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978-1-108-06445-3 - Sir Francis Chantrey: Recollections of his Life, Practice and Opinions

George Jones

Excerpt

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## SIR FRANCIS CHANTREY.

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SIR FRANCIS CHANTREY was born at Norton, in Derbyshire, not far from Sheffield, in 1782. His father cultivated a small property of his own. To his son Francis he wished to give an education suited to his station, and based on the best dictates of common sense, which through life the sculptor developed in a most exemplary manner, for whatever may be the opinion of the world as to his merits as an artist, or his accomplishments as a man, all agree in acknowledging his remarkable and undeviating sagacity. Chantrey's father died when he was eight years of age, and his

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mother soon married again, which probably prevented an earlier consideration of her son's course of life, and his profession was not determined by his friends until he had reached his sixteenth year, at which period their intention was to place him with a lawyer in Sheffield.

Chantrey saw in a shop window in that town some carving in wood, which induced him to declare his wish to be a carver instead of a solicitor, which was acceded to by his relatives, and he was, in consequence, bound apprentice to Mr. Ramsay, a carver in wood, at Sheffield, where he commenced a career for his future maintenance. At the house of his master, he met Mr. Raphael Smith, the distinguished draftsman in crayon.

The works of that ingenious artist soon attracted the attention of young Francis, who took pleasure in seeing Mr. Smith paint, and rendered himself agreeable and serviceable in useful offices about the artist whilst he was painting, and he

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## JOURNEY TO IRELAND.

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became so impressed with the desire of practising art in a higher class than wood carving, that at the age of twenty-one he gave the whole amount of his wealth, that being fifty pounds, to his master, to induce him to cancel his indentures ; for Chantrey's impatience to commence his course as an artist would not allow him to wait during the six months of his unexpired apprenticeship. With his freedom he began his studies and practice in the liberal arts, and painted the portraits of his friends and others, by which he gained a small sum of money, and having borrowed a little, he ventured to try his fortune in London ; but with sagacious caution he sought employment as an assistant carver in wood, rather than as a painter in a metropolis, where so many able competitors were ready to impede, contest, and rival his progress.

Soon after this time Chantrey went to Ireland, where he suffered so severely from a fever, that

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his recovery was doubtful; and in the progress of the disease he lost his hair, and was bald at his restoration to health, and so he remained during the rest of his life, which, however, rather improved than injured the character of his head; and to those who never saw the sculptor, a portrait of Shakspeare may supply a resemblance, as the pictures and prints of the immortal poet have often recalled his open countenance to the memory of his friends. Alluding to this supposed likeness he once observed, “Shakspeare might have been the ruin of me, for when I was young, and knew no better, I had been told I was like his picture, and that notion very nearly made me a coxcomb;” for although Chantrey was confident in his capacity, yet he was quite free from conceit. At his return to England he continued carving, and executed some figures in wood, in the possession of Mr. Hope. During the time that Chantrey was a carver in wood, he

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## INTRODUCTION TO MR. ROGERS.

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saw Mr. Rogers, and received employment from him. At an after period, when the artist had risen to eminence, the poet was reminded by the sculptor of their previous interview; and the frank, courteous, and friendly recognition of each other cannot be described adequately by any one after having been heard by many in the admirably descriptive language of the author of the "Pleasures of Memory." The intercourse of these persons, both distinguished for talent and conduct, was frequent and friendly; each had confidence in the ability and sincerity of the other, and their opinions and judgment often led the influential in the world, who were inexperienced in the arts, into the estimation of their beauties and advantages, and thereby rendered an important benefit to the taste of the country, and the professors in art.

Chantrey became weary of carving, and recommended portrait painting, which he did in most

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instances gratuitously; by this means he obtained some notice as an artist, and during this time he lived in various places, not being able to establish himself in any permanent residence by his efforts and ability in painting; for he would have been a good painter, as his works, though few, are remarkable for colour and expression; the former is striking, from its entire freedom from the too prevailing fault of blackness, being rich without gaudiness or positive colour, and they show that he was impressed by the tints of Velasquez, Murillo, Jan Stein, and Hogarth; but it would have been difficult for him to finish very highly, as his sight was imperfect for diminutive objects. However, he continued his studies, and improved his talents in carving and modelling, by making models in clay of the human figure, and then hanging pieces of drapery on them, that he might get a perfect knowledge of the way, and the best way, that it should be

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## EARLY WORKS.

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represented. In this manner he was accustomed to work, and when he had completed one figure or mass of drapery, he pulled it down, and began to model another from drapery differently arranged; for at that time he never did any thing without nature, or the material being before him. His first imaginative work was the model of the head of Satan, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in the year 1808. His next work of any consequence was a monument to the memory of the Rev. J. Wilkinson, Vicar of Sheffield, and Prebendary of Ripon; his employers obliged him to complete the work in that town, as they suspected his ability to execute any thing of importance in marble. Soon after this his friend Mr. Tappin, the architect, introduced him to Mr. Daniel Alexander, from whom he received an order to execute four colossal busts for Greenwich Hospital, of the Admirals Duncan, Howe, Vincent, and Nelson, and this probably was the

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source which produced and forwarded his future employment and success; for consoling as it may be to the unsuccessful, yet it should be cautionary to those entering the profession to know, that during eight years after the sculptor's commencement he avowed that he did not gain five pounds by his labour as a modeller, and until he executed the bust of Horne Tooke in clay, he had but little prospect of success; yet this single effort obtained for him commissions to the amount of £12,000. At this time he had 80 or 100 guineas for a bust, and he continued to work at that rate for three years, when he raised his prices to 120 and 150 guineas, which he maintained till 1822, when he raised the amount to 200 guineas; and when he modelled the bust of George the Fourth, the King wished him to encrease his price and insisted that the portrait of himself should not be carved by him in marble for a less sum than 300 guineas, what-



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## MARRIAGE AND FIRST RESIDENCE.

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ever might be his practice with respect to other portraits.

In 1811 Chantrey married his cousin, Miss Wale; with the lady he received £10,000; this money enabled him to pay off some debts he had contracted, to purchase a house and ground, on which he built two houses, a studio and offices, also to buy marble to proceed in the career he had begun, with a reasonable chance of success. At this period circumstances seemed both favourable and hazardous, for it was at this time that he was introduced by Mr. Raphael Smith to Horne Tooke, then residing at Wimbledon, to which place Chantrey often went, accompanied by his wife, and there he joined in the society of the distinguished for ability and station, and became acquainted with Sir F. Burdett. This intercourse was very useful to the young professional man, for many were his opportunities of seeing the remarkable characters of the day, of profiting by

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their conversation, and of exercising his own judgment respecting persons engaged in the great and busy career of the world, both in literature and politics; and with regard to the latter, he received from his host, during the visits he made to Wimbledon, most salutary counsel, for he advised the young sculptor with earnest friendship to avoid even the appearance of disposition towards any party in politics, and in proof of indifference to get some known men of opposite opinions to those held by Horne Tooke to sit to him for their portraits.

These admonitions were carefully cherished and followed by Chantrey, at least during the time that he was dependent on public opinion; and through his life he never gave utterance to any sentiments that could shock a zealot in whatever might be his favourite opinion or pursuit. This tender respect for the feelings of others is worthy of remark in a man who was peculiarly