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Katherine Ada McDowall Esdaile
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Roubiliac's Work at Trinity College Cambridge

First published in 1924, Katharine A. Esdaile's study of Roubiliac (1702–1762) provides a fascinating insight into the work of this great late-baroque sculptor, who was born in France but spent most of his working life in England. The Introduction outlines the history behind the world-renowned collection at Trinity College, Cambridge, describing Roubiliac's distinctive 'vivid and intense' style. Esdaile tells of the sculptor's passion for perfection and his habit of sacrificing sleep for art. Twenty illustrations of Roubiliac's work are reproduced – including the busts of Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon and Francis Willoughby – and each is accompanied by detailed notes on the provenance of the work and special points of note. Enlightening and informative, this short book still fulfils the author's aim for the reader to find 'a new source of artistic pleasure, a new interest in the glories of Cambridge'.

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KATHERINE ADA MCDOWALL ESDAILE



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By

KATHARINE A. ESDAILE

SOMETIME SCHOLAR OF LADY MARGARET
HALL, OXFORD

CAMBRIDGE
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1924

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IN MEMORY OF A
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INTRODUCTION

EIGHTEENTH century sculpture has long been out of fashion in England, and there is no more curious example of this truth than the fact that the only existing reproductions of the great series of busts in Trinity Library are four very poor engravings of the Bacon, Ray, Coke and Cotton by Lewis after Ince in the *Cambridge Portfolio* of 1840, while the magnificent models for four of them in the British Museum have never been reproduced at all, though a fifth, acquired in May, 1924, was published by myself in *The Times* of May 13th. The statue of Newton is, and deserves to be, world-famous; but even it is less familiar than it should be. It seemed to me worth while therefore to bring before the public—more especially the Cambridge public—the artistic value of these works, than which there is no nobler group of historical portraits in the world.

Roubiliac executed many busts for single patrons, but such a series is unparalleled elsewhere. The grand terracotta models and plaster casts from terracotta models at the British Museum, though they include five of those executed in marble at Trinity¹, are not a series at all, but, with the exception of the newly acquired Cotton, are only a selection from the works of art on sale in the sculptor's studio after his death, ranging from the Cromwell which the antiquary Vertue saw in 1738 and which was never apparently executed in marble, to the model for the Charles I executed for George Augustus Selwyn in 1759, which, though long believed to be lost, is, and has long been, at Hertford House². The history of this great gift must be reserved for another place, though enough is said in the text to Plate IV to explain its interest and importance; but as a series the busts at Trinity are unique among Roubiliac's works. Bolingbroke indeed commissioned busts of Pope and of himself, as Lord Pembroke ordered busts of Martin Folkes and Sir Andrew Fountaine for Wilton³, but it was reserved for a distin-

¹ The fifth was acquired on May 10th, 1924; the others have been there since May 2nd, 1762.

² Both were published by me in the *Burlington Magazine* for April, 1923.

³ [Thomas Martyn] *The English Connoisseur*, 1766; James Kennedy, *A Description of the Antiquities and Curiosities in Wilton House*, 1769, p. 32.

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guished Fellow, Daniel Lock, F.R.S., who is buried in the Ante-Chapel, to inaugurate the Trinity series, and his monument, from the same chisel, is here fittingly reproduced (Pl. xviii).

Those familiar with Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting* may object: What of the series, "half the busts at Trinity College, Dublin," there mentioned as Roubiliac's with the seemingly convincing addition that the writer's brother, Sir Edward Walpole, obtained him the commission? The fact is that only one of the whole set, the famous bust of Swift, is by Roubiliac at all; the rest, though successive editors of the *Anecdotes* have failed to notice the fact, are the work of Scheemakers and the younger Van Nost¹. The explanation, presumably, is that Walpole hastily wrote Trinity College, *Dublin*, for Trinity College, *Cambridge*, and knowing that the patronage of Sir Edward obtained for the sculptor the commission for the bust of Swift, knowing also that the sculptor executed the series at Trinity, Cambridge, simply confused his facts.

Mr W. W. Rouse Ball has been good enough to inform me that there is no record among the College archives of the circumstances under which the busts came to be placed in the Library; it is therefore reasonable to ascribe the idea to the donor of two of the three earliest busts, the Daniel Lock aforesaid. Evidently the idea impressed the College, for, as Mr C. W. James has pointed out to me, there is preserved at Holkham a letter of 1757 from Dr Walker, Vice-Master of Trinity, in which he asks Lord Leicester ("Coke of Norfolk") to present the College with a bust of his great ancestor, Sir Edward Coke, adding, "Mr Roubilliac², our Sculptor, has lately made several Busts for us, is now at work upon more, and knows the size and situation. If your Lordship pleases to grant us this favour, we could send up [to Roubiliac's studio in St Martin's Lane, that is] the Picture you gave us some years ago for him to work by."

¹ Four indeed are so placed that the signatures are invisible, but one is a bust of Aristotle, a subject known to have been executed by Van Nost, and all are probably his.

² This spelling of the name is almost universal in the literature of the time. Even Oliver Goldsmith, who knew him, uses it in the famous passage in which the Citizen of the World visits Westminster Abbey and comments on the monuments there which "confer honour, not upon the great men, but upon little Roubilliac." But there is not a shred of evidence for it, and the scores of signatures which I have seen, ranging from 1735 to 1762, use no other form than *Roubiliac*.

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Sometimes, it is clear, patrons preferred a sculptor of their own choosing. Thus when the Master, Dr Robert Smith, erected the bust of Roger Cotes in 1758, he went to Scheemakers¹ and not to Roubiliac, an odd fact considering that only three years before he had earned undying fame by commissioning the statue of Newton from the latter. The second of Scheemakers' works in the Library, the bust of Jurin, was erected in 1766, when Roubiliac was dead and Scheemakers himself seventy-one; a third, the bust of Edward Wortley Montagu, donor of the bust of Barrow (Pl. VIII) which stands among his antiquities outside the Library, is from the same hand. The only other eighteenth century bust of any interest is the admirable portrait of Anthony Shepherd, sculptured by John Bacon, R.A., in 1790, which is only inferior to his Dr Jeremiah Milles at the Society of Antiquaries or the Dr John Romaine of St Andrews-by-the-Wardrobe in that the costume is classical instead of realistic.

But the other eighteenth century works serve to point the moral that there was only one Roubiliac, and only once did "our Sculptor," as Dr Walker called him, lapse to the level of his contemporaries. This is in the bust of Lord Trevor (Pl. XIII), where the Romanising head—the sculptor loved his sitters without their wigs—is set upon a bust wrapped in classical drapery which, skilful as it is, is curiously inferior to the rest. Even the shape is poor, and the whole prophesies uncomfortably of the ugly cut-away shoulders and scanty drapery dear to the sculptors of nineteenth century busts; it is the one work of Roubiliac's, with the exception of the bust of Fountaine aforesaid, which the charming splayed foot characteristic of his busts does not seem to fit as it fits the rich robes and deeper shoulder-line of the rest. Roubiliac's skill in veiling the ugly junction of bust and pedestal, always a difficulty in this form of portrait, is as a rule supreme, and is not least conspicuous in the other bust of a nobleman from the same hand at Trinity. The finely-designed draperies and pleasant handling of the hair and features

¹ Peter Scheemakers (1690–1771?) spelt his own name in various ways: Schae-maekers, Scheemakers, Scheemaker. The second has been adopted in the text since the Trinity busts are signed in this form; but it is by no means the commonest, especially during the later years of his life, and I prefer as a rule to write the third. Reasons for the dates assigned him—not those of the *Dictionary of National Biography*—will be found in my chapters on him in the *Architect* for 1921.

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make Lord Whitworth's bust (Pl. xiv) singularly attractive when contrasted with the Flavian stolidity of the Trevor; but as a whole, the more strictly historical portraits—those, that is, of long-dead worthies of the College—are the most satisfactory.

“I know of no works which may be safely compared to them,” said Chantrey to Allan Cunningham. “They have a manly air and vigorous freedom of manner which proves to me that he treated them rather in the manner of the heads of statues than as domestic portraits, where fidelity of resemblance is more aimed at. Those who have not seen the Cambridge busts, and above all the statue of Newton, are strangers to the best work of Roubiliac.”

This is well and finely said, but in one point it seems to me to miss its mark. Roubiliac, above all other sculptors, aimed at “fidelity of resemblance.” The portraits are alive, more so in many cases than the pictures they were taken from; and if this is not fidelity, it is hard to know where it may be found. But Chantrey is otherwise perfectly right: what distinguishes the busts of Roubiliac from those of most other sculptors, Bernini and his school excepted, since the second and third centuries of our era, when the portrait bust had reached its highest ancient development, is that they do suggest the upper parts of statues, that they have not that painfully cut-off appearance common to other works of the class. This is due, as already said, to the skilful use of drapery, to the carrying-down of the shoulder-line almost to the level of the foot, which gives a more stable as well as more dignified effect to the whole composition.

Only four of the busts, those of Newton, Bacon, Ray and Willoughby, were in place when Dr Robert Smith, to his eternal honour, conceived the idea of commemorating Newton by a larger work to be placed in the Ante-Chapel; for this he turned to “our Sculptor,” and late in 1755 the great statue was in its place.

An “Ingenious Correspondent at Cambridge” sent Lord Chesterfield a copy of verses on the occasion, which appeared in the *World* for October 28th, 1756, and this is the earliest account of the work which I have come across. It begins:

*Behold (a prism within his hands)
Absorb'd in thought, great Newton stands!*

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*Such was his solemn, wonted state,
His serious brow, and musing gait,
When, taught on eagle-wings to fly,
He trac'd the wonders of the sky;
The chambers of the sun explor'd,
Where tints of thousand hues are stor'd.*

Apart from the curious anticipation of Blake's *Address to the Muses* in the phrase "the chambers of the sun," and the inevitable reminiscence of Milton in the "musing gait," the lines are really not too bad; and a good many people to-day would prefer them to the pomposities of Bulwer Lytton's Prize Poem on Sculpture (1825), to the published edition of which the lines on Newton were added "by permission of the Vice-Chancellor." A few lines will suffice:

*In graven pomp and marble majesty
Stands the Immortal Wanderer of the Sky....
Mark ye—how well the kindling Sculptor took
The sweeping robe—the majesty of look,
And o'er each feature's lofty beauty wrought
The deep intense pervading soul of thought,
And that ethereal sunshine which in him
Life could not cloud and Passion could not dim,
As if the spirit within had winged its way
Through Heaven, had purged each earthlier sense away.*

This is better than what follows; but after all, it is not Bulwer Lytton to whom we turn for a description of the Newton. Wordsworth, inspired by his nightly vision of the statue from his windows in St John's, gave us the poet's verdict once for all when he wrote of

*Newton, with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of thought alone.*

The prism thus represented and commemorated I have myself seen and handled. It belongs to a collateral descendant of Newton's, and exactly resembles that held by the statue. Its red leather case, too, is reverently preserved. Of its kind, and with all its associations, I know of no more poignant relic.

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The original of that statue, as of the bust in the Library, is assuredly the portrait by Thornhill in the Master's Lodge. Both are more vivid, more intense, than Roubiliac's earlier Newton portraits, into the history of which this is not the place to go. It is sufficient to say that I have discovered that the original of those earlier portraits was executed at the request and before the death of Newton's nephew John Conduitt in May, 1737, and under his supervision, from the death-mask made by Rysbrack and from various portraits and descriptions. They differ markedly from the Trinity type, though the death-mask, as we shall see, was used for both; but it is clear to me that the Thornhill portrait was not among the documents known to the sculptor when engaged upon the earlier portraits.

One curious tradition about the statue was told me by the sculptor's great-great-granddaughter. When Roubiliac came to carve the hand holding the prism, he had to modify the original pose owing to an unexpected flaw in the marble. In what that alteration consisted I have been unable to learn, but every fragment of anecdote is of value where a work of art so noble is concerned, and as this is unpublished, it is worthy of record where the field of Trinity tradition is so barren.

A second tradition, preserved in the *Cambridge Portfolio* but not indexed under the sculptor's name, is characteristic of Roubiliac: "The statue of Newton in Trinity College Chapel, when first completed, had the mouth closed. Some friend and connoisseur having come to the artist's studio to view the work immediately remarked this as a defect and expressed his opinion to the artist. Roubiliac went to bed, but could not sleep: he rose early, set to work, and made it what it is at present; and certainly the result of this bold experiment is admirable. The good taste of the artist was not greater than his candour in admitting an error in that stage of his work, or more remarkable than the confidence which he possessed in his own skill to correct it." There is a great body of testimony to Roubiliac's habit of sacrificing sleep to art, to his constant "moulding and re-moulding his designs"—the phrase is his friend Bridgen's; but thus to alter a statue in the last stages of its existence in the marble indicates a passion for perfection which can scarcely be paralleled elsewhere.

The third volume of Farington's *Diary* contains a criticism which, for

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all its quaintness of expression, is of real interest; the writer is expressing his opinion of Cambridge in 1805: "In the Chapel of Trinity...there is a statue of Newton executed by Roubiliac which having something of the character of Bernini's works which appears in all his productions, is a very respectable performance." If the last phrase is emphatically one of the things we should put differently, the perception of the value of the Berninesque in an age dominated by Winckelmann and neo-Hellenism, an age when Reynolds and Flaxman had publicly denounced Bernini as the corruptor of the art of Europe, is something to be thankful for.

To the *Cambridge Portfolio* we also owe some interesting facts about the history of the statue, which is there stated to have cost £3000, a sum so enormously beyond anything received on other occasions by the sculptor that one would be glad to know the authority for the statement. In 1751 his charge for the life-sized marble bust of Archbishop Chichele at All Souls' was £52. 10s. 0d.; in 1759 he signed an agreement with Mrs Ann Lynn, preserved in the Library at Lyons¹, to execute a marble monument not less than seven feet broad and fourteen feet high, with a life-sized marble figure, a medallion portrait and various accessories for £500, fees, carriage and fixing included; the price stated to have been paid for the Newton in 1755 is therefore out of all proportion to what he obtained for other works, and must, I think, be received with caution. The other passage from the same source deals with a matter within the writer's personal knowledge and is on a different footing: "His statue which is Roubiliac's masterpiece is now seen to great advantage, being set free from the iron railing which once enclosed it rather incongruously. This was done at the suggestion of Sir F. Chantrey in 1833, who also advised the darkening of a portion of the wall behind, by which the figure is thrown out in full relief. It is a monument to be gazed at in silence and stillness . . . the philosopher is alone with nature and with God."

Roubiliac possessed two copies of the death-mask, that in the possession of the Royal Society and that in the Library at Trinity; this last, it is significant to note, belonged to his pupil Nathaniel Smith. Whether

¹ I owe a transcript of this important document to the kindness of M. Henry Joly, Keeper of the Lyons Libraries.

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Smith presented it to the College I have not ascertained, but he was apprenticed to Roubiliac on August 7th, 1755, and his earliest experiences in the sculptor's studio must have been connected with the statue of Newton, which was erected at the close of that very year.

Not one shred of information about these works of Roubiliac at Trinity other than what has been already mentioned appears to exist, but the preservation of four of the models in the British Museum and the discovery and acquisition of a fifth (Plate xvii) is a piece of good fortune which no one could have counted on. In one case also, that of Bentley, we possess two plaster casts, one (Plate xi) from the lost terracotta model, the other (Plate xii) an original plaster cast from the marble identified by myself at Lambeth Palace and here published by permission of his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is highly interesting to compare the marbles and the models, and in so doing we may recall an acute criticism from a very unexpected quarter. From Tom Moore's *Diary* we learn that the poet, calling on Sir Robert Peel about a nomination for the Charterhouse on February 7th, 1834, found him at home, and having discussed the business on which he came, Moore goes on to say that Peel "took me into another room to show me what he said I ought to see, the original bust of Pope, by Roubiliac, which was done for Lord Bolingbroke. Told him that Rogers had a very fine *cast* of it; (which I find since is a mistake, as Rogers' is the original clay or model from which this bust was made, and is remarkable for the fine lines and markings with which it abounds and which were afterwards softened down or omitted in the marble)." The marble bust of Pope is now in the possession of Lord Rosebery, the model (reproduced as a frontispiece to the fifth volume of Elwin and Courthope's *Pope*) in that of Mr A. Hallam Murray; the plaster model in the British Museum¹. Here, as in the Trinity models at the British Museum and the Hogarth, Garrick, Handel and Ligonier at the National Portrait Gallery, we can see and study the force of Moore's criticism. It is perfectly true: something *is* lost in the transition from the clay, with its vivid impress of the sculptor's tools and fingers, to the more im-

¹ By the phrase "plaster model" I mean a plaster cast taken from the terracotta model, and not from the finished marble. Such models have all the authority of the terracottas themselves, as Plates vii and xi will show.

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practicable material on which no finger-work was possible; and though Roubiliac is the greatest worker in marble this country has ever seen, there is inevitably more vivacity, more detail, more intensity in the models than in the finished busts.

All that is known of the Trinity Roubiliacs—an uneventful history in most cases—will be found in the text to each plate¹. The one touch of romance in the story—the wholly unexpected recognition of a wrongly named terracotta as the model for one of those at Trinity—is told in its place, Plate xvii.

One work by another pupil of Roubiliac's, Nicholas Read, will be found in the Ante-Chapel at Trinity, that to Francis Hooper, S.T.P. (*ob.* 1763), and is added here (Plate xix) to complete what may be called the Roubiliac cycle. Roubiliac himself was dead, but his pupil Read had taken over his premises in St Martin's Lane, "modestly concluding," in the words of Nollekens Smith—the son, be it remembered, of a rival pupil of Roubiliac's—"that by occupying *his studio*, the public would come to the *old shop for jobs in the stone-carving line*, fully satisfied that the business must necessarily be as well executed by his being one of the late *man's* apprentices!" It was only natural therefore for the monument of another distinguished Trinity man to come from the same studio; and whatever the jealousy of the Smiths may have induced them to think of the "many large and most expensive monuments" which the rival pupil was called on to erect, Read was a very competent sculptor, and the bust of Hooper is not quite unworthy of his master's chisel. It should be added that the discovery of Read's signature is not mine, but that of my little son.

If this small book should lead others to find in the works of Roubiliac herein reproduced a new source of artistic pleasure, a new interest in the glories of Cambridge, my purpose in writing it will have been fulfilled. For further information on the sculptor and his works the reader may be referred to the *Dictionary of National Biography*; to the long article and bibliography in M.M. Audin and Vial's *Dictionnaire des Artistes du Lyonnais* (Paris, 1919); to my three very imperfect chapters in the *Architect* for 1922, which, however, give for the first time the

¹ The busts are given in the order of their erection, and no attempt is made to describe the lives of their illustrious subjects.

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passages in the Vertue MSS.; to my articles in the *Burlington Magazine* for April and September, 1923, and in *The Times* of December 29th, 1923, April 11th and May 13th, 1924; and to my forthcoming *Life of Roubiliac*, which aims at filling in some of the gaps and correcting some of the errors in the existing accounts of the greatest of our sculptors.

My cordial thanks are due to his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury for permission to reproduce the bust of Bentley at Lambeth; to the Trustees of the British Museum for a similar permission in regard to four of the noble group of Roubiliac's works presented by Dr Maty in 1762; and to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, without whose kindness the publication of this little book would have been impossible.

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