

Two Bells (2007)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

There I was in Philadelphia, with two Liberty Bells.

The first was the one I expected, that magnificent icon of our freedom, which tolled history from 1753 until it cracked 93 years later; it's housed in a fine brick enclosure, behind floor-to-ceiling glass on the street-side. Inside you can walk right up beside it. These days you have to have your purses and bags checked.

The surprise was the second one, right outside, parked on a trailer, with twin placques of the Ten Commandments on either side of it. And there was David Hall, dressed in his Minuteman outfit, who explained to me that it's the only exact replica of the original, that it belongs to his family, and that he tours the country with it at various patriotic events. His exhibit is called "Liberty and Law," and makes the point that without Law, there is no liberty.

When I said it was a replica of the original, it pretty much is, except for the crack, which keeps the original silent, of course — but not David's. His bell has the crack etched on the side, but the bell itself is intact: 2,080 pounds of it, 3 feet from lip to crown, 12 feet in circumference. And you can ring it! He let me do it — I pulled the rope, the clapper swayed a little; David said, "Pull it!" so I did — all 44 and a half pounds of it, and rang the bell! It rings E Flat; did you know that? I'll confess it was a thrill.

I learned very quickly that there's a religious side to David's organization, too — which explains the Ten Commandments monuments bracketing the bell. He tried to explain it to me, but got into deep water pretty quickly; I got pretty confused just as quickly, and I began to edge away from him the more I discerned that his views and mine diverged widely.

But then it came to me: I didn't have to agree with his point of view; I didn't even have to understand it. He was free. He was free to tour the country, to appear at state fairs and parades and schools, to show his bell and tell his story: it's the liberty of this land symbolized by the first bell that makes it possible for his bell to ring.

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