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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

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From the middle of the eighteenth century, with the growth of travel at home and abroad and the increase in leisure for the wealthier classes, the arts became the subject of more widespread appreciation and discussion. The rapid expansion of book and periodical publishing in this area both reflected and encouraged interest in art and art history among the wider reading public. This series throws light on the development of visual culture and aesthetics. It covers topics from the Grand Tour to the great exhibitions of the nineteenth century, and includes art criticism and biography.

The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds

A fellow Devonian, James Northcote (1746–1831) was an admirer and pupil of Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose two-volume biography he published in 1813–15. Reissued here is the 'revised and augmented' second edition of 1818. Northcote is self-deprecating as to his fitness for the task, but claims that a worthy biography of a great artist can be written only by another artist, and his close personal knowledge of his subject and the circle in which Reynolds moved gives him insights, as well as providing anecdotes, which would not be available to a more 'professional' author. Volume 1 covers the first fifty years of Reynolds' life, and includes accounts of Reynolds' development as an artist, his growing fame, the founding of the Royal Academy and the first six of his *Discourses on Art* (also reissued in this series), which Northcote defends against claims that they were not written by Reynolds himself.

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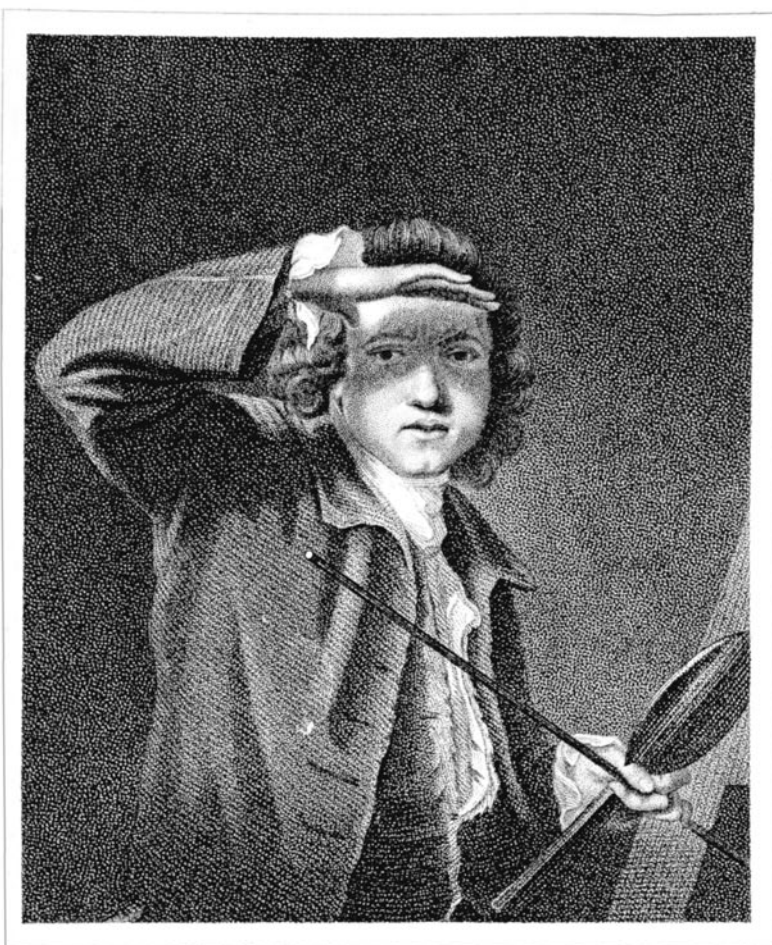
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Sir Joshua Reynolds Kt.

Engraved by Robert Cooper from a Drawing by John Jackson.

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THE
L I F E
OF
SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS,
LLD. F. R. S. F. S. A. &c.
LATE PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY.
COMPRISING
Original Anecdotes
OF MANY DISTINGUISHED PERSONS,
HIS CONTEMPORARIES;
AND A
BRIEF ANALYSIS OF HIS DISCOURSES.
BY
JAMES NORTHCOTE, ESQ. R. A.

THE SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND AUGMENTED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.



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MY presuming to write the Life of so illustrious a man as Sir Joshua Reynolds—a task which Burke declined and Malone has not performed—a work, also, so formidable in my own view of it—may require some apology; the truth is, that I was drawn into it by degrees, as we commonly are to all the sins we commit. I had at first written a short Memoir, at the earnest request of a friend, which was received with marks of approbation: I had also collected many little anecdotes, which I was told were worth preserving; and at length was persuaded to make the present attempt, or rather, I may say, pressed into the service.

Another motive to my undertaking this subject was, that several of the circumstances which I had to relate might help to

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clear Sir Joshua, in respect to the unwarranted ideas, many persons have entertained, that he was not the author of his own Discourses, and that also in his youth he was particularly illiterate. That the latter is far from the truth may be seen in the letter from him to Lord E——, which is demonstrative of a delicate, elegant, grateful, and feeling mind; and is written with admirable simplicity of language.

Familiar letters by Sir Joshua are, however, very scarce: he was too busy and too wise to spend his time in an occupation which is more congenial to the idle and the vain, who are commonly very voluminous in their production of this article.

With respect to the anecdotes which I have inserted in these Memoirs, a few, I hope, may be gratifying to the Artist; others may amuse the leisure hours of my reader; some, I must acknowledge, are trifling, and may not do either: but I have given all I could recollect, and would not make myself the judge by omitting any, especially when I reflected, that minute particulars are frequently characteristic, and that trifles even are often amusing, when they relate to distinguished persons: therefore I felt unwill-

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ling that any memorial, however slight, should be lost, as would inevitably happen, in a very few years.

It is my fixed opinion, that if ever there should appear in the world a Memoir of an Artist well given, it will be the production of an Artist: but as those rarely possess an eminent facility in literary composition, they have avoided the task; and the labour of writing the lives of Painters has been left to depend solely on the skill and ingenuity of men who knew but little concerning the subject they had undertaken, in consequence of which their works have been rendered useless and insipid.

I feel sensible that certain parts of these Memoirs may be considered tedious, some parts weak, and others not sufficiently connected with the original subject; but no man can be a competent judge of his own work: and I apprehend that, amongst a variety of readers, many will be pleased with what others will despise, and that one who presumes to give a public dinner must provide, as well as he is able, a dish for each particular palate; so that if I have given too much, it is at my own risk, and from an earnest desire to satisfy every one.

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In respect to the volume on the whole, if I were to say, by way of excusing its imperfections, and to screen myself from severe censure, that it was composed in my idle hours, to relieve my mind when pressed by the difficulties of my profession, and therefore ought to be looked upon with a favourable eye, it would be asked, "Why I should, with any pretence to modesty or justice, suppose that the mere amusement of my idle hours can in any degree occupy the attention or contribute to the amusement of an enlightened public?" And if, on the other hand, I declare that it has cost me infinite pains and labour, and that I now humbly and respectfully offer it to the experienced world as the most perfect work I could produce, it may then be reasonably said that I ought to have performed my task much better, as the effect is by no means answerable to such labour.

Under these considerations, therefore, I shall say no more on this subject; but calmly submit the work to the animadversion of the public, and rest perfectly satisfied with their decision, as on the verdict of the purest jury, and one from whose judgment there can be no appeal.

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To the Second Edition.

OF a man so various in his knowledge, so accomplished in his manners, and so eminent in his art, as Sir Joshua Reynolds, it can scarcely ever be possible to give an adequate biography. Had the Memoir been reserved for the nine years prescribed by the poet,* still would it have appeared before the public in an imperfect state: yet, I do not hesitate to confess, that if so much time for consideration and correction had been allowed, many parts might have been deemed proper to be omitted, and others more fully related, or more accurately arranged.

But the occasion on which the work first appeared was important, and, from the very short time between the conception and the

* Horace.

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execution of the attempt, any very near approach to excellence ought not to have been expected, though perhaps my endeavours have gone so far beyond mediocrity, as not to be totally unworthy of him they were intended to celebrate.

Since the publication of the first edition many anecdotes have occurred to my recollection; and also, as it may naturally be supposed, the publication of the *Memoirs* of so distinguished a person, has led to my receiving, through the kindness of friends, details of many circumstances respecting him, with which I was not before acquainted.

These additions, together with my own memoranda, and which formed a supplement in the original work, I have now carefully incorporated in this new edition.

I shall now avail myself of this opportunity to notice a few observations that my friends have made, on the perusal of these *Memoirs*, as being the most important which have come to my knowledge.

That much new matter would be looked for, in such a work, is not unreasonable; yet if, in addition to a collection of hitherto unpublished notices, I am to be blamed for

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having taken many circumstances, relative to Sir Joshua Reynolds, from the works of other writers, it should, at the same time, be remembered, that my intention was to give a life of him, as complete as was in my power; therefore, in omitting those particulars which I knew to be true, only because they had already been presented to the world, though scattered about in various publications, I must have rendered my own Memoir of him incomplete with respect to several important facts, which are very probably unknown to many of my readers; so that my work would have been merely an appendix to some lesser biographical sketch.

On this principle, I cannot help feeling that such facts will be considered as having an undoubted right to the place assigned them; and I should have been liable to reprehension, with stricter justice, for the omission of them.

The field of anecdote is an extensive one; yet, when we only glean, even after a plentiful harvest, our collection may be but scanty, though composed, perhaps, of some weighty ears: in fact, anecdotes are small characteristic narratives, which, though long

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neglected or secreted, are always valuable, as being frequently more illustrative of the real dispositions of men than their actions of greater publicity, and therefore particularly requisite in biography.

To enter at large, indeed, into such particularity of circumstances, though highly useful, might be irksome to a philosopher: still it must be allowed, that curiosity, a weakness so incidental to mankind, ceases to be a weakness, when it occupies itself respecting persons who may deserve to attract the attention of posterity.

It is universally allowed, that no kind of reading is more beneficial than history, so it is likewise admitted, that there is no class of historical writing so applicable to common instruction as biography: for the lives of individuals are generally written more naturally, and with greater sincerity, than larger histories; nay, it may be advanced, that, in respect to benefit and application, we are much more interested in a knowledge of the lesser occurrences, even of great men's lives, than of the more exalted actions from whence they derive their glory, because it is in every one's power to imitate

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them as men, though very few have opportunities of emulating them as heroes.

To know what we ought to pursue, and by what road that object may be attained, is, moreover, not the sole point which ought to occupy our attention: there is another not less necessary—the knowledge of what we ought to avoid; and on that principle it appears, that even the lives of bad men may become profitable examples, to point out the misery that is ever attendant on bad conduct.

The developement of weaknesses, however, only serves to entertain the malignant, except when the detail of those weaknesses may afford instruction, either from their fatal consequences, or when latent and accompanying virtues have tended to prevent the impending misfortune. But the most useful and valuable lessons are often contained in those private papers which eminent men leave behind them, and wherein their minds have thrown off all reserve:—a few of which description will be found in the course of this Second Edition.

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