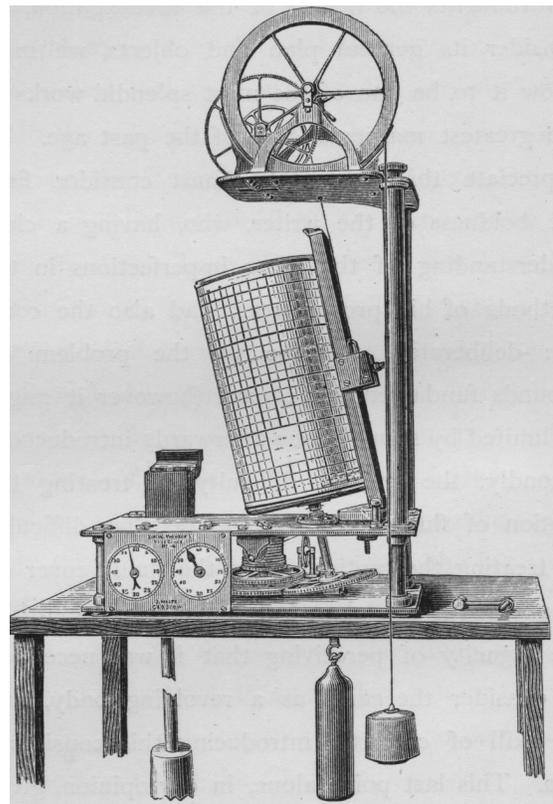


was to be found in the occurrence of such disasters. With the grim facts culled from coroners' inquests continuing to fill its pages—a death-roll of fourteen victims, many taken in their beds—the *Times* reported on a “Sunday Vigil by the River,” wherein thousands of people “observed with growing relief the passing of the minutes in the hour which might have been perilous.” How the scene differs from the evening of 16 October 1836, when throngs of spectators made to the precincts of Parliament, drawn hither by the ineluctable allure of the sublime conflagration. Those who staged the vigil, by contrast, “had a rather dreary wait in the night, with little to provide excitement.”⁴⁷ The present danger having passed, the *Times* published an impressionistic nocturne, a photograph of the river returned to its gently rolling state. The evening's nonevent was what proved newsworthy. The maximum threat of the flood tide recurring was predicted to the minute. What remained to be vigilantly attended was the role of those disturbing factors, deemed “accidental,” which in the calculus of prediction proved irreducible. Under the column heading “Safeguards against Repetition,” a representative of the London County Council was reported in the *Times* to state “that there must have been on this occasion a most unfortunate and probably unique combination of adverse circumstances outside previous experience and beyond human foresight.”⁴⁸ That the flood was unfortunate was a matter to be considered by an array of public authorities, in addition to insurance underwriters who immediately sought to readjust rates for policy owners in low-lying areas of London. However, the unresolved conjunction of “probably unique” points to the difficulty of determining whether, in the nature of things, the “calamity was wholly exceptional,” in the words of the Conference Report.

The chronology of the tides is not that of a calendar but of cross-references. Under the heading “Historical,” the Parliamentary report recapitulates the record of inundation dating to the thirteenth century, from which period endures in the British Library a manuscript tide-table that indicates the time of “flod at London brigge.”⁴⁹ “Flod” refers to the period of high tide, which in Shakespeare's memorable phrase “leads on to fortune.” In the alternative and now perhaps more familiar acceptance of flood as an inundation, a miscellany of misfortune lie in its wake. The scientific committee appointed by Parliament particularly fastened upon the flood tide of December 1663 as noted in Pepys's *Diary*, regarding

Opposite: Photograph of Tate Britain taken from the opposite bank of the swollen River Thames, showing sandbags being piled up on the bank after the flood of 1928. © Tate, London 2007.

Right: William Thomson's Tide Gauge.

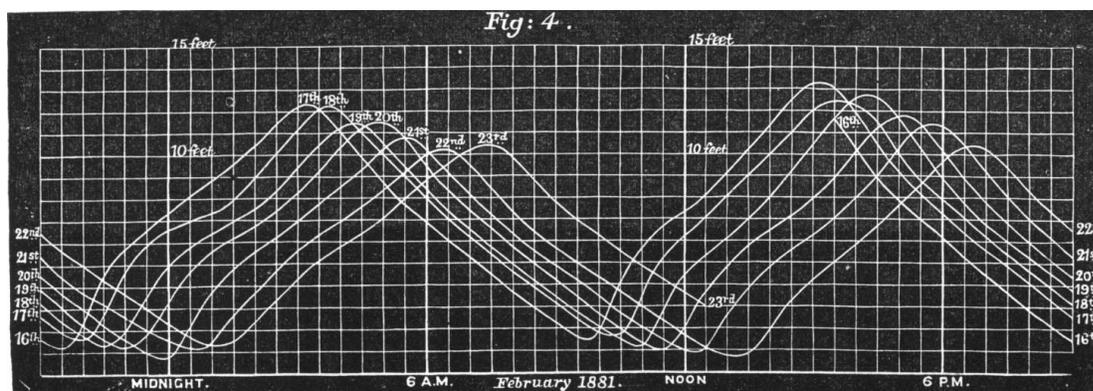


it as a “forerunner” of the still greater catastrophes of plague and fire in 1665 and 1666. An updated form of “fatality”⁵⁰ was at work in the dismal calculations made by mathematician Arthur Doodson, associate director of the Tidal Institute of Liverpool, whom the committee appointed to lead a scientific subcommittee charged with determining the “reasonable probability of the recurrence of a tide of a height approximating to or exceeding that of January 6–7?”⁵¹

Taking the measure of future events was tantamount to understanding the causes of the recently endured disaster.

In the flood year of 1929 Doodson published a paper that “revolutionized” the harmonic analysis of tidal constituents, a conspicuously abstruse problem. His shorter and more accurate processes were subsequently “widely used for normal analyses and the principles have been used for abnormal analyses.”⁵² Differentiating the normal from abnormal, the periodic from a-periodic was one of the defining tasks of tidal analysis. Here the term *remainder* enters into the discussion. The remainder, or residue, describes the departure of the observed tide from the predicted tide. Tidal prediction is possible only when accurate observations have been made of the phenomena to be predicted, the physicist William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) explained in necessarily circuitous fashion. The automated machinery Thomson designed to observe, analyze, and predict the tides not only removed human error but also rendered in legible graphic form the wave form of tides past, present, and future.

“Beware of the kinks.” So warned Thomson, referring to the fine platinum wire that linked the floater of the automatic tide gauge of his own design to its self-registering pencil marker. Like Jenkinson imploring archivists to look out for signs of worm, the concern was for the pests that compromised the record. Tidal analysis was an intensively record-producing and record-based discipline. When the Liverpool Institute was founded in 1919, it was charged not only with the study of prediction techniques, the drafting of tidal charts, the design of recording instruments, and, crucially, the analysis of storm surges but was also to “form a bureau of organized information concerning the tides.”⁵³ A society organizes rational self-knowledge by controlling its records, it was earlier asserted. One trait of that self-knowledge is apparent in the early use of Thomson’s machines to produce tide tables for the major ports of India, the maintenance of regular maritime traffic which was essential to the conduct of empire. In the record form produced by Thomson’s concatenated machinery of observation, analysis, and



prediction is further to be read the attempt to govern circumstance. The enemy of control—accident—is immanent to the legibility of the record. “Beware of the kinks,” which were most likely to occur when “by any accident the motion of the wheelwork has been arrested.”⁵⁴ The paper on which the pencil sinuously marks the ebb and flow of the tide forms a cylinder that by means of the precision-time wheelwork is caused to make one revolution every twenty-four hours. A circle of time was thus continuously inscribed, except when it was not. The fault lies not in the machine, which was designed with internal controls, but in the stars, or rather the sublunary causes that disturb the regular unfolding of time—the storms in which time is materialized.

The principle finding of the official “Report on Thames Floods” was a probable measure of the “recurrence” of a flood tide approximating or exceeding that of 7 January 1928. To arrive at this crucial measure was a matter of calculating the extent to which accidents caused sudden or uncommon departures from the predictable appearance of regular and persistent phenomena. Under the heading “Collection of Data and Method of Reduction,” Doodson notes that the underlying difficulty was to quarry from the masses of the tidal and meteorological record not only the source of large-scale disturbances but its phase and amplitude in relation to ordinary tidal oscillations. Doodson focused on those in which a disturbance of the normal progression of the tides occurred. The analytic “residue” spelled the telling “difference” between the observed and the predicted tides. Once in sixty years. That, according to Doodson, was the reasonably probable rate of recurrence of the tide of 7 January 1928. Understandably left unasked by the report was whether the tidal records upon which such a calculation was based, or the more encompassing scientific-become-bureaucratic apparatus that produced tidal records, would survive a similarly long time. As with the disastrously discarded tally sticks, history is made with the stuff of residue.

Wading In

For an imaginative historian such as Judy Egerton in her study of Turner’s canvas *The Fighting Temeraire*, analysis of tidal records from 1836 served as the basis to reconstruct the hour-by-hour transit of the enormous 98-gun Second Rate ship-of-the-line to its final berth at a breaker’s yard at Rotherhithe.⁵⁵ In fact, the steam tug that compels it appears again in *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* at the bottom right of the canvas, as Serres observes, almost in place of the painter’s signature. There it pulls a floating fire pump, that, arriving at 1:30 A.M.—its movement impeded by the shallowness of the river—failed to be of any service on the night of the fire. Whether the Thames flood of

Weekly sheet of curves traced
by Tide Gauge.

January 7 caused any meaningful damage to Turner's studies of the fire is still open to question; however, the Millbank Gallery Director's Report for 1928 noted that "the archives of the gallery were seriously damaged."⁵⁶ Since added to the Tate's archives is the statement made to the board of trustees by the gallery's director, Charles Aitken, who briefly sketched the "sequence of events" wherein "wading through the flood" the Turner watercolors were "salvaged." The director regretted the release of an earlier, "hastily prepared report" that was "somewhat inaccurate and promises a wrong impression."⁵⁷

"The very possibility of seeing what is actually written depends on the power of the reader to imagine for himself what ought to have been written," Jenkinson writes.⁵⁸ And here the keeper of records resonates with Thomson, who wrote that tidal prediction is possible only when accurate observations have been made of the phenomena to be predicted. In an article of 1937, Jenkinson imagined a possible future when "written archives may dwindle to unimportance and some new form of record be demanded as a result of fresh inventions in telephony and television."⁵⁹ But as concerned as he was with the memorial value of new kinds of record forms such as the telephone message, the future historian's unguarded handling of these documents was what captivated him. Turner already knew what he was going to make of his studies. His artistic translation of events informed the hasty delineation of his personal notation. By contrast, the fate of records is in the hands of remainders, the historians of the future. Upon the difference between the aims of the archivist and historian resides the "gift of impartiality"; namely, the potential of records to be read variously. The only "safe prediction" regarding the research ends to which archives may be made to serve is that they will not be the purposes that were contemplated by the people by whom the archives were drawn up and preserved.⁶⁰ Where safe predictions tend to fail is in the accidental afterlife of the records themselves.

Notes

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3. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 75.
4. On the muses of history and the Angelus Novus, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "History's Two Bodies," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 1 (February 1988): 29.
4. Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. (London: P. Lund, Humphries & Co. 1937). See also Charles Johnson, "The Public Record Office," in *Studies Presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. J. Conway Davies (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 178–195; and Philippa Levine, "History in the Archives: The Public Record Office and Its Staff, 1838–1886," *The English Historical Review* 101, no. 398 (January 1986): 20–41.
5. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 11.
6. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 11; emphasis in original. For a critical evaluation of Jenkinson's views, see Theodore Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). For an important alternative definition of documents, see Michel Foucault, "The Statement and the Archive," *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 79–131.
7. Jenkinson notes that *archive* derives from the Greek *arkheion*, which refers to a magisterial residence or public office. On the housing of "archives" in the residence of the ancient *archons*, see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.
8. Useful accounts of the fire include, "Conflagration of the Two Houses of Parliament," *Gentlemen's Magazine* (November 1834): 477–483; Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London: A Narrative of Its History, Its People, and Its Places* (London: Cassell, Petter, & Galpin, 1878), III: 502–23; and Edward Wedlake Brayley, *The History of the Ancient Palace and Late Houses of Parliament at Westminster* (London: J. Weale, 1836).
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10. Katherine Solender, *Dreadful Fire! Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1984), 43.
11. E.V. Ripplingille, "Personal Reminiscences of Great Artists," *The Art Journal* (1860): 100, quoted in Solender, 54.
12. Alexander Joseph Finberg, *A Complete Inventory of the Drawings of the Turner Bequest, with Which Are Included the Twenty-Three Drawings Bequeathed by Mr. Henry Vaughan. Arranged Chronologically*, 2 vols. (London: Darling & Son, 1909).
13. Andrew Wilton, in *J.M.W. Turner*, exh. cat., trans. Andrew Wilton (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983), 278.
14. Gerard Wilkinson, *Turner's Color Sketches, 1820–34* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, Ltd., 1975), 5.
15. "Extract from the Shorthand Diary of John Green Waller, F.S.A.," transcribed by William J. Carlton, fols. 54f, Carlton College MS 317, London University Library. Carlton was a noted authority on shorthand.

16. See R.J.B. Walker, "The Palace of Westminster after the Fire of 1834," *The Walpole Society* 44 (1974): 94–122.
17. Edmund Gosse, "Diary," *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1910), VIII: 168.
18. "Fires in London, with an Account of the London Fire-Engine Establishment," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 1, no. 5. (September 1838): 283.
19. See Theodore Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
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59. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 12.