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978-1-107-55978-3 - A Painter's Pilgrimage Through Fifty Years

A. S. Hartrick

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE PAINTER

“Artists are dull dogs.” Thus spake Benjamin Jowett, sometime master of Balliol, as reported to me by my house-master at Fettes when I tentatively proposed “painting” as my “life” career. And the verdict was reinforced in growls to my mother, then a widow, by the headmaster, W. A. Potts, to the effect that they were “an uneducated lot”. Doubtless this criticism and resistance was based on experience of the world, such as they had, and was well meant—but the immediate result for me was that my effort to make a serious attempt at beginning as an artist was postponed until after I should have passed the matriculation examination for medicine at Edinburgh University. This, however, I accomplished successfully, even with some honours, if I remember aright; though indeed I remember little of it, for in my mind that examination was no more than another obstacle to my purpose, now safely overcome.

But as this writing is by way of autobiography, and as there are always with us those who demand facts, apart from the majority who prefer fiction, I must go back from Fettes for a little while to Bangalore in India, near which place my father, Captain William Hartrick, was stationed with his regiment, the 7th Royal Fusiliers, on 7 August 1864, where and when I was born. As to my ancestry (if it matters), it was Scots, Welsh and Irish, so should be called mongrel, like that of most people in these islands, I suppose. The Hartricks, I have been told, came from Holland with William III, and were given land in New Ross as military settlers after the Battle of the Boyne. My father was a cousin of Charles Lever, the novelist: these are all my contacts with Erin that are worth recording. On my mother’s side I may claim a connection with sufficient of romance in it to have

2

The Painter

attracted the attention and the pen of Sir Walter Scott. For the Rose Bradwardine in *Waverley*, as Scott himself testifies in his introduction to that novel, was moulded on Mary Stewart of Invernahyle in Appin, who, as a child of eight years old, for weeks after Culloden evaded the soldiers who were hunting her wounded and fugitive father, Alexander Stewart, and fed and tended him in a cave hidden in a thicket on his own property. That Mary Stewart became the great-grandmother of my own grandfather. Much more of the romantic history of Stewart of Invernahyle can be read in that same introduction to *Waverley*. Of Welsh blood, I remember a grand-uncle, Joseph Peers, the last of his race, who was Clerk of the Peace for Denbigh in North Wales. There is, or used to be, a public memorial to him in the town of Ruthin. The memory of him remains green with me, for his custom was to send my parents at Christmas a cake from Bolland of Chester and a Stilton cheese. As I write I wonder if there be anything in this Celtic ancestry to account for my juvenile artistic tendencies, or whether the whole belief of some artistic strain in any trickle of Celtic blood be mere superstition. I have no other reason to account for it in myself.

At two years of age I came home permanently to the land of my fathers and mothers in a troopship; and, of course, as needs be in those days, by way of the Cape. We touched at St Helena, where I am informed, and perhaps remember, that I was held up by the French sentry, there stationed, to kiss the bust of the great Napoleon.

This makes a sufficient introduction of myself to bring me back to Fettes. Notwithstanding the unfavourable view of the artist's vocation in high authority at that school, a drawing-master was kept there. He was an elderly Bohemian named Bohuslav Kroupa. His skull had been bashed in by a blow from a Prussian needlegun at the battle of Königgrätz in 1866, and since then he had wandered the earth a political exile. How he came to be appointed to Fettes I have no idea. He was a good friend to me, giving me prizes for drawing and nursing my enthusiasm for

The Painter

3

art, though he remained a “butt” for the majority of the school, who cheeked, tormented and told funny stories about him, as boys will do with foreigners. There was no proper equipment for teaching art in public schools at that time, and, truth to tell, Kroupa was an amateur in art who could not take one far. The most valuable art teaching I had at Fettes was acquired from a study of the early numbers of the *Graphic* newspaper, bound volumes of which were in my house library. There I used to copy from the works of Boyd Houghton, E. J. Gregory, W. Small and others. Both Thomas Hardy and Van Gogh have pointed to their value as education in art, so by instinct or accident I wrought better than I knew. I have learnt recently, from Col. M. W. Douglas, a contemporary at Fettes, that the news that I, a favourite pupil, had gone to study in Paris, was a nightmare to old Kroupa. “He is lost. He will return an impressionist!” he wailed; a matter fully as shocking in those days to the well brought up as a post-impressionist of yesterday or to-day.

Further, the decision was that I must remain at school for yet another year, presumably to acquire more culture. The net result, profit or loss, to me was that I got my cap for the 1st XV at Rugby football, and was in the school VIII for gymnastics; at cricket I was an indifferent performer, being short-sighted. Such is, or was, my education for that period, and honestly, I doubt if I can ever complain. What mind I possess is, thank God, contained *in corpore sano*, which was certainly encouraged. Nevertheless, that dismissal of all artists as “dull dogs” rankled with me at the time and still does.

The education of an artist is a much more personal matter than that of a schoolmaster or a don. What others know or can teach is of little use to him. Only what his own eye and hand and brain can together create will serve him in the end. “Though we can become learned through another man’s knowledge, we can never be wise except in our own wisdom” is how Montaigne puts it.

The Painter

The lives of artists, as written by themselves or other people, do not fare badly beside the biographies of the eminent who have been conventionally educated. It is doubtful if an autobiography exists more vivid and more widely acclaimed by the verdicts of every nation that counts than that of Benvenuto Cellini, artist, egoist, ruffian and even scoundrel though he may appear in the eyes of the righteous.

Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks are still yielding ideas and possibly gold to investigators, and William Blake, already, has as many books written in English about himself and his mysticism as St John the Divine.

Even the failures have a saving quality about them, for Benjamin Hayden's autobiography and Van Gogh's letters have a vitality that seems to have evaporated from the life of Benjamin Jowett and his like, eminent and important though they were in their own time.

Finally, on this subject I would like to quote the opinion of Ellen Terry, who must have met the pick of all the men of her day; it is written in her own autobiography that of the two most brilliant men she had ever known Whistler was one.

For what my own experience is worth, I can confirm her statement about Whistler. He had the quickest brain of anyone I have ever known and he used it like an artist to be perfectly charming or perfectly impossible. To this I would like to add that it amuses me to remember that although Whistler, in his impatience, mocked and abused England and the stodginess of the English as compared with the politeness and polish of the inhabitants of Paris or West Point, his perspicacity did not fail him at the end; for in spite of all temptations, when his time drew near he retired into the bosom of a real British family to die, and left all the money he had to his English sister-in-law in gratitude for her care of him with the certainty that his last wishes would be punctiliously obeyed. Few so faithful would be found to-day, for nearly all would think that they "knew better!"

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[More information](#)*The Painter*

5

“*Qui s’excuse s’accuse*”, but having got this grievance off my chest I will proceed with my narrative.

In the last year of my time at Fettes, my mother made her second marriage to Dr Charles Blatherwick, a widower with a family mostly grown up, who lived near my home at Rhu on the Gareloch, in Dumbartonshire. He was Chief Inspector of Alkali Works for Scotland, and also an amateur painter in water-colours of quite professional ability—indeed, he had been one of the founders of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Water-Colour about the middle of the eighteen seventies, and was President of the Glasgow Art Club; thus he was at home in all art circles of the West of Scotland. Socially, he was the most gifted man I have ever known—musician, writer, painter, as well as doctor of medicine; and each of a standard that was remarkable. He had been in practice at Highgate until his health broke down, living in what was still known as Coleridge’s house; and after an interval was appointed to this Inspectorship, which had just been created under the Local Government Board.

At last the opposition to my aspirations, so far as authority was concerned, passed away. After various inquiries as to ways and means I found myself in London at the Slade School of Art under Professor Legros. Those were the days of the apotheosis of the Barbizon School of painting for the English and American public. More pictures signed Corot than the artist had painted in his lifetime had been sold in America alone.

J. F. Millet’s picture, “*The Angelus*”, after a series of rapid rises in value, was bought for 553,000 francs (the franc was then worth 10*d.* in sterling) from the estate of a Parisian stock-broker Secretan, who had made a fortune speculating in copper, and lost it. The name of Millet was in the news of the world, a competition having been cleverly started by the picture-dealers and worked up by the press in the fashion still approved by publicity. The moneybags of Europe and America were set in competition. We were told that the honour of nations was at stake; and dramatically the picture was saved for France by

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6

The Painter

Mons. Proust, the Government agent, from the bids of two American dealers who arrived after the sale had started! But this was not the end of “sensations” in regard to it. The French Government refused to ratify the deeds of its agent, so the picture was surrendered to the Americans, who took it home and exhibited it in New York and all the principal American cities as the most expensive picture in the world! At long last it was bought for £32,000 and brought back to France by a Mons. Chouchard, proprietor of the Magazins du Louvre, the chief French collector of Barbizon pictures, and by him was bequeathed to the Louvre, where it now hangs. Through reproductions, in every form and shape, it has become one of the best-known pictures in the world. I was surprised at its small size when I saw it for the first time, and even more astonished to learn that when first painted it earned for the painter the reputation of a dangerous anarchist together with much accompanying abuse. While agreeing that the motive really is touching and the design impressive, most painters will agree also that it is not the artist’s finest work—indeed, the Louvre already possessed in the “Gleaners” and the “Church at Greville” two unchallenged masterpieces. The most marvellous painting by Millet I have ever seen is that lovely nocturne called “A Shepherd in the Fold by Moonlight” painted in 1861. About four feet square in size, it was exhibited at the International Exhibition in Paris of 1889, when it belonged to a Belgian collector. The luminosity and quality of the moonlight in this picture is extraordinary; quite as startling as the first sight of a Van Gogh to me, but with a reserve that is absent from the latter. The moonlight really floods everything and the flanks of the sheep seem to heave, while their breath goes up like smoke in the frosty air; there can be no reservations—it is a masterpiece.

The most striking memory I have of the art world, in my early days at the Slade, is of Rodin and his “L’âge D’Airain”. He was a personal friend of Legros, and for a week or two I

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[More information](#)*The Painter*

7

seem to remember him a small energetic figure with a wispy beard hurrying about the passages of the Slade; very different from the stout, grave signor (with scented beard) of the International Society twenty years later.

The statue, already cast in bronze, had been placed in the corridor outside Legros's private room, which was not used as a studio but as an office. Rodin at that time had hardly become known in London, but the bronze excited considerable interest, not to mention criticism, among the students, especially on account of the story that it had been rejected from the Salon at first, because the jury believed that the torso had been cast from the life; a suspicion that was proved to be false. It disappeared from its place at the Slade for about a fortnight, then returned, and we students heard sinister rumours that it had been sent to the Royal Academy and was rejected from there also!

Legros was not a stimulating teacher for the ordinary, undistinguished student. In the first place he did not speak English, so there was a barrier between him and those who could not speak French. The teaching of the common herd was chiefly in the hands of Messrs Slinger and Durham, both elderly men. The former was cleverly caricatured as the "Vulture" in an early book called *The Wages of Sin* by the daughter of Charles Kingsley, who wrote under the name of "Lucas Malet": this description aptly conveys his appearance to the youth of that day. He used to follow Legros, when he made his somewhat rare rounds of the classes, to translate the words of the "master", and always began "the Professor says". What the Professor said was usually "pas mal", or something equally colourless; but in correcting the life drawing he had one peculiarity: on the smallest opportunity he cut down the size of the genitals, saying, "Michael Angelo always made them small".

Of Slinger many tales used to be told, of which an encounter with a student called Sturdee is worthy to be preserved from oblivion if possible. Coming up to the drawing, Slinger began

his criticism: "A little more andante, Mr Sturdee, a little more andante", and he went on rubbing his hands together as was his wont. "Ah! I thought we were supposed to draw *à Legros*", was the *riposte* of the victim; and this indeed was the burden of most outside criticism of the period. The truth is that Legros, like other artists of strong individuality, had a very marked effect, perhaps too marked, on his favourite pupils, such as William Strang, Charles Holroyd and J. B. Clarke. Although, I confess, I did not see it properly at that time, it is my conviction now that his method of teaching drawing, based on that of the old Italian masters, to draw with the point and by the character of the contour rather than by the mass in tone, is the best, if not the only one for the proper training of a student. Drawing is the study of the representation of form, and the expression of form is the end of drawing.

For the purpose of teaching this art nothing can equal the point on white paper, and such was Legros's general instruction to his pupils. Charcoal and the brush, tools most suitable for the representation of tone and colour, should come later. A novelty, in those days of square drawing and the stump, in most art schools, Legros provided quantities of full-size photographs of drawings by the old masters, especially those by Leonardo, Michael Angelo and Raphael. These, all students were encouraged to study and to copy. "Nothing new in that" the expert will say, but it was new then and can easily be forgotten again. In the formation of taste as well as in training the eye this sort of unconscious discipline is invaluable.

Charles Holroyd (a future Director of the National Gallery, for which he was knighted) and Harrington Mann were the "high lights" in the life-room when I arrived at the Slade, with Charles Furse a little later. From the first the last-named displayed that mixture of energy and self-confidence which the prophets believed would have made him President of the Royal Academy had he lived a little longer. The quality of his wit is displayed in a story belonging to a few years later than these,

The Painter

9

his student days. The occasion was a meeting of the Art Workers' Guild in Clifford's Inn.

Frank Dicksee (who later *did* become P.R.A.), then at the height of his vogue as one of the attractions to Burlington House, had just read a paper on "Handling in Paint" to the members. When he had finished, Furse rose with deliberation to hurl this "bomb": "Master and brethren, it appears to me that there must be some mistake or confusion in the mind of the last speaker, because what he has been talking about is certainly not *handling* but *footling*."

Holroyd became a teacher of the life for a time, and it was from him rather than from Legros himself that I acquired the more valuable part of the instruction I received at the Slade.

Rossetti had but recently died, the Grosvenor Gallery in Bond Street had just been opened by Sir Coutts Lindsay, so the Pre-Raphaelites and the teachings of Ruskin were in the air and news. Holroyd's advice to us students remains with me as convincing, that when Ruskin praised it was safe to follow him, but that when he blamed we should look for ourselves. This is true of most prophets and valuable criticism for a beginner. I have never forgotten it, so now hand it on. Whether Ruskin is read by students to-day or not is not the question, but we could do with another Ruskin to-day.

At the Slade we were taught to draw on Michalet paper with the point, using the "natural" Italian chalk. When you had found a good piece this was delightful, but oftener it was little better than slate pencil. I recall another of Legros's little sensations: it was his pleasure, whenever he found a drawing carefully shaded up in the approved east-wind Slade fashion, to seize a piece of this slate pencil chalk and cut his corrections without pity into what the poor student considered, if not a masterpiece, something of the nature of a ewe lamb. I have seen a student in tears of rage, if not of sorrow, after such a visitation.

From time to time a special session was held, to which all the

students both male and female were called together, in order to see the Professor paint a head from the “life”.

He invariably used a canvas with a background prepared on it with a wash of raw umber and “turps”. On this ground he rubbed in the main drawing directly with a brush, also in a raw umber, blocking in the main planes and tones rather carefully until the drawing was completely realized in monochrome. Next he worked with solid colours, leaving the shadows for the most part thin and transparent in the umber, while loading impasto in the lights. In an hour to an hour and a half the head was complete. This of course is an old and perfectly sound method of painting in oil colours, but it was also monotonous, heavy, and often dull. Some of us had heard of freer and more exciting methods which were being tried in Paris. Now Legros seriously objected to any of his pupils going to Paris—that was the *via damnosa*. Why? Apart from the implied reflexion on his own teaching I do not know. It was said he refused to have anything further to say or do with a pupil who took so false and insulting a way. Many years before this, Legros proposed to Courbet and others of his friends: “Let us form a school and I will be the head of it.” Thus man proposes, but who disposes in these days the winds alone may tell.

After about two years at the Slade, hearing that Harrington Mann, Frank Emanuel, George Gascoyne and several others were about to migrate to Paris, the city of light as it then seemed, I determined to go there also, and joined up with a number of other English students from the Royal Academy School and elsewhere in the Académie Julian in Paris. Among them an impish figure stands out, Raven Hill (of *Punch*), aged nineteen and wearing a full black beard!

Julian’s was the largest school of art in Paris and it had been started by a painter *manqué* and ex-strong man called Julian who, having hired a studio to work in, got together a number of students, engaged a model and finally persuaded certain well-known painters to come round and, for a fee, correct the efforts