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978-1-108-06894-9 - The Life and Studies of Benjamin West, Esq.,:

President of the Royal Academy of London

John Galt

Excerpt

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THE  
LIFE AND STUDIES  
OF  
BENJAMIN WEST.

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CHAP. I.

- I. *The Birth and Paternal Ancestry of Mr. West.* II. *His Maternal Family.* III. *His Father.* IV. *The Origin of the Abolition of Slavery by the Quakers.* V. *The Progress of the Abolition.* VI. *The Education of the Negroes.* VII. *The Preaching of Edmund Peckover.* VIII. *His Admonitory Prediction to the Father of West.* IX. *The first Indication of Benjamin's Genius.* X. *State of Society in Pennsylvania.* XI. *The Indians give West the Primary Colours.* XII. *The Artist's first Pencils.* XIII. *The Present of a Box of Colours and Engravings.* XIV. *His first Painting.*

I. **BENJAMIN WEST**, the subject of the following Memoirs, was the youngest son of John West and Sarah Pearson, and was born near Springfield, in Chester County, in the State of

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Pennsylvania, on the 10th of October, 1738. The branch of the West family, to which he belongs, has been traced in an unbroken series to the Lord Delawarre, who distinguished himself in the great wars of King Edward the Third, and particularly at the battle of Cressy, under the immediate command of the Black Prince. In the reign of Richard the Second, the ancestors of Mr. West settled at Long Crandon in Buckinghamshire. About the year 1667 they embraced the tenets of the Quakers; and Colonel James West, the friend and companion in arms of the celebrated Hampden, is said to have been the first proselyte of the family. In 1699 they emigrated to America.

II. Thomas Pearson, the maternal grandfather of the Artist, was the confidential friend of William Penn, and the same person to whom that venerable legislator said, on landing in America, “ Providence has brought us safely hither; thou hast been the companion of my perils, what wilt thou that I should call this place?” Mr. Pearson replied, that “ since he had honoured him so far as to desire him to give that part of the country a name, he would, in remembrance of his native

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City, call it Chester.” The exact spot where these patriarchs of the new world first landed, is still pointed out with reverence by the inhabitants. Mr. Pearson built a house and formed a plantation in the neighbourhood, which he called Springfield, in consequence of discovering a large spring of water in the first field cleared for cultivation; and it was near this place that Benjamin West was born.

III. When the West family emigrated, John, the father of Benjamin, was left to complete his education at the great school of the Quakers at Uxbridge, and did not join his relations in America till the year 1714. Soon after his arrival he married the mother of the Artist; and of the worth and piety of his character we have a remarkable proof in the following transactions, which, perhaps, reflect more real glory on his family than the achievements of all his heroic ancestors.

IV. As a part of the marriage portion of Mrs. West, he received a negro slave, whose diligence and fidelity very soon obtained his full confidence.

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Being engaged in trade, he had occasion to make a voyage to the West Indies, and left this young black to superintend the plantation in his absence. During his residence in Barbadoes, his feelings were greatly molested, and his principles shocked, by the cruelties to which he saw the negroes subjected in that island; and the debasing effects were forcibly contrasted in his mind, with the morals and intelligence of his own slave. Conversing on this subject with Doctor Gammon, who was then at the head of the community of Friends in Barbadoes, the Doctor convinced him that it was contrary to the laws of God and Nature that any man should retain his fellow creatures in slavery. This conviction could not rest long inactive in a character framed like that of Mr. West. On his return to America he gave the negro his freedom, and retained him as a hired servant.

V. Not satisfied with doing good himself, he endeavoured to make others follow his example, and in a short time his arguments had such an effect on his neighbours, that it was agreed to discuss publicly the general question of Slavery.

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This was done accordingly; and, after debating it at many meetings, it was resolved by a considerable majority THAT IT WAS THE DUTY OF CHRISTIANS TO GIVE FREEDOM TO THEIR SLAVES. The result of this discussion was soon afterwards followed by a similar proposal to the head meeting of the Quakers in the township of Goshen in Chester County; and the cause of Humanity was again victorious. Finally, about the year 1753, the same question was agitated in the annual general assembly at Philadelphia, when it was ultimately established as one of the tenets of the Quakers, that no person could remain a member of their community who held a human creature in slavery. This transaction is perhaps the first example in the history of communities, of a great public sacrifice of individual interest, not originating from considerations of policy or the exigences of public danger, but purely from moral and religious principles.

VI. The benevolent work of restoring their natural rights to the unfortunate Negroes, did not rest even at this great pecuniary sacrifice. The Society of Friends went farther, and established

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Schools for the education of their children ; and some of the first characters among themselves volunteered to superintend the course of instruction.

VII. In the autumn of 1738, Edmund Peckover, a celebrated Orator among the Quakers, came to the neighbourhood of Springfield, and on the 28th of September preached in a meeting-house erected by the father of Mrs. West at the distance of about a mile and a half from his residence. Mrs. West was then the mother of nine children, and far advanced in her pregnancy with Benjamin. —Peckover possessed the most essential qualities of an impressive speaker, and on this occasion the subject of his address was of extraordinary interest to his auditors. He reviewed the rise and progress of society in America, and with an enthusiastic eloquence which partook of the sublimity and vehemence of the prophetic spirit, he predicted the future greatness of the country. He described the condition of the European nations, decrepid in their institutions, and corrupt in their morality, and contrasted them with the young and flourishing establishments of the New

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World. He held up to their abhorrence the licentious manners and atheistical principles of the Court of France, where God was disregarded or forgotten ; and, elevated by the importance of his subject, he described the Almighty as mustering his wrath to descend on the nation, and disperse it as chaff in a whirlwind. He called on them to look towards their home of England, and to see with what eager devotion the inhabitants of that illustrious country worshiped the golden image of Commerce, and laid the tribute of all their thoughts on its altars ; believing that with the power of the idol alone, they should be able to encounter all calamities. “ The day and the hour are, however, hastening on, when the image shall be shaken from its pedestal by the tempest of Jehovah’s descending vengeance, its altars shall be overturned, and the worshipers terribly convinced that without the favour of the Almighty God there is no wisdom in man ! But,” continued this impassioned orator, “ from the woes and the crimes of Europe let us turn aside our eyes ; let us turn from the worshipers of Commerce, clinging round their idols of gold and silver, and, amidst the wrath, the storm, and the thunder, endeavouring to

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support them ; let us not look at the land of blasphemies ; for in the crashing of engines, the gushing of blood, and the shrieking of witnesses more to be pitied than the victims, the activity of God's purifying displeasure will be heard ; while turning our eyes towards the mountains of this New World, the forests shall be seen fading away, cities rising along the shores, and the terrified nations of Europe flying out of the smoke and the burning to find refuge here." — All his auditors were deeply affected, particularly Mrs. West, who was taken with the pains of labour on the spot. The meeting was broken up ; the women made a circle round her as they carried her home, and such was the agitation into which she was thrown, that the consequences had nearly proved fatal both to the mother and the infant.

VIII. This occurrence naturally excited much attention, and became the subject of general conversation. It made a deep impression on the mind of Mr. West, who could not divest himself of a feeling that it indicated something extraordinary in the future fortunes of his child ; and when Peckover, soon afterwards, on his leaving that



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part of the country, paid him a farewell visit, he took an opportunity of introducing the subject. The warm imagination of the Preacher eagerly sympathised with the feelings of his friend. He took him by the hand, and, with emphatic solemnity, said that a child sent into the world under such remarkable circumstances would prove no ordinary man; and he charged him to watch over the boy's character with the utmost degree of paternal solicitude. It will appear in the sequel, that this singular admonition was not lost on Mr. West.

IX. The first six years of Benjamin's life passed away in calm uniformity; leaving only the placid remembrance of enjoyment. In the month of June 1745, one of his sisters, who had been married some time before, and who had a daughter, came with her infant to spend a few days at her father's. When the child was asleep in the cradle, Mrs. West invited her daughter to gather flowers in the garden, and committed the infant to the care of Benjamin during their absence; giving him a fan to flap away the flies from molesting his little charge. After some time

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the child happened to smile in its sleep, and its beauty attracted his attention. He looked at it with a pleasure which he had never before experienced, and observing some paper on a table, together with pens and red and black ink, he seized them with agitation and endeavoured to delineate a portrait: although at this period he had never seen an engraving or a picture, and was only in the seventh year of his age.

Hearing the approach of his mother and sister, he endeavoured to conceal what he had been doing; but the old lady observing his confusion, enquired what he was about, and requested him to show her the paper. He obeyed, entreating her not to be angry. Mrs. West, after looking some time at the drawing with evident pleasure, said to her daughter, "I declare he has made a likeness of little Sally," and kissed him with much fondness and satisfaction. This encouraged him to say, that if it would give her any pleasure, he would make pictures of the flowers which she held in her hand; for the instinct of his genius was now awakened, and he felt that he could imitate the forms of those things which pleased his sight.