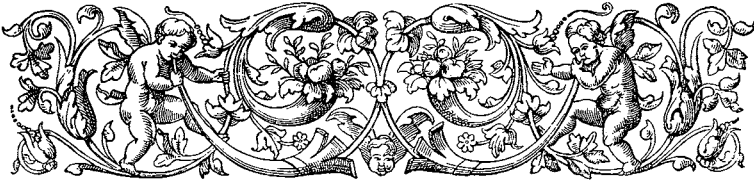


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978-1-108-05955-8 - Memoirs of the Life of John Constable: Composed Chiefly of his Letters

Edited by Charles Robert Leslie

Excerpt

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# MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF JOHN CONSTABLE.

## CHAPTER I.

1776—1810.

*Constable's Native Scenery. Parentage. Birth. School Days. His Love of Painting. John Dunthorne. Constable employed in his Father's Mills. Introduced to Sir George Beaumont. His first Sight of a Picture by Claude. Girtin's Drawings. Constable's first Visit to London. Farrington. Antiquity Smith. Constable engaged in his Father's Counting House. Returns to the Study of Painting. Becomes a Student of the Royal Academy. His Drawings at Helmingham. Visits Derbyshire. Anatomical Studies. Exhibits at the Academy. Samuel Strowger. Mr. West. Situation of a Drawing Master offered to Constable. Dissuaded by Mr. West from accepting it. Voyage from London to Deal. Altar-Piece for Brantam Church. Visits Westmoreland and Cumberland. Introduced to the Earl and Countess of Dysart. Altar-Piece for Neyland Church. Jackson. Wilkie.*

“**E**AST BERGHOLT, or as its Saxon derivation implies, Wooded Hill, is thus mentioned in the ‘*Beauties of England and Wales*:’—‘South of the church is Old Hall, the manor house, the seat of Peter Godfrey, Esq. which, with the residences of the Rector the Rev. Dr. Rhudde, Mrs. Roberts, and Golding Constable, Esq. give this place an appearance far superior to that of most villages.’ It is pleasantly situated in

the most cultivated part of Suffolk, on a spot which overlooks the fertile valley of the Stour, which river separates that county on the south from Essex. The beauty of the surrounding scenery, its gentle declivities, its luxuriant meadow flats sprinkled with flocks and herds, its well cultivated uplands, its woods and rivers, with numerous scattered villages and churches, farms and picturesque cottages, all impart to this particular spot an amenity and elegance hardly any where else to be found."

This is Constable's description of the "scenes of his boyhood," which he was fond of saying "made him a painter." From among them most of the subjects of his pencil were selected. The frontispiece to the "English Landscape," a series of engravings published by him late in life, is from a sketch of the house in which he was born, and the passage I have quoted accompanies the plate. Fearful of having said too much, and yet unwilling to say less, he adds, "Perhaps, the Author, with an over-weening affection for these scenes, may estimate them too highly, and may have dwelt on them too exclusively."

His ancestors were from Yorkshire, where the name is frequent. His great-grandfather, Hugh Constable, carried it into Suffolk, and settled as a farmer at Bures, on the border which separates that county from Essex. Golding Constable, the artist's father, inherited a considerable property from a rich uncle, who was childless, including the water-mill at Flatford; he afterwards purchased a water-mill at Dedham, and two windmills in the neighbourhood of East Bergholt; at the latter place he built the house which has been mentioned, and to which he removed in the year 1774; having before that period married Miss Ann Watts, who brought some accession to his wealth, but more to his happiness, for she possessed in a high degree the virtues best suited to domestic life.

## BIRTH—SCHOOL-DAYS—LOVE OF PAINTING.

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CHAP. I.

1776.

The children of this marriage were three sons and three daughters. John Constable, the second son, was born on the 11th of June, 1776, and baptized on the same day, not being expected to live. He became, however, a strong and healthy child, and when seven years old, was placed at a boarding-school about fifteen miles from Bergholt. He was afterwards removed to a school at Lavenham, the master of which, being in love, left the care of his scholars to an usher, who flogged them so unmercifully as to incur the hatred of them all; and Constable secretly resolved to repay his own share of the castigation in kind, if as men, he and the tyrant should ever meet; a resolution he was well qualified to put in practice, unless the usher had been a man of uncommon personal strength. From Lavenham he was removed to the grammar school of the Rev. Dr. Grimwood, at Dedham, where he met with an indulgent master, with whom he became a favourite. Dr. Grimwood had penetration enough to discover that he was a boy of genius, although he was not remarkable for proficiency in his studies, the only thing he excelled in being penmanship. He acquired, however, some knowledge of Latin, and subsequently took private lessons in French, in which he made less progress. He was at this time sixteen or seventeen years of age, and had become devotedly fond of painting. During his French lessons a long pause would frequently occur, which his master would be the first to break, saying, "Go on, I am not asleep: Oh! now I see you are in your painting-room."

But his painting-room was not under his father's roof. He had formed a close alliance with the only person in the village who had any love for art, or any pretensions to the character of an artist, John Dunthorne, a plumber and glazier, who lived in a little cottage close to the gate of Golding Constable's house. Mr. Dunthorne possessed more intelligence than is often found in the class of life to which he be-

CHAP. I.

longed ; at that time he devoted all the leisure his business allowed him, to painting landscapes from nature, and Constable became the constant companion of his studies. Golding Constable did not frown on this intimacy, although, he was unwilling that his son should become a professional artist, and Constable's attempts were made either in the open air, in the small house of his friend, or in a hired room in the village.

It argued no want of affection or of foresight in his father that he opposed his son's choice of a profession in which future excellence cannot with any certainty be predicted from early attempts, and which, even if attained, is less sure than excellence in many other pursuits of securing a competence. He would have educated him for the Church, but finding him disinclined to the necessary studies, he determined to make a miller of him. For about a year, Constable was employed in his father's mills, where he performed the duties required of him carefully and well. He was remarkable among the young men of the village for muscular strength, and being tall and well formed, with good features, a fresh complexion, and fine dark eyes, his white hat and coat were not unbecoming to him, and he was called in the neighbourhood the "handsome miller."

1792.

The windmill in an engraving from one of his sketches entitled "Spring," is one of those in which he worked ; and its outline, with the name of "John Constable, 1792," very accurately and neatly carved by him with a penknife, still remains on one of its timbers. His acquaintance with the picturesque machinery both of wind and water-mills, was very useful to him in after life. His younger brother, Mr. Abram Constable, said to me, "When I look at a mill painted by John, I see that it will *go round*, which is not always the case with those by other artists." By a wind-miller every change of the sky is watched with peculiar interest ; and it will appear

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Gardner pinx<sup>t</sup>

T. H. Maguire lithog.

*John Constable*

Aged 20

*Printed by Mess<sup>rs</sup> M & N Hanhart.*

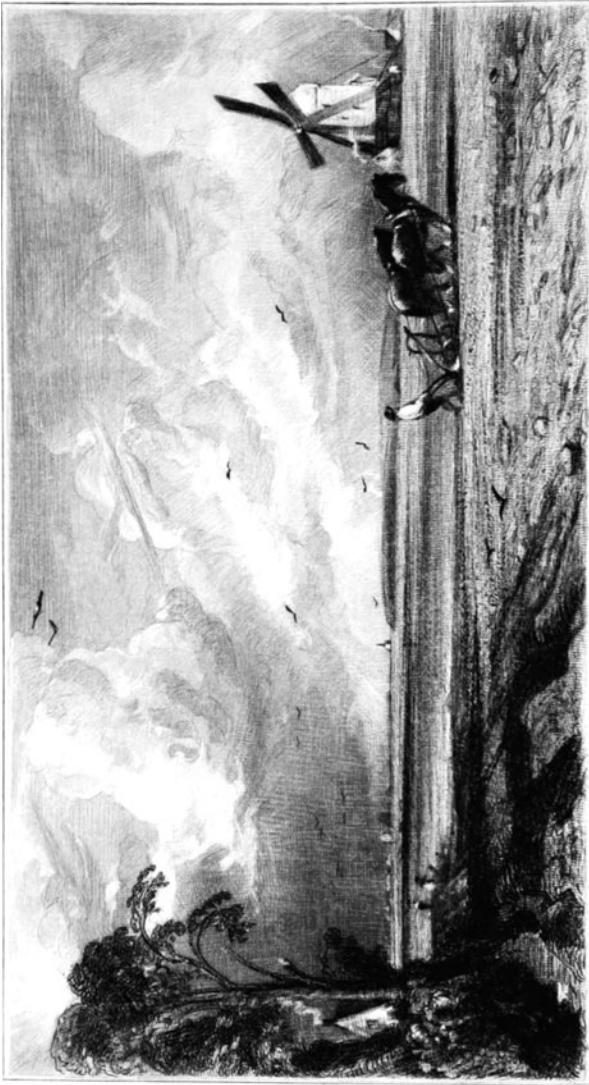
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*Thomas Stowe*

*Spring*

*John Constable R. A.*

*London, 1825. Pub. by Wm. Man & Co. Pall Mall Row*



## SKIES—SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT.

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CHAP. I.

1792.

from Constable's description of this plate that the time spent as one, was not wholly lost to him as a painter.

“It may perhaps,” he says, “give some idea of one of those bright and silvery days in the spring, when at noon large garish clouds surcharged with hail or fleet sweep with their broad shadows the fields, woods, and hills; and by their depths enhance the value of the vivid greens and yellows so peculiar to the season. The *natural history*, if the expression may be used, of the skies, which are so particularly marked in the hail squalls at this time of the year, is this:—The clouds accumulate in very large masses, and from their loftiness seem to move but slowly: immediately upon these large clouds appear numerous opaque patches, which are only small clouds passing rapidly before them, and consisting of isolated portions detached probably from the larger cloud. These floating much nearer the earth may perhaps fall in with a stronger current of wind, which as well as their comparative lightness causes them to move with greater rapidity; hence they are called by wind-millers and sailors, *messengers*, and always portend bad weather. They float midway in what may be termed the lanes of the clouds; and from being so situated, are almost uniformly in shadow, receiving a reflected light only, from the clear blue sky immediately above them. In passing over the bright parts of the large clouds they appear as darks; but in passing the shadowed parts, they assume a grey, a pale, or a lurid hue.”

Mrs. Constable procured for her son an introduction to Sir George Beaumont, who frequently visited his mother, the Dowager Lady Beaumont, then residing at Dedham. Sir George had seen and expressed himself pleased with some copies made by Constable in pen and ink from Dorigny's engravings of the Cartoons of Raphael; and at the house of the Dowager Lady Beaumont the young artist first saw a

picture by Claude, the “Hagar,”\* which Sir George often carried with him when he travelled. Constable looked back on the first sight of this exquisite work as an important epoch in his life. But the taste of a young artist is always the most affected by cotemporary art. Sir George Beaumont possessed about thirty drawings in water colours by Girtin, which he advised Constable to study as examples of great breadth and truth; and their influence on him may be traced more or less through the whole course of his practice. The first impressions of an artist, whether for good or evil, are never wholly effaced; and as Constable had till now no opportunity of seeing any pictures that he could rely on as guides to the study of nature, it was fortunate for him that he began with Claude and Girtin.

In the year 1795, his father consented to his visiting London, for the purpose of ascertaining what might be his chance of success as a painter; and on this occasion Priscilla Wakefield furnished him with a letter of introduction to Farrington, of whom, it has been said, he became a pupil. But this was not the case, though he, no doubt, received many valuable hints from a landscape painter, who, though not a man of genius, possessed a great deal of good sense, and could tell him much of the practice of Wilson. Farrington predicted Constable’s future excellence, and said, at an early period of their acquaintance, that his style of landscape would one day “form a distinct feature in the art.”

Soon after his arrival in London, Constable became acquainted with John Thomas Smith, known then as a clever draughtsman, engraver, and local antiquary; since more gene-

\* This little treasure is now in the National Gallery, where it is called “The Annunciation;” but the spring by which the female is seated, and the action of the angel who points to the buildings in the distance, leave little doubt that Claude’s intention was to represent the first flight of Hagar from the presence of her mistress.



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## ANTIQUITY SMITH.

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rally, I cannot say *better*, known as the writer of the “Life of Nollekins.” Constable’s intercourse with “Antiquity Smith,” as he was called, tended, no doubt to strengthen that fondness for localities which had so much to do with, if indeed it was not the basis of his art; and it may be inferred that the advice he received from his new friend was generally sound, from the following specimen. “Do not,” said Smith, “set about inventing figures for a landscape taken from nature; for you cannot remain an hour in any spot, however solitary, without the appearance of some living thing that will in all probability accord better with the scene and time of day than will any invention of your own.” Often has Constable, in our walks together, taken occasion to point out, from what we saw, the good sense of Smith’s advice.

CHAP. I.  
1795.

Constable’s time was now divided between London and Bergholt; and the following passages from the letters he wrote from the country to Smith show what were some of his occupations for the next two years. “October 27th, 1796. As the evenings are now long, I find great pleasure in reading the books I brought home with me, particularly Leonardo da Vinci and Count Algarotti. I should feel obliged to you, when you make up the parcel which I mentioned, if you would enclose Geffner’s Essay on Landscape. I devote all my evenings to the study of anatomy.” “January 16th, 1797. You flatter me highly respecting my ‘Cottages,’ and I am glad you have found one or two amongst them worthy of your needle.\* I am obliged to you for the directions you sent me for etching, but they were not exactly what I meant. What I fear I am deficient in is the biting. I have lately copied Tempesta’s large battle, and painted two small pictures in oil, viz. a Chymist and an Alchymist, for which I am chiefly indebted to our immortal bard. You

1796.

1797.

\* Smith was publishing a series of etchings of picturesque cottages, and some of Constable’s letters to him contained sketches of cottages.

CHAP. I.  
1797.

remember Romeo's account of an apothecary's shop. I have a great mind to copy one of Ruyssdael's etchings. I have seen one at your house where there are two trees standing in the water, and there is one your father copied: either of these I should like very much, but as they are scarce and dear, perhaps you would not like to trust them; if not, send me any others. I want to know if it is possible to take the proofs of the plates myself."

The little pictures of the Chymist and the Alchymist, mentioned in this letter have very little merit. Constable probably intended a moral by the ragged and poverty-struck appearance of the alchymist, while the chymist is neat and comfortable; but if he had as yet produced nothing better, it is not surprising that his own pursuits were regarded by his friends much in the same light with those of his alchymist. In a letter to Smith, dated March 2nd, 1797, he says, "I must now take your advice and attend to my father's business, as we are likely soon to lose an old servant (our clerk), who has been with us eighteen years; and now I see plainly it will be my lot to walk through life in a path contrary to that in which my inclination would lead me." The next letter is from Mrs. Constable to Smith: "East Bergholt, October, 1797. Dear Sir, I have great pleasure in receiving a letter so warm in commendation of my son John, as yours of the 29th ult. His future conduct I trust will ever merit the favour of your friendship, which I know he highly values. Let me assure you, that were you intimately acquainted with his father, you would not wonder at his having so worthy a son. We are anticipating the satisfaction of seeing John at home in the course of a week or ten days, to which I look forward with the hope that he will attend to business, by which he will please his father, and ensure his own respectability and comfort."

How long Constable was engaged in his father's counting-