

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07379-0 - Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon Historical Painter: From
His Autobiography and Journals: Volume 1

Edited by Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON.

INTRODUCTION.

WHEN a man writes a life of himself or others the principle of truth should be the basis of his work.

Where all is invention, if consistency be kept high colouring is a merit; but a biography derives its sole interest or utility from its EXACT TRUTH.

Every man who has suffered for a principle and would lose his life for its success, — who in his early days has been oppressed without ever giving the slightest grounds for oppression, and persecuted to ruin because his oppression was unmerited, — who has incurred the hatred of his enemies exactly in proportion as they became convinced they were wrong, — every man who, like me, has eaten the bitter crust of poverty, and endured the penalties of vice and wickedness where he merited the rewards of virtue and industry, — should write his own life.

If the oppressed and the oppressor died together, both (if remembered at all) might be left to the impartiality of future investigation; but when the oppressed is sure to die, and the oppressor, being a body, is sure to survive, I cannot be blamed for wishing to put my coun-

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trymen in possession of my own case when they will most undoubtedly at all times be able to ascertain the case of my enemies. I have known and associated with many remarkable men. My life has been connected with my glorious Country's Art. The people and nobility of England, the grandest people and nobility of the world, have ever sympathised with my fate and often deferred my ruin.

My mistakes I hope will be a beacon to the inexperienced; my occasional victories, a stimulus to the persevering; and the manner in which I have been elevated from the depths of want and disgrace to the heights of fortune and hope, an encouragement to those who believe, as I believe, that bending before the corrections of the Almighty is the only way to save the brain from insanity and the heart from sin.

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BIRTH AND PARENTAGE.

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PART I.

CHAPTER I.

BIRTH AND PARENTAGE.

A. D. 1786. MANY years ago, my sister sent me a journal of my father's, which he had kept for a number of years. I destroyed most of it, and no doubt the Royal Academicians will think that I ought to have destroyed the following extracts too.

On the 23rd of January, 1786, my father thus writes:—

“I went with Miss Squire to hear Mr. Watson, who made an excellent sermon; went home with her and spent a very agreeable hour with her and her mother.”

“Hay supped with me and left me at twelve.”

“*Dear Sally poorly.*”

My mother was called “Sarah,” and every husband, from this gentle hint of my father's, will anticipate the approaching catastrophe.

The next day,

“Very dirty weather; wind W. S. W.,” says my father.

“Sally taken bad,—hope it will end well with her.”

“Called on Squire.”

And the next,

“Sally taken in labour, and at nine at night was delivered of a fine *boy*. Is as well as can be expected.”

And so my father's journal launches me fairly on the world.

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The most important as well as the most trivial notes in my father's journal generally concluded with the state of the wind.

"Poor Mrs. Burgess died in childbed," says he in one part, — "poor Tom Burgess much afflicted: wind W. N. W." I do not know how it is, but that statement of the wind always alleviated any pain I felt at the afflictions he related. There was a consolation in finding that the course of nature went on. One contrasted the cool perseverance of the wind doing its duty with the griefs of my father's friends.

Poor Tom Burgess had lost his wife, but yet he ought to be comforted, for the wind was not a South-wester. My dear father had such a habit of recording the state of the wind on everything, that I will not positively affirm he did not sometimes head a Christmas account with

"Blowing hard; wind S. W."

My father was the lineal descendant of one of the oldest families in Devon, the Haydons of Cadhay. The family was ruined by a chancery suit, and the children were bound out to various trades. Among them was my grandfather, who was bound out to Mr. Savery, of Slade, near Plymouth. He conducted himself well, and gained the esteem of his master, who in time made him his steward. In a few years he saved money, and on the death of Mr. Savery set up a bookseller's shop in Plymouth, where he died in 1773 from disease of the heart.

My grandfather (who was very fond of painting) married Mary Baskerville, a descendant of the great printer. She was a woman of great energy and violent prejudices. She hated the French and she hated the Americans; and once, when an American prisoner, who had escaped, crept into her house and appealed to her for protection until pursuit was over, though alone in

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MY FAMILY.

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the house, she told him "she hated all Americans," and turned the poor fellow out into the street.

At my grandfather's death, my father succeeded to the business, and married a Miss Coble, the daughter of a clergyman who had the living of Ide near Exeter. He was killed early in life by the fall of the sounding-board on his head while preaching. He left a widow and eight children. An opulent merchant at Leghorn, a Mr. Partridge, who had married the eldest sister, immediately took two boys and one girl off their mother's hands. The Russian fleet was cruising in the Mediterranean at the time and frequently put in to Leghorn. The Admiral and officers were often entertained at Partridge's table: and one of them, a Captain Mordwinoff, fell in love with the girl. His prospects being very good, consent was given, and Mordwinoff and his young wife started for Russia, taking with them one of her brothers who had expressed a great desire to enter the Russian army. Mordwinoff got him a commission, and Thomas Coble joined his regiment during the Turkish war. He was at the storming of Otschacoff and Ismailoff, and gained a good name during the siege of the latter place by the following act of daring.

Close under the fortifications of the town was a very fine vine loaded with grapes. One day the officers of Coble's mess in a joke said they should like some grapes for dessert. My uncle offered to go if a guard could be got to cover him. This was granted by the Colonel, and away went my uncle with a ladder and basket. He soon reached the vine, planted the ladder against the wall and commenced picking the grapes. Some of the Turks, observing him, opened a rattling fire, but he filled his basket in spite of them and returned to his own lines without a scratch. Mordwinoff had been educated by order of Catherine and was the playmate of the Emperor Paul. He rose to be an Admiral in the

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Russian navy and was at one time at the head of the Admiralty and President of the Council. The Emperor Paul, during the latter and eccentric part of his reign, thought proper to reward his playmate by exiling him to Siberia. On his way, Mordwinoff was recalled by the news of His Majesty's sudden demise. This recall of Mordwinoff was a most unfortunate thing for me. I should have been sure to have heard often from my worthy relative in Siberia, but I scarcely heard from him at all in St. Petersburg.

Both by my father's and mother's side, I am well descended and connected; the families always residing on their own landed property. The only estate, however, at present remaining to us, is a small one near Ide, Exeter. Such are the consequences of folly, extravagance and law-suits. Surely there is no occasion in England for a Judean Commonwealth, to restore property every fifty years, when it hardly ever remains in one family half that time as it is.

My ancestors were loyal public-spirited men and my father inherited their spirit. He loved his Church and King, believed England to be the only great country in the world, swore Napoleon won all his battles by bribery, did not believe that there was poet, painter, musician, soldier, sailor, general, or statesman out of England, and at any time would have knocked down any man who dared to disbelieve him, or been burnt in Smithfield for the glory of his principles.

I remember nothing of my early days of nursing and long petticoats, nor indeed much of any time before I was five years old. I was, I believe, an excessively self-willed, passionate child. As I was one day in a fury of rage which nothing could pacify, my mother entering the room with a book of engravings in her hand, as a last resource showed me the "pretty pictures," at which, as she used to declare, I became very

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EARLY RECOLLECTIONS.

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silent and interested, and would not part with the book for the rest of the day.

Among my father's apprentices was one (George, I called him) who made love to my nurse, and under pretence of showing me prints and teaching me to draw from them, visited the nursery very frequently. In fact George became so very fond of teaching "little master Benjamin, — the little dear" to draw, that my nurse was obliged to be sent away.

About this time a severe fever laid me up for six weeks, and my life was repeatedly despaired of. For my recovery we went to Plympton St. Mary, and here I remember sitting, propped up with pillows, on a little pony, watching some gentlemen throwing the fly on the bridge opposite the church in the valley. The delight of this day, with its beautiful landscape and village church, I have never forgotten. I was now six years old, and of course old enough to go to school, and well remember my dear mother standing at the door, watching me as I trotted down the street to school, and then I remember for the first time writing my name "*Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1792,*" in a parchment copy-book.

In 1793, the King of France was beheaded, and I well recollect the furious discussions which used to arise at breakfast and dinner about the French Revolution. I recollect my mother crying on the sofa, and on my asking her the reason, replying, "They have cut off the Queen of France's head, my dear." I used to wonder what for, and ask, but nobody ever gave me a satisfactory reason.

For a boy, this was a most stirring period. Nothing was talked of but the Duke of York, the siege of Valenciennes, Robespierre and Marat. French prisoners crowded Plymouth. Guillotines made by them of their meat bones were sold at the prisons; and the

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whole amusement of children consisted in cutting off Louis XVI.'s head forty times a day, with the play-things their fathers had bought to amuse their young minds. My chief delight was in drawing the guillotine, with "Louis taking leave of the People" in his shirt sleeves, which I copied from a print of the day.

About this time, I remember, while I was caricaturing a schoolfellow, my father came behind me and said, "What are you about, sir? you are putting the eyes in the forehead!" As I went to school, I observed people's eyes were not in the middle of their foreheads, as I had drawn them. To this day and hour I hardly ever paint a head without thinking of my father's remark.

My father now sent me to the grammar-school under the Rev. Dr. Bidlake, a man of some taste. He painted and played on the organ, patronised talent, was fond of country-excursions, wrote poems which nobody ever read, one on "the Sea," another on "the Year."

I remember him with his rhyming dictionary, composing his verses and scanning with his fingers. He was not a deep classic, but rather encouraged a sort of idle country-excursion habit in the school; perhaps, however, he thus fostered a love of nature.

All I know of hydraulics, pneumatics, astronomy, geography, and mechanics I learnt of him; but it is so very little, that I suspect he put us off with amusement for instruction.

Finding that I had a taste for art, he always took me with another boy from our studies to attend his caprices in painting. Here his odd and peculiar figure, for his back was bent from fever, induced us to play him tricks. As he was obliged to turn round and walk away to study the effect of his touches, we used to rub out what he had done before he returned, when his perplexity and simplicity were delightful to mischievous boys. Once he sent my companion to cut off the skirt

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EARLY RECOLLECTIONS.

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of an old coat to clean his palette with, and the boy cut off the skirt of his best Sunday coat. Poor dear Dr. Bidlake went to Stonehouse Chapel in his great coat the next Sunday, and when he took it off to put on the surplice, the clerk exclaimed in horror, "Good God, sir, somebody has cut off the skirt of your coat!"

He was a kind eccentric man of considerable talent. He brought forward several youths (especially Howard, a charity boy, who has translated Dante), and published many useful school books.

My father was much plagued with apprentices who thought they were geniuses because they were idle. One, I remember, did nothing but draw and paint. He was the first I ever saw paint in oil. The head man in the binding-office was a Neapolitan called Fenzi, a fine muscular lazzaroni-like fellow. Fenzi used to talk to me of the wonders of Italy, and bare his fine muscular arm, and say, "Don't draw de landscape; draw *de feegoore*, master Benjamin." He first told me of Raphael and the Vatican.

I used to run up to Fenzi, and ask him hundreds of questions, and spent most of my half-holidays in his office.

I now tried to draw "*de feegoore*," began to read anatomical books by the advice of Northcote's brother (a townsman), to fancy myself a genius and a historical painter, to talk to myself in the fields, to look into the glass and conclude I had an intellectual head; and then I forgot all about it and went and played cricket; never touched a brush for months; rode a black pony about the neighbourhood; pinned ladies' gowns together on market-days and waited to see them split; knocked at doors by night and ran away; swam and bathed, heated myself, worried my parents and at last was laid on my back by the measles. Here again came my divine art. I looked at my drawing-book, at the date

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of my last drawing with sorrowful regret and set to work, resolving never to leave it, and I kept my resolution. I remember my dear father, to keep me in spirits, one day putting his head in at the curtain and saying, "My dear, Jervis has beaten the Spanish fleet and taken four sail of the line. This will cure ye!" In the summer I was sent to Ridgway, and here I drew from nature for the first time,—a view of the old farmhouse, built during the civil wars, and the new Cider Ground on the right of it. The Plym river ran by it a little further on, a hill on the left ascended to Ridgway, and a passage in front across beautiful meadows led to the Church of St. Mary; on the right you could only get to the road by one of those simple wooden bridges so frequent in Devonshire, and carriages, carts, and horses plunged right into the stream.

My father used to show my drawings to his customers. One of them was a very great man in the town, merchant, and, I believe, consul. John H—— was a very worthy but pompous man, exceedingly vain, very fond of talking French before people that could not speak a word of it, and quoting Italian sayings of which he knew little; liked everything but steady attention to his business, was a good father, good husband, and to play soldiers for a week at any time would have laid his head upon the block. During the dread of invasion, volunteer corps became the rage. The very infants in the nursery played soldiers too. Mr. John H—— either raised or joined a corps of volunteers, and warier men made him Colonel, that the expense might not fall on their heads. Colonel he was, and devoted himself to the occupation with so much sincerity that his men in discipline and order would certainly not have disgraced a marching militia regiment. After review days, nothing gave the Colonel so much delight as marching right through the town from the Hoe, to the horror and