

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

L I F E
OF
SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

THE last century may be said to have formed an era in the progressive refinement of the British empire in all matters of taste; an era whence future historians will date our advancement in the arts, and our rivalry of the most polished nations.

In the early part of that century, however, so weak and puerile were the efforts of almost all our native professors, particularly in the *Art of Painting*, as to reflect equal disgrace on the age and nation. Philosophers, poets, statesmen, and warriors, of unquestionable eminence, were our own; but no Englishman had yet added the praise of the elegant arts to the other glories of his country, and which alone seemed wanting to fill up the measure of British fame. This remarkable deficiency in the efforts of genius in that department may, in a great degree, have arisen from the want of sufficient encouragement—a natural con-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sequence proceeding from the customs and manners of the preceding ages. What the fury of Zealots, in the reign of Henry the Eighth, had spared at the Reformation, was condemned by the Puritans; and the Arts, long disturbed by civil commotions, were, in a manner, expelled from Great Britain, or lay neglected in the sensual gallantry of the restored court of Charles the Second: nor were they revived by the party contentions that immediately followed, and wholly occupied the attention of all men, rendering them not only unfit to relish the Fine Arts, but also depriving them of leisure for their encouragement or protection.

In illustration of this, I may add the observation of an excellent author, that no set of men can have a due regard for the *Fine Arts* who are more enslaved by the pleasures arising from the grosser senses than charmed by those springing from, or connected with, reflection. The interests of intemperance and study are so opposite, that they cannot exist together in the same mind, or, at least, in such degree as to produce any advantages to the agent. When we indulge our grosser appetites beyond what we ought, we are dragged to contrition through the medium of anguish, and forego or violate that dignified calmness of the system which is only compatible with an honorable ambition—the sorceries of Circe, or the orgies of Bacchus, cannot administer or infuse efficient

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

3

inspiration to intellects debauched by unhallowed fervor; such as sink under their influence may, perhaps, feel contented with their ignorance of the value of superior merit, but will never exert their ability for, nor pant with the desire of being enviable, happy, or renowned.

The period, however, at length arrived in which taste was to have its sway; and to seize and improve the favorable opportunity, presented by the circumstances of the times to one possessed of superior talents and ardour of mind, was the fortunate lot of Sir Joshua Reynolds: yet, notwithstanding that he carried his art so high beyond our expectation, and has done so much, we cannot but lament that he was not more frequently called upon to exercise his great genius on subjects more suitable to so enlarged a mind.

It is worthy of remark, that the county of Devon has produced more painters than any other county in England; whilst, at the same time, it must be noticed, that till very lately there were fewer collections of pictures, of good ones at least, in that county, than in any other part of England of an equal space.

Of that county was Thomas Hudson, the best portrait painter, of his day, in the kingdom, and famous for being the master of Reynolds; also Francis Hayman, the first historical painter of his time; and Mr. Cosway, R. A., Mr. Humphry, R. A., Mr. Downman, Mr. Cross, all eminent in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

LIFE OF

their profession.* Of that county also was Sir Joshua Reynolds, eminent in the highest de-

* In addition to Devonshire artists, perhaps it may not be improper to notice Thomas Rennell, a scholar of Hudson, some years previous to the time of Sir Joshua, who was born of a good family, long settled in that county near Chudleigh, in the year 1718. After remaining some time at the grammar school of Exeter, he was put apprentice to Hudson, the painter, in London. How long he remained in that situation, I am not told; but, at his return into Devonshire, he settled at Exeter, with a wife and family. In process of time, he removed to Plymouth, where he resided many years, and drew several pictures, which were much admired in that neighbourhood, and gained the painter the patronage of the Duke and Duchess of Kingston, who endeavoured to draw him from his obscurity, by a promise of their house and interest in London. But this splendid offer was lost in an indolent mind; and from Plymouth, Rennell went to settle at Dartmouth, where he lived in great poverty several years. He has been known to lie in his bed for a week together, with no other subsistence than a cake and water. His art had only its turn with other amusements; and if a picture was completed in twelve months, it might be considered as very expeditious. No sooner was he in possession of a few pounds, than any stray object that presented itself was instantly bought, though, by so doing, the necessaries of food and clothing were to be sacrificed. About two years before his death, he experienced a comfortable asylum in the bounty of J. Seale, Esq. of Dartmouth; and the manner of his end evinced his serenity, if not his stoicism. Being asked whether his pains were not intense, he replied—"No; that they were such feelings as he could not describe, having never felt any thing of the kind before:" then wishing his friend a good night, turned his head aside and expired, October 19th, 1788.

The knowledge of Mr. Rennell was universal; for there was hardly a science that did not come within the sphere of his comprehension. As a painter, he is said to have possessed merit, particularly in the draperies of his portraits. In the neighbour-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

5

gree; this illustrious painter, and distinguished ornament of the English nation, the subject of the following memoir, being born at Plympton, in Devonshire, on the 16th of July, 1723.* It has been noticed as not unworthy of record, that this event took place about three months before the death of Sir Godfrey Kneller, which happened on the 27th of the succeeding October, as if thus perpetuating the hereditary descent of the art; and preceding biographers are correct in stating that he was on every side of his genealogy connected with the clerical profession, as both his father and grandfather were in holy orders, besides having a paternal uncle, John, the elder brother of the family, who was a canon of St. Peter's, Exeter, and held a fellowship of the College at Eton. To

hood of Dartmouth are to be seen a few of his landscapes, but those very bad. He was very fond of chemistry, to which he devoted a considerable portion of his time. Most of his colours, which he prepared himself, went through that operation: and he is said to have discovered the art of fixing those which are the most fading. Of music he was passionately fond; and though he was not an excellent performer on any instrument, he composed some pieces which display genius. He also invented and constructed an instrument, containing sixty strings struck with a bow, moved by the foot, and modulated by keys. Some of his poetical pieces have been printed, but most of his papers were destroyed. Only one print has been taken from his works; to wit, a mezzotinto scraped by Fisher: it is from a portrait of the eminent Dr. John Huxham, M.D. of Plymouth, and the only portrait ever done of that physician.

* On a Thursday, about half an hour after nine o'clock in the morning.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

this last, Exeter College, in Oxford, is much indebted for the bequest of a very valuable library, and for a considerable part of his fortune, of which it became possessed by his death in 1758. There is a mezzotinto print of him scraped by M^r Ardell, from a portrait painted by his Nephew, now in Eton College. In addition to these, it is recorded that his maternal grandfather was in orders, who was married to the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Baker, a most eminent mathematician of the seventeenth century, and one to whom the Royal Society were, on several occasions, particularly indebted.

This gentleman was the son of Mr. James Baker of Hilton in Somersetshire, who lived in great respectability, and was steward for the extensive estates of the family of Strangeways in Dorsetshire. Thomas was born at Ilton in 1625, and at the age of fifteen entered a student of Magdalen, at Oxford, from whence he was five years afterwards elected scholar of Wadham College; in which situation, in the year 1645, he proved his loyalty by the performance of some little service for King Charles I. in the garrison of that city. In 1647 he was admitted A. B., but quitted the university without completing that degree by determination; and having taken orders, he was appointed Vicar of Bishop's Nymmet, in Dorsetshire, where he resided many years in studious retirement. Here he applied himself assiduously

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

7

to the study of mathematics, in which he made a most extraordinary progress; but was totally unknown and unvalued in his obscure neighbourhood until 1684, when he published his famous "Geometrical Key," in quarto, and in Latin and English. The Royal Society now became ambitious of possessing the result of the labours of his learned life; and having, in particular, but a short time before his death, sent him some difficult and abstruse mathematical queries, he returned an answer so extremely satisfactory, that they voted him a gold medal, with an inscription dictated by the deepest sense of respect. This venerable mathematician died in 1690, and was buried in his own church at Bishop's Nymmet.

1723.

JOSHUA REYNOLDS was the son of the Reverend Samuel Reynolds and Theophila his wife, whose maiden name was Potter; he was the seventh of eleven children (five of whom died in their infancy,)* and it has been said by Mr. Malone, that his father was prompted to give him his scriptural appellation, in hopes that one so singular, or at least so uncommon, might, at some future period of his

* Of that part of the family which died in infancy, one child, named Theophila, lost her life by falling out of a window from the arms of a careless nurse.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

life, perhaps, be the means of attracting for him the patronage of some person with a similar christian name. The good man's intentions, if the circumstance be true, were indeed never literally fulfilled; but instead of that, had he lived, he might have seen his son become an honor to his country.

I do not know on what evidence Mr. Malone gives this account concerning the introduction of the name of Joshua into the family, but this I know, from undoubted authority, (having seen it in Sir Joshua's own hand-writing, and therefore shall insert it, as it serves to controvert this very improbable story, which otherwise would altogether be unworthy of notice,) that it is certain that Sir Joshua had an uncle, whose christian name was Joshua, who dwelt at Exeter, and also was his godfather, but not being present at the baptism of his nephew, was represented by a Mr. Aldwin; the other godfather being a Mr. Ivie; and that his godmother was his aunt Reynolds of Exeter, represented also by proxy by a Mrs. Darly. Mr. Malone is in general very correct, but not in the circumstance he has related as above. I hope to be excused in being thus minutely particular, as it serves to prove a fact.

The register of Plympton, however, has, by some negligence or inaccuracy, deprived him of this baptismal name; for in that record it appears that he was baptized on the 30th of July, and he

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

9

is styled "Joseph, son of Samuel Reynolds, clerk." It is difficult to account for this error in any other way than that which Mr. Malone has given, by supposing that the name was written originally on a slip of paper in an abbreviated form—"Jos. son of Samuel Reynolds," and was at a subsequent period entered erroneously by the clergyman or clerk of the parish.

The maintenance of this family of six children was a tax sufficiently heavy on the slender income of the father, who possessed no other resources than those which he derived from the living of Plympton, and the grammar school annexed to it; the whole amounting to a very small sum: for the church was only a Windsor curacy, and he was so ill calculated for the management of a school, that, notwithstanding his possessing a high character for learning, its number was, before his death, literally reduced to one solitary scholar. Yet this mortification, which might have overpowered a more irritable temper, the good old man bore without any dejection of spirits, and he continued as much as ever beloved and respected for the variety of his knowledge, his philanthropy, his innocence of heart, and simplicity of manners.

Young Reynolds is said to have been for some time instructed in the classics by his father, who was very assiduous in cultivating the minds of his children; but as it is known that the son did

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06906-9 - The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries, and a Brief Analysis of his 'Discourses': Volume 1

James Northcote

Excerpt

[More information](#)

not display any proofs of classical attainments in the earlier part of his life, it is most probable that the mass of general knowledge, by which he was at a later period so eminently distinguished, was the result of much studious application in his riper years. A correct classical scholar, however, he could not be considered in any part of his life. That he was what the world terms a genius, and of the first order, cannot be disputed. He possessed talents of the highest kind, which he brought into full and constant action by a laudable ambition, the ardent desire of acquiring eminence in the profession which he had adopted.

It has been ignorantly said that his father intended him for the church, and sent him to one of the universities, where he received the degree of Master of Arts. This erroneous notion probably arose from his subsequent honorary degree of LL. D. I have, however, heard him say that his father at first intended him for the practice of physic; and that, if such had been the event, he should have felt the same determination to become the most eminent physician, as he then felt to be the first painter of his age and country.* Indeed it was ever his decided opinion, that the supe-

* I have been informed, that, at the period when his father intended him for the practice of physic, he paid some attention to the study of anatomy, in order to qualify himself for the medical profession; but, if this were true, his works do not evince much progress in that science.