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978-1-108-06907-6 - 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 2

James Northcote

Excerpt

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**L I F E**  
OF  
**SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.**

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**1775.**

ÆTAT. 51.

IN the year 1775, or about that time, a new arrangement took place in Sir Joshua's favorite society, the Literary Club, which now changed its original plan of supping once a week, into dinner parties once a fortnight, during the parliamentary sessions.

In this year also, he paid a compliment to another club, of which he had long been a member; this was a present of a portrait of himself for the dining-room of the Dilletanti Society, held in Pall Mall. It is a three quarter length, and he appears in his own hair, and in a loose robe: it has since been engraved in mezzotinto by James Watson.

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As most of the efforts of Reynolds's pencil deserve notice, I must not omit that the Dilletanti Club are still further indebted to his abilities, he having enriched the room of this society with many other portraits of its members, particularly two pictures, each of which contains a group of figures, something in the manner of Paul Veronese.

The first has the portraits of the Duke of Leeds, Lord Dundas, Constantine John Lord Mulgrave, Lord Seaforth, the Honourable C. Greville, Charles Crowle, Esq., and the Right Honourable Sir Joseph Banks, Bart., and K. B.

The other picture represents the persons of Sir William Hamilton, Sir Watkyn Williams Wynne, Bart., Richard Thompson, Esq., Sir John Taylor, Payn Galway, Esq., John Smith, Esq., and Spencer Stanhope, Esq.

This Society of Dilletanti has the merit of being, in some measure, the harbinger of all the others for the Encouragement of the Arts; for although it was at first supposed to have been established upon political principles yet, a few years at least before Sir Joshua's introduction to it, the members had at last the good sense to alter its original objects (if ever they were such) and to turn their thoughts to the formation of a public academy. For this purpose they held some communications with the Society of Artists, then recently established; but some jealousies about the

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government and regulation of the proposed institution prevented any union from taking place.

This, however, did not discourage the Dilletanti members, who, without any apparent ostentation, silently directed their exertions in favour of the arts, and it must be acknowledged were certainly of considerable service.

It was in this year, (1775,) that they were first enabled, by the accumulation of a fund set apart for the purpose, to support a student at the Italian Capital, whilst engaged in his professional acquirements; since which they have sent out several classical travellers, and patronized some valuable classical productions of the press on Grecian Antiquities.

In this same year Reynolds painted that portrait of his friend Dr. Johnson, which represents him as reading and near-sighted. This was very displeasing to Johnson, who, when he saw it, reproved Sir Joshua for painting him in that manner and attitude, saying, "It is not friendly to hand down to posterity the imperfections of any man." But, on the contrary, Sir Joshua himself esteemed it as a circumstance in nature to be remarked as characterizing the person represented, and therefore as giving additional value to the portrait.

Of this circumstance Mrs. Thrale says, "I observed that he (Johnson) would not be known by posterity, for his defects only, let Sir Joshua do his worst:!" and when she adverted to Sir Joshua's

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own picture painted with the ear trumpet, and done in this year for Mr. Thrale, she records Johnson to have answered, "He may paint himself as deaf as he chooses; but I will not be *blinking Sam* in the eyes of posterity."\*

It is evident, however, that Sir Joshua meant not to hurt his feelings: indeed, his general politeness and attention at all times, both to the comfort and to the foibles of his friends, are particularly exemplified in this year, even by a tri-

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\* A collection of portraits of the friends of Mr. and Mrs. Thrale, painted by Sir Joshua, ornamented the dining-room of their house at Streatham. These were all sold by public auction, on May 10th, 1816. The following is a list of the persons and the prices they fetched at the sale.

|   | £.   | s. | d. |
|---|------|----|----|
| Portrait of Sir Joshua himself . . . . .                    | 128  | 2  | 0  |
| Dr. Johnson . . . . .                                       | 378  | 0  | 0  |
| Baretti . . . . .   | 86   | 2  | 0  |
| Lord Sandys . . . . .                                       | 36   | 15 | 0  |
| Dr. Goldsmith . . . . .                                     | 133  | 7  | 0  |
| Dr. Burney . . . . .  | 84   | 0  | 0  |
| Lord Westcote . . . . .                                     | 43   | 1  | 0  |
| Arthur Murphy . . . . .                                     | 102  | 18 | 0  |
| David Garrick . . . . .                                     | 183  | 15 | 0  |
| Sir Robert Chambers . . . . .                               | 84   | 0  | 0  |
| Edmund Burke . . . . .                                      | 252  | 0  | 0  |
| Miss Owen . . . . .   | 31   | 10 | 0  |
| Mrs. Piozzi and her daughter, }<br>in one picture . . . . . | 81   | 18 | 0  |
| Sum Total   | 1625 | 8  | 0  |

Sir Joshua's price, at the time these portraits were painted, was thirty-five guineas each.

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fling occurrence, described by Mr. Boswell; when being engaged together with that gentleman and Dr. Johnson to dine with Mr. Cambridge at his Twickenham villa, Sir Joshua being anxious to fulfil an engagement at Richmond, early in the day, set off by himself on horseback, *leaving his coach* for his friends, who were not ready to accompany him, in consequence of Johnson's *tardiness*.

On the arrival of the latter, and on his entering Mr. Cambridge's library, he immediately ran to the shelves, when Sir Joshua whispered to Boswell—"He runs to the books as I do to the pictures; but I have the advantage, as I can see more of the one than he does of the other."

In the latter part of the year 1775, he sent his portrait, painted by himself, in the dress of his University honours, to be placed in the Gallery of illustrious Painters at Florence, in consequence of his having been chosen a member of the Imperial Academy of that city, and in compliance with its regulations, by which, in return for the honour conferred, the newly elected member is required to present his portrait, painted by his own hand: a circumstance which has produced the most curious and valuable collection of portraits of eminent painters in the world.

The following inscription in Sir Joshua's own hand is on the back of the portrait, painted on a pannel of mahogany:—

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“JOSHUA REYNOLDS, EQUES AURATUS,  
 ACADEMIÆ REGIÆ LONDONI PRÆSES,  
 JURIS CIVILIS APUD OXONIENSES DOCTOR;  
 REGIÆ SOCIETATIS, ANTIQUARIÆ  
 LONDINI SOCIUS.  
 HONORARIUS FLORENTINAS APUD ACADEMIÆ IMPERIALIS  
 SOCIUS, NEC NON OPPIDI NATALIS, DICTI PLIMPTON  
 COMITAT. DEVON.  
 PRÆFECTUS JUSTITIARIUS MORUMQUE CENSOR.”

This portrait has since been engraved by C. Townly: and also for the Italian edition of his discourses; there is a print by Carlo Faucci from the drawing by Franco Corsi.\*

I recollect Mr. S——, on his return from Italy, calling on Sir Joshua to inform him that he had seen his portrait in the gallery at Florence, and that when the Florentines expressed to him their high admiration of the excellence of this picture, he told them it was impossible for them to form any judgement of the painter's ample abilities from seeing that single head: but could they only

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\* Portraits of Sir Joshua are almost innumerable, a great number by his own hand; but there is only one marble bust of him, which was executed by Cirachi, an Italian sculptor.

This Cirachi was a young man of some ability, but of a turbulent spirit, and had been driven from every country which he had visited. When he left England, he went to France, where he soon got himself guillotined for being concerned in a conspiracy formed against the life of Buonaparte, by means of a horrid contrivance, which the French named the Infernal Machine.

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see some of his more extensive compositions, their admiration would then be infinitely greater, as this portrait gave a very inadequate idea of the variety of his powers. There were, at the time, three young painters before this picture, employed in copying it.

The picture of a little strawberry girl, with a kind of turban on her head, was painted about this time, and he considered it as one of his best works; observing, that no man ever could produce more than about half a dozen really original works in his life, "and that picture," he added, "is one of mine." The picture was exhibited and repeated by him several times; not so much for the sake of profit, as for that of improvement: for he always advised, as a good mode of study, that a painter should have two pictures in hand of precisely the same subject and design, and should work on them alternately; by which means, if chance produced a lucky hit, as it often does, then, instead of working upon the same piece, and perhaps by that means destroy that beauty which chance had given, he should go to the other and improve upon that. Then return again to the first picture, which he might work upon without any fear of obliterating the excellence which chance had given it, having transposed it to the other. Thus his desire of excellence enabled him to combat with every sort of difficulty or labour. I have heard him say, that while he was engaged in paint-

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ing a picture he never knew when to quit it, or leave off; and it seemed to him as if he could be content to work upon it the whole remainder of his life, encouraged by the hope of improving it: but that, when it was once gone from him, and out of his house, he as earnestly hoped he should never see it again.

It was in this year also, that Sir Joshua painted an admirable portrait of Mrs. Hartley, in the character of a gipsy with an infant at her back, and began another of her in the character of Jane Shore. She was much admired when she appeared on the stage; but it was more on account of the extraordinary beauty of her person, than for her professional talents as an actress: her features were of an excellent form, and her complexion very fair and clear; but as she herself once observed to Sir Joshua, to use her own innocent expression, "her face was as freckled as a toad's belly."

I well recollect, likewise, an excellent portrait which he painted about this period, of a gentleman who had acquired in India more money than intellect. From this picture a print was to be taken. The Nabob went into the country, whence he wrote to Sir Joshua on the subject. In this letter he says, "my friends tell me of the Titian tint and the Guido air, of course you will add them; but I leave it to your judgement whether it should be done before or after the print is taken." This letter I saw and read.



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Numberless little anecdotes of this kind might be recorded ; I shall venture to mention a trifling one of the late Duchess of Cumberland, who sat to him about this time for her portrait, full length ; and I remember his being much diverted by her affected condescension, when she said, “ I come to your house to sit for my portrait, because I thought it would be much more convenient to you, as you would have all your materials about you and at hand.” He made her no answer, nor did he trouble himself to inform her, that there was no other way by which she could have had her portrait painted by him : indeed, the great Duke of Cumberland, and many others of the royal family, had not conceived it to be beneath their dignity to come to his house for the same purpose ; and formerly, as he observed, even the king himself, Charles the Second, always went to the houses of Lely and Kneller, whenever he sat for his portrait. However, great allowance must be made for those who are suddenly raised high beyond their expectation, as it not unfrequently has made even the wisest giddy.

Some portion of vanity indeed, ought to be pardoned in every one ; as the happiness of life so much depends upon it : for how could many of us endure our existence with any degree of patience if we saw ourselves as others see us ? Vanity has made many a happy mortal of such as, without it, might have been driven to the crime

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of suicide. But kind, indulgent Nature, in the gift of this article is ever abundant, always bestowing it most amply where there is most need of its support; for which we ought to be infinitely thankful, as it fills up all our mental emptiness with delight, and the mind is consoled under all its insufficiencies, or even corporeal imperfections, which, by its assistance, oftentimes assume the form of beauty to our own apprehension. Self-opinion is Nature's stratagem to keep all the world quiet; and those who are so forlorn as to have no other flatterers, generally undertake that office for themselves, and perform its duties with more sincerity than those who do it for gain.

The admiration and fame that followed Reynolds, both as a man and an artist, could not fail to excite envy; instances of which have been recorded; in addition I may observe, that in the year 1775, Mr. Nath. Hone made an exhibition of several of his works, at a great room nearly opposite to Old Slaughter's Coffee-house, St. Martin's-lane. The collection contained between sixty and seventy paintings: among them were two which claimed particular notice. It seemed that the first idea of this exhibition owed its origin to pique, and something of envy in the artist towards Sir Joshua Reynolds, and this opinion is suggested by the following anecdotes.

In the exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1770, there was a picture painted by Mr. Hone, entitled