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978-1-108-06903-8 - Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds: With Notices of Some of his Cotemporaries: Volume 1

Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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# L I F E

OF

## SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

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### CHAPTER I.

1723—1748. ÆTAT. 1—25.

Parentage and birth of Reynolds — His father's character — Joshua's education — He studies *The Jesuit's Perspective* — Draws likenesses of several of his friends — Richardson's *Treatise on Painting* — Its probable effect on young Reynolds — He is bound apprentice to Hudson — His progress under his master — Hudson dismisses him suddenly — He returns to Devonshire, where he is much employed in portraits — Is soon again in London, and on good terms with Hudson — Is recalled to Devonshire by the illness of his father — His father's death — Reynolds takes a house at Plymouth Dock — His style formed on that of Gandy of Exeter.

IN his *Argument against abolishing Christianity*, Swift asks "whether it may not be thought necessary that, in certain tracts of country which we call parishes, there should be *one* man, at least, of abilities to read and write." He goes on to show, from the temperate habits of these educated men, that their children are likely to prove healthy;—and he might have said something more.

Ben Jonson, Fletcher, Hobbes, Andrew Marvell, Otway, Addison, Young, Thomson, Armstrong, Goldsmith, Churchill, Cowper, and Coleridge were the sons of clergymen. So were John Wesley, Paley, and Robert Hall, Sir Francis Drake and Lord Nelson, Sir Christopher Wren, Richard Wilson, and Sir David Wilkie; and among gifted women who were the

daughters of clergymen, Miss Austen, I believe, deserves the first place.

To this list might be added many names of eminence in the Church. The names too of some of the most distinguished lawyers, physicians, and soldiers belong to it; but the pre-eminent are sufficient, and I will conclude it, therefore, with that of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was on every side connected with the Church. His father and grandfather were clergymen,—his mother and her mother were daughters of clergymen,—and two of his father's brothers were in holy orders.

He was born at Plympton Earl,<sup>1</sup> in Devonshire, on the 16th of July, 1723, where his father, Samuel Reynolds, son of John Reynolds, vicar of St. Thomas the Apostle, Exeter, was master of the grammar school, founded and endowed by the celebrated Serjeant Maynard, in 1658.

Samuel Reynolds married Theophila Potter, the history of whose parents is a melancholy one. Her mother, Theophila, was the only child of the Rev. Thomas Baker, vicar of Bishop's Nymmet (or Nympton), near South Molton, Devonshire, who was highly distinguished as a mathematician. She became attached to Mr. Potter, her father's chaplain (it is said), but probably his curate, and they married without Mr. Baker's consent, who never forgave his daughter, and left her nothing. Her husband died in a few years, leaving her, a young widow, with a son and two

<sup>1</sup> For a very full and careful description of Plympton, and all that concerns Reynolds in his connection with it, see Mr. Cotton's work, 'Some Account of the ancient Borough of Plympton St. Maurice,' &c. J. Russell Smith, Soho Square. 1859.—  
 Ed.

daughters; and the tradition is that she wept herself blind for his death, though she did not long survive him.

Her daughter Theophila was very young when Samuel Reynolds married her. All that I have been able to learn of her character is by incidental remarks found in letters, from which it appears she had her full share of intellect.

Of the father of Sir Joshua somewhat more is known. He was a scholar, guileless as a child, and as ignorant of the world.<sup>1</sup> He had obtained a fellowship of Balliol College, Oxford, and was known to Young, the author of the *Night Thoughts*. From the innocence of his heart and the simplicity of his manners, and from his being withal so absent, that, riding on horseback, in a pair of gambados, he dropped one by the way without missing it, he was likened, by his friends, to Fielding's Parson Adams.

Fielding tells us that Mr. Abraham Adams "was provided with a handsome income of twenty-three pounds a year, which, however, he could not make any great figure with, because he lived in a dear country, and was a little encumbered with a wife and six children."

Mr. Reynolds had the advantage of that excellent person in the number of his children; Northcote speaks of eleven, Mr. Cotton of ten or eleven, while

<sup>1</sup> The portrait of him, painted by his illustrious son, now in the Cottonian Library at Plymouth, represents a ruddy, round-faced, smooth-visaged man, almost bald, with a placid and sweet expression. The picture is of interest, not merely as the only portrait of Samuel Reynolds, but as an example of the style of Sir Joshua before 1746, when his father died.—Ed.

another account makes it twelve. All, however, agree in stating it as reduced by death to six, while the father still lived.<sup>1</sup> He had also the advantage of Mr. Adams in a more *handsome* income. It is supposed he received 120*l.* a year, as master of the school, the dwelling-house attached to which was rent free.

Northcote and other biographers of Reynolds speak of his father as the Incumbent of Plympton, but Mr. Cotton has shown this to be a mistake. It does not appear that the grammar school was at "any time annexed to the living of Plympton, and an inspection of the parish register proves that there is no foundation for the statement that Samuel Reynolds was ever the Incumbent."

Joshua received his name from his father's brother, the Rev. Joshua Reynolds, Rector of Stoke Charity, Hants, who was his godfather by proxy.

All accounts of Samuel Reynolds agree as to the goodness of his heart. His daughter Elizabeth (Mrs.

<sup>1</sup> The following is the longest account of his children, in which I have adopted the dates of the baptisms of such as are registered at Plympton, from Mr. Cotton's statements:—

Humphrey, born 1713, not registered at Plympton. He was a lieutenant in the navy, and was drowned on the voyage from India, 1741.

Robert, born 1714, not registered at Plympton. He was an ironmonger at Exeter, and died unmarried.

Mary, baptized March 7th, 1715, married John Palmer, Esq., of Torington, died 1787.

Ann, baptized March 9th, 1717, died 1720.

Jane, baptized February 9th, 1719, died unmarried.

Elizabeth, born 1721, not registered at Plympton, married William Johnson, Esq., died 1792.

Joshua, registered by mistake Joseph, baptized July 30th, 1723.

Samuel, baptized September 1st, 1727.

Frances, June 6th, 1729,\* died unmarried 1807.

Theophila (no date, and not in Plympton register).

Martin, baptized July 29th, 1731; and another child who died in infancy, and is not registered at Plympton.

\* In the list furnished by the Johnson branch of the family her birth is stated in 1722.

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1723-1748.

HIS FATHER'S CHARACTER.

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Johnson) remembered his giving half a guinea to the famous Bampfylde Moore Carew, when it was all the money he had in hand. This seems scarcely credible; but the King of the Gipsies was a man of genius. He could assume the character of a shattered sailor, a disabled soldier, a ruined tradesman, or an unfortunate clergyman, with equal success. He did not, of course, present himself to Mr. Reynolds in his own character, for that was too well known.

Mr. Reynolds was addicted to a variety of studies, among which that of medicine occupied much of his time. It was his custom to instruct his children by giving them lectures on different subjects, and it was remembered by Mrs. Johnson, that, at one of these, he produced a human skull. Among the little else that is known of him, we are told that he said to his wife, for whose name there was a choice of diminutives—

“ When I say The,  
You must make tea;  
But when I say Offy,  
You must make coffee.”

Northcote relates this as an instance of his economy of words; but the rhymes are proofs rather of fondness than taciturnity; and, considering how very little we know of Mrs. Reynolds, they form no unimportant part of her history.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Cotton tells me, on the authority of a lady

<sup>1</sup> This doggrel, I believe, on the authority of Miss Gwatkin, belongs to Sir Joshua, instead of his father, and

“ When I drink tea, I think of my ‘ The,  
And when I drink coffee, I think of my ‘ Offy;’  
So whether I drink my tea or my coffee,  
I always am thinking of thee, my Theoffy.”

Ed.

living at Ivybridge, whose mother had a female servant who had lived with the mother of Sir Joshua, that Samuel Reynolds was an astrologer, and spent many hours on the top of the old castle at Plympton, studying the stars. The old servant said he used to cast nativities; and, having calculated the horoscope of one of his children, he found that, at its fifth year, very great danger was impending over its life. The child was not allowed even to leave the house, and every precaution was taken for its safety; but at the very time predicted by its father, it fell out of an upstairs window and was killed.

The least extraordinary part of this story is corroborated by Northcote, who says, "Of that part of the family who died in infancy, one child, named Theophila, lost her life by falling out of a window from the arms of a careless nurse."

Allan Cunningham supposes the education of young Reynolds to have been neglected by his father. Joshua must, however, have acquired a tolerable amount of Latin; for we know that he was the first person to whom Dr. Johnson submitted his epitaph on Goldsmith, desiring him, if he approved of it, to show it to the club; and, when Johnson found that Reynolds had mislaid it, he wrote to him for as much of it as he could recollect, having no other copy. Reynolds had no time to pay much (if any) attention to the study of Latin in after life, and whatever he may have known of that language must have been acquired at his father's school.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. R. Gwatkin has his school | mythological, but some etymological,  
Ovid, well thumbed, with notes, chiefly | in Reynolds's hand.—ED.

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1723–1748.

HIS EDUCATION.

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The notion that his education was neglected seems to have arisen from the misspelling of a few words in his letters; and I shall have occasion to quote some of his papers in which there are grammatical as well as orthographical errors. These papers were all, however, written in extreme haste; and with respect to the errors of orthography, it may be mentioned that the same words are more often correctly than incorrectly spelt; a proof that the mistakes are those of carelessness, and not of ignorance,—to say nothing of the prevailing looseness of orthography in his day.

He was certainly fond of literary composition, and, had not his love of art predominated, it is probable he would have become an author. The earliest accounts we have of him prove that he was a thinker. In his boyhood he composed rules of conduct for himself, one of which was, that “the great principle of being happy in this world is, not to mind or be affected with small things.”<sup>1</sup>

There seems, indeed, to be no good reason to charge the memory of his father with negligence. The future painter was no doubt, at times, an inattentive scholar, for the good old man wrote under a perspective drawing of a wall perforated by a window, and which was made on the back of a Latin exercise “*De labore*,” “This is

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Reynolds, however, in one of her letters to her nephew, William Palmer, quotes this as a maxim of her father's. He had transmitted the lesson to Joshua—in the blood. Frances, on the other hand, was a sad fidget about trifles. Another of S. Reynolds's wise saws, which he quoted to his daughter, as “a noble maxim out of Mr. Mudge's mouth,” was, “If you take too much care of yourself, Nature will cease to take care of you.” Sir J. Reynolds had much of the wise negligence thus recommended.—Ed.

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drawn by Joshua in school out of pure idleness.”<sup>1</sup> To such account, however, was this *idleness* turned, that when but eight years old he had made himself sufficiently master of perspective, from the Jesuit’s treatise, to draw the schoolhouse according to rule: no easy matter, as the upper part is half supported by a range of pillars. “Now this,” said his father, “exemplifies what the author of the *Perspective* asserts in his preface, that, by observing the rules laid down in this book, a man may do wonders; for this is wonderful.”

It has been supposed that the love of art was excited in Joshua by the example of his elder sisters, who were fond of drawing; but this, I think, proves only that it was in the blood. It is related on the authority of his sister Elizabeth that, as pencils and paper could not be afforded to the young artists, they were allowed to draw on the whitewashed walls of a long passage, with burnt sticks;<sup>2</sup> and it is added that Joshua’s productions were the least promising of the set, and he

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Cotton, in his *Gleanings*, gives a fac-simile of this drawing.

<sup>2</sup> In the autumn of 1818 I visited Plympton, and was charmed with the beauty of the scenery that surrounds it. I thought it no wonder that, born in such a spot, Reynolds had shown so much taste in landscape.

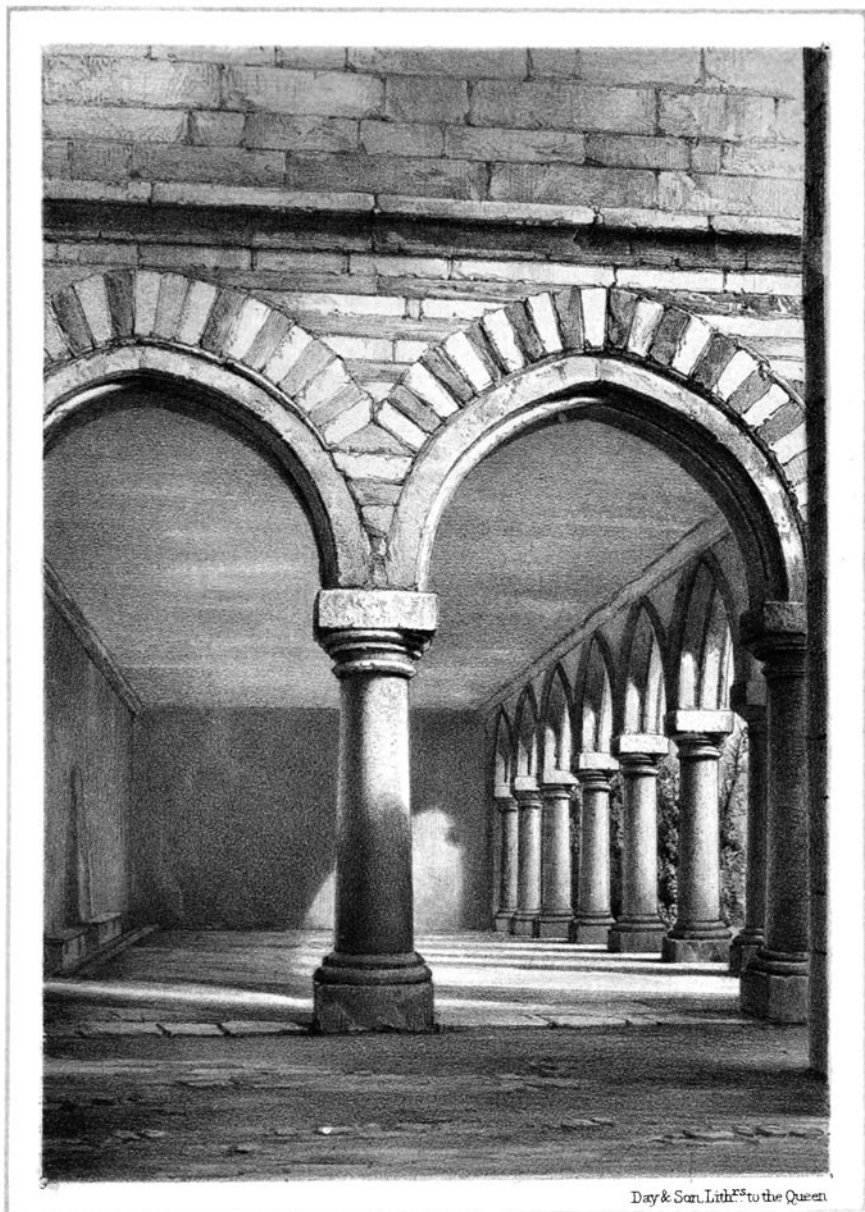
I was very politely received by Mr. Phillips, who then occupied the house in which Sir Joshua was born, and learned that, not many years before that time, there were some paintings on its walls (probably they were only the charcoal drawings) supposed to be his early efforts. They had, however, been barbarously destroyed in the rage for whitewashing so prevalent in Devonshire. Mr. Phillips told me

that Joshua had written his name with a glazier’s diamond on a pane of glass in the great window of the schoolroom, but that a previous master had carried it away. He sent a boy with me to the Guildhall, where I saw the portrait of Reynolds, which he presented to the corporation on his being elected Mayor of Plympton, and which, to the utter disgrace of the corporation, has since been sold!! (L.) (But see my explanation post.)

I visited Plympton in August, 1861. The schoolhouse was then closed, being under repairs. The house has been transmogrified, but the arcade under the schoolhouse is still as when the boy Reynolds drew it. (See Frontispiece.)—ED.



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Day & Son, Lith<sup>rs</sup> to the Queen

COLONNADE UNDER THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL,  
AT PLYMPTON.

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