Notorious Tom Bell

Intercolonial relations assumed many forms. The most commonplace were those which came under the heading of trade; others included religion, science, medicine, the printing business, and even horse racing. But one of the most spectacular, unusual, and revealing instances concerned a man who not only traveled extensively in the continental colonies, but who was acquainted also with several of the West Indian Islands. Admittedly, travel in mid-eighteenth-century America left much to be desired. Yet if it were necessary for an individual to visit the various seaboard colonies in pursuance of his livelihood, it could be done with amazing regularity.

Tom Bell, a man devoted to making money the easy way, entered the American scene in the late 1730's and departed, at least as far as newspaper coverage is concerned, in 1755. The press in all the major colonial cities at one time or another carried items pertaining to his crimes, which were generally those of a subtle nature. His methods were unique. Bell's primary modus operandi was to assume the name of a prominent family of another colony, approach a wealthy resident with a tale of distress, borrow money and depart, leaving with the victim, for a time at least, the radiant feeling of having helped a distinguished countryman.

Let us follow the adventures of Tom Bell as reported in the early American newspapers. We first hear of him in July, 1738, when the Virginia Gazette reported his escape from Constable John Rodway en route to the Isle of Wight County jail. His crime was a felony; his appearance at that time, "... a middle-sized man, with his own Hair, and ... a Brown colour'd Broadcloth Coat, lin'd with Ash colour'd silk, which has had a Rent in the Back of it." This description is indicative of his character: even if his coat were torn, it had a silk lining.

Several years later this "gentleman" had made Barbados the scene of his operations. This is the least savory of his escapades, and the

1 Virginia Gazette, July 21, 1738.
newspapers are not clear as to all the details of his participation in what was one of the few cases of anti-Semitism reported in the colonial press. In August, 1739, the merchants of Barbados petitioned the president of the island’s council about the colony of Jewish merchants among them. The crux of this bitterly worded indictment seems to lie in the fact that the Jews were underselling their Christian rivals primarily by their purchase of stolen goods and their unconformity to British fashions, a measure which enabled them to eliminate a great expense. But further they had allegedly attacked Christians. “Nor are your Petitioners at a Loss for many Instances of this Nature, and particularly of their daring Insolence to a Stranger* here; a Gentleman of a distinguished Family, sprung from that great Prelate to whom we owe the History of the Reformation. . . .” The asterisk draws attention to a note of editorial correction which identifies the stranger as “an Imposter, who has the Impudence to call himself Burnet.”

The only outcome of this affair, which can be culled from the newspaper files, is the punishment of the impudent imposter. The Pennsylvania Gazette and the Boston News Letter both carry an item from Newport of March 7, 1739/40, brought there from Barbados by one Captain Rogers:

Thomas Bell who went under the name of Gilbert Burnet, Son of Governor Burnet, late of Boston, was whip’t and pillor’d the latter end of December last in Barbados, and was sentenced to be branded with the Letter R on each cheek, for his Misdemeanor and wicked Actions, but the Goodness and Clemency of his Excellency Governor Byng, released him from that Part of his Punishment.

By 1743 Bell had returned to the mainland colonies apparently undaunted by his narrow escape from branding. A resident of Philadelphia wrote to New York concerning the criminal and this letter found its way into newspapers of New York, Boston, and Charleston. It described Bell’s apprehension in the Pennsylvania city and is worthy of quotation:

Last Night came to Town young Mr. Livingston, Son of Robert Livingston of Albany; formerly by the Name of Gilbert Burnet; since by that of Rip Van Dam, jun, but his proper Name is found to be Tom Bell. He imposed the Name of Living- ton on one Mathers of Chester, who I suppose had receiv’d some Favour from that

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2 Ibid., Nov. 16, 1739.
Family, and this Bell appearing like a Gentleman, persuaded Mather's to let him have two Horses, and a Man to bring him up here: He's now taking his second Degree in our College; from which Place he will soon have his Trial, and if he be found fit for the Pillory, doubtless he will receive his Ordination. He imposed himself on the Lower Countries for a Minister. I was present when he was before the Mayor; he there said he was well acquainted with Books, skill'd in Law and Divinity, and believ'd no one could tell him any thing he was not acquainted with before; he rejoic'd in his Sufferings, and hoped to clear himself from all Aspersions. 4

A news item in the Pennsylvania Gazette, reprinted in the South Carolina Gazette, during the period of this visit by Bell to Philadelphia amplifies the description of his technique:

He has it seems made it his Business for several Years to travel from Colony to Colony, personating different People, forging Bills, Letters of Credit, &c. and frequently pretending Distress, imposed grossly [sic] on the charitable and compassionate. He has been in every Colony on the Continent, and in some Parts of the West Indies; knows and talks familiarly of all Persons of Note as if they were of his Acquaintance. In Barbados he was the Thomas Burnet that rais'd the Persecution against the Jews. In the Jerseys he was the Rowland that occasion'd so many Prosecutions, which ('tis said) he now owns. In Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, New-York and New-England, he has been Fairfax, Wentworth, &c. &c. &c. We hear that a very exact Description of his Person, &c. is intended to be published, and dispers'd thro' all the Plantations to prevent future Impositions. 5

By June, 1743, Tom Bell was again on his way, and three papers took notice of the event. "The notorious Tom Bell freed himself from confinement last Saturday Night, and is now taking a Tour thru' the Colonies, apparel'd completely." The item concluded with a caution for the credulous, reminding them of his methods of operation. 6

Nor did the papers underestimate his capabilities. The following month Bell was practicing his profession in New York, albeit unsuccessfully, for by now his name and reputation were becoming well known in America. A September issue of the South Carolina Gazette related his abortive attempt to fleece the burghers of New York and also gave an indication of the presence of mind the rogue had when faced with a difficult situation. It tells how he crossed the ferry into New York City and entered a public house.

4 New York Weekly Post Boy, Feb. 14, 1742/3; Boston News Letter, Mar. 10, 1742/3; South Carolina Gazette, Apr. 18, 1743.
5 Pennsylvania Gazette, Feb. 10, 1742/3; South Carolina Gazette, Apr. 18, 1743.
6 Pennsylvania Gazette, June 16, 1743; Boston News Letter, July 7, 1743; South Carolina Gazette, Sept. 12, 1743.
called for pen and ink and explained his intention to write to a prominent New York acquaintance whom he could not see at present because of the poor condition of his clothing, occasioned by a misfortune at sea. Upon being confronted with the possibility that he was in reality Tom Bell, he denied the accusation, "yet said that whoever Tom Bell was, he was a Man that deserv'd Compassion; and taking his Hat, thought fit to make the best of his Way Out at the Back Door, and has no doubt gone to exercise his Ingenuity where he is not in so much Danger of being known."\(^7\)

Again the paper correctly called the turn, for the *South Carolina Gazette* in November, 1743, contained a date line from Boston (September 20) which indicated that Bell had attempted a new line of endeavor, participation in the Great Awakening: "We are credibly informed that the famous Tom Bell has lately been preaching and exhorting in several Places within the Country of Plymouth, &c. and that with great Success, in the new Way. But 'tis said he has not yet arrived to the Honour and Convenience of an Armour Bearer."\(^8\)

The following summer the "famousSharper" Tom Bell returned to the Philadelphia jail\(^9\) and showed signs of being of some use to the public weal. A gang of counterfeiters—five or six men and two women—were at that time also in custody in Philadelphia. Their work was the reproduction of New York five and forty shilling bills of 1737 in a mint erected in a log house in a remote section of New Jersey. "This Discovery was first made by Tom Bell, to whom one of the Gang apply'd, endeavouring to engage him to be concern'd with them, and assist in Signing their Bills."\(^10\)

Bell was reported next to have been seen walking the streets of New York "with a large black Patch on one of his Cheeks" in November, 1744\(^11\); he shortly thereafter journeyed to Charleston, South Carolina.

Last Thursday the celebrated Mr. Thomas Bell, otherwise called TOM BF.J.J., &c. (so well known thru' all the Colonies and most of the Islands, by his Actions for several Years past under fictitious Names), was committed to the Work-House in this Town, as a Vagabond. He was detected and secur'd by the Honourable

\(^7\) *Ibid.*
\(^8\) *Ibid.*, Nov. 7, 1743.
\(^10\) *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 9, 1744; *South Carolina Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1744.
\(^11\) *Boston News Letter*, Nov. 15, 1744.
Edmond Atken, Esq; having (after several attempts for that Purpose) introduced himself to that Gentleman, at his House on Wands Neck, as a Native of the Province going to Goose Creek, and at last assum'd the Name of Nathaniel More [?]. Mr. Atken, in coming to Town, instead of landing Mr. Bell on Daniels Island as he expected, brought him to this Town; and as a great Concourse of People daily flocks to see him, no doubt the further Execution of His Schemes in this Province will be hereby defeated.  

Several weeks later Bell was released from the Charleston workhouse, as it appeared he had not committed any crime since his arrival in the Carolina capital. Upon his departure from the province, the South Carolina Gazette printed a short description of the notorious character: “He wears a light colour’d Sur tout, and a light Wig, and walks very quick.” This particular episode in Tom Bell’s career holds a great deal of significance. So well had his description and methods been circulated in the colonies that Mr. Atken was able to detect him immediately and thus prevent the deception of less discerning inhabitants of Charleston.

In North Carolina, however, Bell had found a victim. In an advertisement in the Virginia Gazette, in October, 1745, John Campbell of Edenton disclosed the criminal’s arrival in the province from Jamaica and warned the people of his character. Bell, in the past December, had forged a letter of credit on Campbell from Colonel Andrew Meade, “and received a Sum of Money on said Meade’s Account, in the Name of Robert Middleton, which he then assumed, as he often changes his Name, the better to impose.” Campbell offered a further description of the “incorrigible Offender”: “He had on a Silk Waistcoat; is a middle-siz’d smooth-fac’d Fellow, very smooth-tongu’d, and is a pretty good Scholar.” A reward was offered by Campbell if the offender was apprehended in North Carolina or Virginia within six months. A note to the advertisement explained that Bell had been in many jails north of Maryland and had currently assumed the name of Captain Randall of Havana.

12 South Carolina Gazette, Feb. 18, 1744/5.
13 Ibid., Mar. 4, 1744/5.
14 Ibid., Mar. 11, 1744/5.
15 There is no other account of Bell having been in Jamaica at this time. This fraud was evidently perpetrated the previous winter when he was traveling from New York to Charleston.
16 Virginia Gazette, Oct. 31, 1745.
In May, 1746, Bell was confined in the New York jail, accused of selling a horse he had hired on Long Island, but maintained his innocence "with a most undaunted Front and matchless Impudence. . . ." He was released by the Court of Quarter Sessions with orders to depart within twenty-four hours. Between these visits to the New York jail, Bell was reported as "listed a Soldier" in a New Jersey company and gone to Albany. We have seen that he utilized the religious revival to serve his needs; now he apparently made use of the military crisis, for it is to be doubted that a character so accustomed to easy living would have enlisted in the army for other than ulterior motives.

Yet this may be doing injustice to Bell, for shortly thereafter he became a schoolmaster in Virginia. The *Virginia Gazette* reported in 1752 that "the ingenious Mr. THOMAS BELL, the famous American traveller, made his public appearance in this city. . . . As his former character and romantic life, have made a great noise in every American colony, 'twill doubtless be a satisfaction to all who have any knowledge of him, to hear in what manner he has lived, during his retirement from the public. . . ." The article explained that he had been a schoolmaster in Hanover County for two years and possessed a certificate signed by leading men of that county vouching that he had "behaved himself with Justice, Sobriety, and good Manners. . . ." Upon his departure several days later, however, the Virginia paper expressed some doubt of Bell's reformation. "Can the Æthiopian change his skin, or the Leopard his spots: then also may he do good that has been accustomed to do evil."

The purpose of his visit to the capital was revealed in an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* of the following month. In it Bell informed the public that he had seen the folly of his ways: "I am now determined to spend the Remainder of my Days in a close Application to some reputable Business, wherein I may render myself a useful Member of Society, and acquire a Substance suitable to my

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17 Ibid., May 15, 1746.
20 Virginia Gazette, July 24, 1752; Boston News Letter, Aug. 27, 1752.
21 Ibid.
Genius and Education." To do this he planned to publish a history of his experiences which he believed would not only be amusing but instructive. It was to be called "THE TRAVELS and ADVENTURES of the famous TOM BEI.I., For upwards of twenty Years of his Life, viz From the Year 1730 to the present Year 1752. . . ." 22

Apparently the project was not well received, for two years later Bell was in Charleston in pursuit of subscriptions. The South Carolina Gazette gave him good publicity. The printer copied the articles from the Virginia paper which told of Bell's reformation and of his intention to print his memoirs. He believed the former criminal to be sincere and thought the undertaking merited support, for it promised to vie "with any History of the kind ever yet made public. . . ." 23

An advertisement in the same issue of the Gazette told of the improvements made on the manuscript which had been "interspersed with moral Reflections [and] Revised and embellished by several able Hands." 24 Three weeks later another notice appeared in which Bell announced his intention to depart from Charleston. He again appealed for subscribers and thanked the magistrates for their indulgence, hoping that his story had won for him "some degree of their favourable opinion." 25

There remains but one last incident to relate before Tom Bell disappears abruptly from the pages of the colonial press. In 1755, the Boston News Letter contained an Antiguan item concerning his arrival on the island of St. John. He had gone there in an effort to improve his health, thus to enable him to pursue the project of printing his memoirs. This article, interestingly enough, fills in several items of background material that had previously been neglected. Bell had been a storekeeper in Jamaica and had maintained an academy near the Ohio; he had "practised Physic, pleaded Law and acted Tar by being many Voyages before the Mast. . . ." The concluding sentence of this account, while perhaps said in jest, nonetheless presents one valediction to the life of the versatile adventurer:

22 Virginia Gazette, Aug. 14, 1752. The facts of his proposal were also printed in the South Carolina Gazette of Oct. 30, 1752, under a New York date line.
23 South Carolina Gazette, July 18, 1754.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., Aug. 8, 1754.
"Since, therefore, it appears that his Proceedings do not partake of Tragedy, he seems to deserve the Appellation of an Universal Comedian."

Edgewood, Md. Brooks E. Kleber

26 *Boston News Letter*, Apr. 10, 1755. Apparently the history of Tom Bell's life was never published. A check of the bibliographies of American imprints reveals no trace of its publication. It would have been a valuable addition to our knowledge of colonial America, for although Bell was a "little man" in the broad path of history, to his contemporaries he was probably better known than many of the more notable figures. (For example, in the colonial newspapers there are at least seven times as many references to Bell as to Jonathan Edwards.)

Bell's publication project may have been his last and greatest hoax. There is no suggestion of the possibility in the press, however, and Bell was good copy. But the lack of subscribers, in a period when subscriptions for such projects were popular, may well indicate public apprehension that his memoirs were just another fraud.