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978-1-108-07806-1 - Palissy the Potter: The Life of Bernard Palissy, of Saintes, his
Labours and Discoveries in Art and Science: Volume 1

Henry Moley

Excerpt

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PALISSY THE POTTER.

CHAPTER I.

BIRTH, PARENTAGE, AND EARLY EDUCATION.

FOR the birth of Bernard Palissy we can assign no more precise date than the year 1509, with a concession that this may be wrong within a limit of six years on either side. The date assigned by his last editor is 1510.

Of the birthplace of Bernard Palissy we only know that it was somewhere in the diocese of Agen. The aforesaid editor does, indeed, undertake to be particular. He tells us that Palissy was born at Chapelle Biron, a poor hamlet near the small town of Biron, in Perigord.

The town of Biron lies so near the southern boundary of Perigord, upon the little river Lade, that to descend the Lade only so far as to Chapelle Biron, is to cross from Perigord into the Agenois. Chapelle Biron is placed about three-quarters of a mile over the border; but although politically situated in the diocese of Agen, it belongs, by virtue of its scenery, to Perigord.

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Perigord is a province, in part hilly and mountainous, in part made up of barren plains. In the days of Palissy, it abounded more than it now does in forest tracts, containing many walnut-trees, and chestnuts in such great abundance that they formed the staple food of the poor natives. These chestnuts also aided in the fattening of herds of pigs, whose noses were at all times prompt to perceive where truffles were concealed under the light soil within the forest. The wealth of Perigord depended, at the time in which we are now interested, on its forests and its pigs; in an inferior degree, on oxen, upon vineyards, and the oil extracted from its nuts. Its truffles were then, as now, an appreciated luxury; and perhaps the notion of combining with these dainties in a pie the excellent pheasants which are fattened in the truffle-yielding woods, had already dawned upon men as the great idea which was hereafter to make Perigord illustrious.

Over the vast heaths, and through the woods, and by the numerous river-torrents which the mountains pour upon the province, walked a free-hearted, clever, lively race of men. Hard and energetic as their dialect was their war-loving character, and good recruits were yielded from their number to the many armies called for in that period of troubles. Many armies had been marching into and out of France, hither and thither, during the period preceding the birth of Palissy; moreover, since the consolidation of the monarchy, neglect had been suffered by

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PERIGORD AND THE AGENOIS.

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districts distant from the central power—by Perigord and its neighbours among the rest. Therefore, in the beginning of the sixteenth century traces of former cultivation were already beginning to be defaced, and the internal wealth of Perigord was rapidly decreasing. The life-blood of France, then in a diseased condition (as it very often is, causing the body of the country to be frequently disfigured by eruptions)—the life-blood then gathering about the head, caused that to throb in a distressing manner, while it left a chill at the extremities.

Through Chapelle Biron flows the river Lade, a little tributary to the Lot; the waters of the Lot flow into the Garonne. By these rivers the Agenois, the district submitted to the diocese of Agen, is made fertile. Physically, the Agenois differs only from its northern neighbour, Perigord, in having larger rivers, more vines, fewer hills, and a soil more uniformly generous. The barren tract about Chapelle Biron is not a characteristic of the Agenois, but, as we said before, of Perigord. If, therefore, it was in Chapelle Biron that Palissy was born, it would please the fanciful to show how well he had been fitted with a birthplace. The variety of scene, the combinations of fertility and barrenness, would make a scrap of Perigord poetically fit to be the birthplace of a man who lived through scenes of intense contrast; who was free-hearted, clever, lively as men are who play upon the heaths when they are children; who was grandly energetic, and if not delighting in a war with men, warred

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against difficulties in the way of knowledge with a heroism that communicates even to the baldest records of his life the colour of romance.

Unluckily, we are unable to attach much credit to the theory which has deposited the birthplace of Palissy upon the skirts of Perigord. That he was native of the fertile Agenois, all writers, on the assurance of his contemporaries, will of course agree. By simple misconception, he has now and then been chronicled in dictionaries as a native of the town of Agen. Some hamlet was probably his birthplace; but the evidence in favour of Chapelle Biron is insufficient. It is no more, I believe, than this: that there is at Chapelle Biron a kiln, bearing the name of Palissy; and that a family with that name, supposed to be descended from the Potter, had for some time resided on the spot. Now we know with certainty that the father of Palissy could not have been a potter. Bernard himself tells us, that when he commenced his own experiments in pottery, he "had never seen earth baked;"* therefore his father's livelihood could not have been drawn out of a kiln. The existence of a Palissy family upon the spot may make it probable, that among the descendants of the Potter, who had many children, one settled at Chapelle Biron, following in a rude way the calling which had made his family-name famous in the History of Art; but it does not prove that Bernard was born at that place. Still, therefore, the

* In *L'Art de Terre*, which will be found translated under the title of "The Artist in Earth," at the end of this biography.

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doubt must be allowed to hang about this portion of our subject. Of some of the grandest rivers which fertilise our world, the source has been for ages undiscovered,—of many, even the existence was for centuries unknown, except to the few dwellers by their banks.

Concerning the parentage of Bernard Palissy, we shall need but little shrewdness to arrive at a satisfactory amount of knowledge. The business to which he was educated was that of a glass-painter,* and worker generally in painted glass. Painted windows were formed both after the manner of mosaic-work (which had originated the invention), by the artistic combination of fragments of glass differently coloured, and also by the fixing upon sheet-glass of pigments laid on with a brush. Glass-making, and all the processes connected with the shaping and colouring of glass, belonged to the art of *Verrerie*, which was accounted in the days of Palissy, and long before and afterwards, an honourable occupation. Not honourable or worshipful in the vague sense employed by our own trading corporations, but literally an occupation which a nobleman might follow without loss of caste in the eyes of a punctilious community.

There were two or three such noble trades, and there was need of them. Penny-needing nobles swarmed formerly in France, as they do now in Spain or Austria.

* “I for a long time practised glass-painting, until I was assured that I could earn bread by labour on earth.” This and other passages to the same effect occur in *L'Art de Terre*.

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They were born to the right of talking big and eating little. They received a birthright, and paid for it with their potage. For the benefit of such men, or rather for the benefit of the order to which they belonged, and to prevent these ragged nobles from breaking down the platform which elevates men noble by their birth above men noble by their honesty, it was from early times thought prudent to honour one or two trades, by allowing noblemen to get their bread in them without a loss of dignity. Thus glass and glory came to be akin. I mean, of course, the glory which consists in a nobility by right of calfskin, as separated from and lifted over a nobility by right of soul. Some satirist, no doubt, suggested glass as a fit substance to be paired with glory of this kind, since both were blown after the fashion of a bubble, both could be seen through by a man with healthy eyes, and both required forbearance in the handling.

The infusion of nobility into the glass trade was so complete, that a belief arose, and has been to this day maintained in many places, that nobles only were permitted to engage in this employment; that they transmitted the trade to their children, and allowed no new business to be opened by a stranger, unless he produced his patents of nobility. By law this never was the fact; by custom it appears to have been the case, however, in a few districts, while in others glass-working was practised by men who had not the immunities of the noble-class, and certainly did not acquire them by virtue of their

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TRADING NOBLEMEN.

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occupation. The practice of *Verrerie* was in fact, as I before said, honourable; it might be practised by a noble without loss of caste, although it did not elevate men out of lower classes, otherwise than by associating them with what was thought to be a gentlemanly occupation.

Poor nobles, labouring for food as glass-workers, taught the trade to their sons; and as few who laboured would be willing to communicate their secrets to strangers, in whom they had not the interest of near relationship, it will be more especially true of glass-workers, as it was true very generally of most trades formerly, and is true rather generally now, that the occupation of the father comes to be the occupation of the son. Bernard Palissy we know to have been born poor, and to have received in his childhood no more than a peasant's education, except that he learned to draw* and paint on glass. We cannot err much in inferring, therefore, that his father was a glass-worker. Additional testimony is, however, furnished by the fact that Palissy, himself bred to *Verrerie*, apparently believes the art to be confined to nobles. He speaks at all times, not from books, but from experience. We may with certainty, perhaps, infer that he himself belonged to one of the innumerable families of petty nobles; and in that case, undoubtedly, the trade to which

* "God has gifted me with some knowledge of drawing."—*The Artist in Earth*. With Palissy's occupations from the first, drawing was associated, and it therefore has frequent mention in his works. From this passage we may suppose the taste to have been developed very early.

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he was educated he acquired from the instructions of his father. Writing in later life, Palissy says:

“I beg you to consider awhile our glasses, which, through having been too common among men, have fallen to so vile a price, that the greater part of those who make them live more sordidly than Paris porters. The occupation is noble, and the men who work at it are nobles; but several who exercise that art as gentlemen, would gladly be plebeians, and possess wherewith to pay the taxes.”

Of these glass-workers, living more sordidly than Paris porters, we have accounts somewhat more recent than the time of Palissy, which do not indicate that they improved in their condition. The fine gentleman who travelled out of town, found, buried in the gloom of a wild forest, men whose sylvan solitude he celebrated in the cant phrase of his day. The simplicity, the candour, the remoteness from men and the propinquity to birds, enjoyed by the glass-workers in the great wood, were duly envied by the little gentleman, who nevertheless would have felt, as against his own person, the suspicion of simplicity to be an insult, and who did not venture to be candid even to himself. The gentleman to whom it was a glorious birthright to be idle, professed to admire the painful toil by which the rough men in the woods earned their exemption from the vapours; and never could the head under a wig forget the day when, for some festival, wild hair was combed, and rugged beards were shaven, by

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HOMES OF THE GLASS-WORKERS.

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the mirror of a pool in the recesses of the forest,—when, rudely accoutred and after an antique way, the knights of the glade made holiday, and bowed, like creatures out of Ariosto, at the feet of the wild beauties of the hamlet. The forest-chase of a wild dinner, and the red glow of the furnace after sunset upon moss and bark of trees, supplied the traveller with themes for a sickly, tepid eloquence, which leaves, after evaporation, a distinct trace of nothing but the fact that the glass-workers were miserably poor.

The furnaces and hamlets of these people were generally to be found in the recesses of a forest, and for the choice of a situation of this kind, good reasons existed. At a period when domestic buildings were much more combustible than they now are, the existence of glass-furnaces within a town was a decided source of risk. It was the banishment of glass-huts from the town itself, in the year 1291, which caused the establishment near Venice of the famous glass-works of Murano. Glass had been made in Gaul from the remote time of the elder Pliny, and the French did not neglect those measures of precaution which were thought requisite in other countries, and of which we find records at a later period in London also. Moreover, to the glass-workers themselves, when wood was their fuel, and the ashes of certain twigs, and of fern, were used as an ingredient in their manufacture, it was more convenient to build their workshops in the wood, where articles of which they were in daily want sur-

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rounded them, and they were saved much loss of time, or much expense of carriage. For this reason, either scattered or singly, or collected with the dwellings of their owners into little woodland hamlets, the fires of the French glass-workers were lighted, in the days of Palissy, most frequently in the recesses of a forest.

Very reasonably, therefore, we may suppose that in a hamlet of the kind thus indicated Palissy was born ; that as a child he rolled upon the moss, and ripened with the chestnuts. Bits of coloured glass held a high place, no doubt, among his early toys, and some of his first lessons must have been those which taught him to distinguish between certain minerals, by the burning of which upon its surface, glass was coloured. Of the learning of his day, none was communicated to the child. The invention of printing had revived letters, and created with the power the desire to read. Italy excepted, little literature had been then added by Europe to the stores of history, philosophy, and poetry, bequeathed to us by ancient Greece and Rome. Whatever folly may attach in our own day to an exclusive study of the ancients, borrowed from our forefathers, to the neglect of better things, that folly is not to be ascribed to our forefathers themselves. Before they had the minds of Shakspeare, Goethe, Molière, Cervantes, Humboldt, and some thousand more, to study, it was in Greek and Latin that they had to seek the highest, and, with some obvious exceptions, the only literature which tended to the education of the world. The degree of