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978-1-108-05942-8 - The Life of J.M.W. Turner: Founded on Letters and Papers

Furnished by his Friends and Fellow Academicians: Volume 1

Walter Thornbury

Excerpt

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THE LIFE
OF
J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.

CHAPTER I.

THE CURTAIN RISES.

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER was born on St. George's-day (day ominous of greatness), the 23rd of April, 1775, and was baptised on the 14th of May following, in the parish church of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, where his name may still be seen in the register.

His father, William Turner, a barber,* well known in the district of the Garden, lived at the west end of Maiden-lane, on the right-hand side, opposite the Cider-Cellars (opened about 1730); at the time of the future painter's birth the studio of an Artist Society. Only a side door of the murky house is still extant,† and that is now absorbed into the sticky warerooms of Mr. Parkin, an adjoining grocer, who has pushed his conquests even to Hand-court. Geographically

* Turner's father had a large theatrical connexion; no doubt Garrick often came to his shop and talked of Johnson and Goldsmith.

† Pulled down this very year, 1861.

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considered, the consecrated house was No. 26, and stood on the left-hand corner of Hand-court, near the south-west corner of Covent Garden. This court is a sort of gloomy horizontal shaft, or paved tunnel, with a low archway and prison-like iron gate of its own.

You must stand for some minutes in the quenched light of this archway before you can see the coffin-lid door to the left that led to the small barber's small shop, in the days of Dr. Johnson. The front window, once grotesquely gay with dummies such as Hogarth loved to stop and draw, is still extant.

Indeed, if I may trust wavering tradition, the barber of Maiden-lane lived most of his time in the cellar under his shop; but this is but living in an underground kitchen, as London servants generally do now, even in grand houses. Still I am inclined to disbelieve the story,* because I think I see in it a sort of dramatic effort to get contrast, to heighten the son in fact by lowering the father. It is, however, not improbable that the Turners cooked underground, in what might be called by many people a cellar, and spent much of their time there, keeping their upper rooms for special holidays and festivals.

Turner mentioned his birthday as April the 23rd, in the first codicil of his will. In the parochial books of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, we find that his father was married (by licence) to Mary Marshall, also of the parish of Covent Garden, on the 29th of August, 1773. In this year he first appears as a householder in Covent Garden parish, paying thirty pounds rent

* Mr. Alaric Watts, on the authority of Mr. Duroveray.

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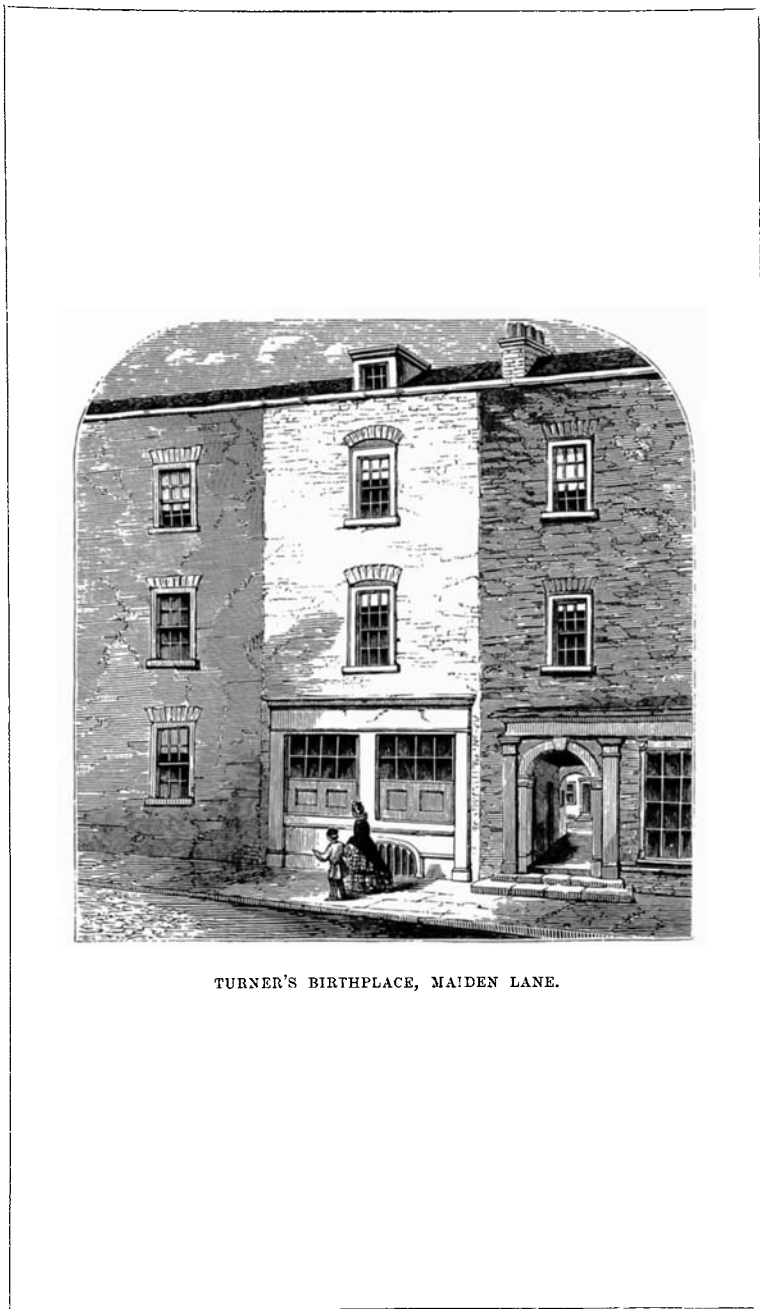
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TURNER'S BIRTHPLACE, MAIDEN LANE.

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A DEVONSHIRE MAN.

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for one half of a double house, a Mrs. Hawkes renting the other at a like sum.

The assertion, therefore, of some writer (Mr. Cyrus Redding, in *Fraser*?), that Turner used to say that he came up from Devonshire to London when he was very young, must be a mistake, as we find that his father was married in August, 1773, and he himself baptised in London in May, 1775. Perhaps Turner meant that it was his father who early in life came up from Barnstaple to London; or perhaps he purposely mystified Mr. Redding, as he did so many other people.

The date of Turner's birth is now beyond dispute, though the executors put the wrong age upon the painter's coffin. The register of the Covent Garden church proves it, and still more the following fact. In an extant drawing of Westminster Abbey (an interior), there is the following inscription, written by the artist himself, on a flat pavement stone in the left-hand foreground of the Abbey.*

| |
|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">WILLIAM TURNER, NATUS 1775.</p> |
|--|

But Turner loved to hide in a corner and mystify

* "*Natus 1775*," is ambitiously marked on a stone in the foreground pavement of this beautiful water-colour drawing of the interior of Westminster Abbey, bought by Mr. J. Dillon at the sale of Lord Harewood's pictures, in 1858. The colour of this drawing is a little blue, the figure introduced very graceful. The size of the Abbey is grandly exaggerated, yet one could scarcely wish it otherwise.

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people. He sometimes talked of being born in the same year as Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, and I have no doubt he wished he had been, though "St. George's Day" was surely just as much a day of good omen for the birth of a great Englishman.

Turner's grandfather and grandmother lived all their life at South Molton, in Devonshire. His father went to London early in life, became a hair-dresser, and married a young woman whose surname was Mallord (or Marshall), from whom the painter derived one of his Christian names. An uncle of the painter settled in Barnstaple, and became a wool-merchant. A descendant of this uncle is now principal clerk in one of the Barnstaple banks, and kindly furnishes me with these facts. He tells me he once called at the painter's house, but was refused admittance, as he believes all the painter's relatives were, if they ventured on a visit to the Gallery. Turner's assertion to Mr. Cyrus Redding, therefore, that he came from Barnstaple, was a mere generality, carelessly uttered, and perhaps carelessly reported. There is no doubt, however, that the painter was proud of belonging to the same county as Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose portrait he had once copied. I can claim no "blue blood" for Turner, nor do I want to. All old families have sprung originally from peasants; and every second peasant family will one day be noble. There is no rank in souls or bodies; and our heralds have now grown mere inventors of ancestors for uneasy men who have grown rich and wish to bear arms. Pedigree and genealogy—both are vanity, and I put them behind me as dead and gone.

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TURNER'S MOTHER.

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A family like Turner's, that produced a small tradesman, a bank-clerk, and a solicitor, must have at least been of as good yeoman rank as Shakspeare's. It is the middle classes indeed that have produced England's greatest minds.

Our aristocracy, having almost the monopoly of governing, may have produced most statesmen (except Pitt, Burke, Canning, Peel, &c.), but our great thinkers have been nearly all middle class men.

As talent is said to come on the mother's side, I will begin with some account of Turner's mother, kindly furnished to me by the Rev. Mr. Trimmer, the eldest son of Turner's old friend and executor, the rector of Heston. Mr. Trimmer obtained his facts from an authority no less unquestionable than Hannah Danby, Turner's old housekeeper, who had them from the painter's father.

"She [the mother] was a native of Islington, but at Turner's decease they had not succeeded in finding an entry of her baptism. There is an unfinished portrait of her by her son, one of his first attempts. I could perceive no mark of promise in this work, and the same remark might be extended to his first landscape attempts. It is not wanting in force or decision of touch, but the drawing is defective. There is a strong likeness to Turner about the nose and eyes. Her eyes are blue, lighter than his, her nose aquiline, and she has a slight fall in the nether lip. Her hair is well frizzed—for which she might have been indebted to her husband's professional skill—and is surmounted by a cap with large flappers. She stands erect, and looks masculine, not to say fierce; report

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proclaims her to have been a person of ungovernable temper, and to have led her husband a sad life. In stature, like her son, she was below the average height. In the latter part of her life she was insane and in confinement. Turner might have inherited from her his melancholy turn of mind. I never saw her, never heard him mention her, nor ever heard of any one who had seen her.

“There is a portrait of Turner, senior, by his son, much later than that of his mother. This,” Mr. Trimmer says, “he showed my father years ago as one of his attempts at portrait. It is full face, the eyes and general expression are most correct, though I do not recognise the nose. A few years before his death, Mr. Turner, the engraver, made a drawing of him which is a fair likeness. Turner, the son, hearing of the circumstance, said it must be destroyed; and the engraver, to pacify him, made a copy of it, which he gave up, and Turner destroyed it. At this time old Turner was decrepit.

“As I knew him well,” Mr. Trimmer says, “I will try and describe him. He was about the height of his son, a head below the average standard, spare and muscular, with small blue eyes, parrot nose, projecting chin, fresh complexion, an index of health, which he apparently enjoyed to the full. He was a chatty old fellow, and talked fast; but from speaking through his nose, his words had a peculiar transatlantic twang. He was more cheerful than his son, and had always a smile on his face. When at Sandicomb Lodge, he was to be seen daily at work in his garden, like another Laertes, except on the Tuesday, which was

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CHALK DRAWING.

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Brentford market day, when he was often to be seen trudging home with his weekly provisions in a blue handkerchief, where I have often met him, and asking him after Turner, had answer, 'Painting a picture of the battle of Trafalgar,' &c. &c.

Of Turner's early days, Mr. Trimmer says, "There is a portrait of him given by his father to Mrs. Danby, by her, I think, to Mr. Griffith, and by him to Mr. Ruskin, painted by himself. It looks the portrait of a youth of sixteen. It is strikingly like about the eyes and nose, but I can trace no further resemblance. There is a profusion of dark tresses, and the old man used to speak of his son's fine head of hair, a point where none will question his judgment. There is a fracture on the left side, through which Turner knocked his fist, as dissatisfied with his work. But for these traditions of Mrs. Danby," says Mr. Trimmer, "I should not consider the painting by Turner; the drawing is too good, but he might have been assisted by a master. Turner received the elements of instruction at the Brentford Free-school, as day-boarder. It was here his talent first showed itself. In his way to and from that seat of learning, he amused himself by drawing with a piece of chalk on the walls the figures of cocks and hens. I have authority for this anecdote; it was told by Turner himself to my father. There is indeed a wide interval between this child and the painter of the 'Téméraire.'"

That narrow, smoky defile, Maiden-lane, now so sacred a place in the eyes of many Englishmen, does not perhaps seem to the "outer barbarians," or art

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Gentiles, a lane specially consecrated by great Mother Nature as a fit reception-chamber for one of her greatest minds, for one of those large-brained thinkers and doers that set their broad shoulders to the world's wheel, that keep it out of ruts, and urge it on at a nobler and more vigorous speed.

It is just like many other London lanes—once, I suppose, country by-paths—a mere dim passage between houses, whose red bricks are coated a dirty black with a century or so of clotted smoke; a narrow road, so often in winter time choked up with blind blue fog that a stranger from any fiery country, such as our old friend Hajji Baba's, might think he had got into a “no thoroughfare” of Hades, so rolling and murky is the stifled smoke that beats down on one's unlucky head from the red tubes of chimney-pots, those visible lung-tubes of London houses.

Yet this lane, though now humble and dirty, has had, like other London streets, its better days. It opened, remember, from Southampton-street (so called in memory of the martyr Lord William Russell's noble wife), and in Southampton-street lived Congreve, Mrs. Bracegirdle, the celebrated actress, and Garrick too, before he went to live in the then new Adelphi, some years before Turner was born.

In older times still, in gay days of plume and sword, Maiden-lane had for grand neighbours Durham-place, where Raleigh lived, and the Cecils' mansion. Indeed, the whole Strand was then a solid phalanx of palaces.

But here we go too far a-field. Suffice it to say of the antecedents of Maiden-lane that in 1633,