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

Edited by Tom Taylor

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Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter

Before the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846) committed suicide, he had left instructions that an account of his life should be published, using his autobiography up to 1820 and his letters and journals for the rest. The writer and dramatist Tom Taylor (1817–80) took on the editing, and the three-volume work was published in 1853. (The slightly enlarged second edition, also of 1853, is reissued here.) Haydon was a history painter at a time when that genre was perceived as the greatest form of the art, and his friends included Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Charles Lamb, Hazlitt and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. However, he was constantly in financial difficulties, and in later life a sense of failure seems to have turned into outright paranoia. Volume 1 reproduces Haydon's autobiographical writings up to 1820. His *Conversations and Table-Talk*, edited in two volumes by his son, is also reissued in this series.

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VOLUME 1

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University Printing House, Cambridge, CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108073790

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2014

This edition first published 1853

This digitally printed version 2014

ISBN 978-1-108-07379-0 Paperback

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OF
BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON,
Historical Painter,
FROM
HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND JOURNALS.

EDITED AND COMPILED
BY TOM TAYLOR,
OF THE INNER TEMPLE, ESQ.

SECOND EDITION.
IN THREE VOLUMES. — VOL. I.

LONDON:
LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMANS.
1853.

Cambridge University Press

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LONDON :
SPOTTISWOODES and SHAW,
New-street-Square.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

TO

THE SECOND EDITION.

THE principal additions made to this Edition are a paper (Appendix I.) on the indications of long-standing disease of brain afforded by *post mortem* examination of Haydon's head,—an additional letter of Wordsworth, at the end of the Third Volume,—some remarks by Mr. Watts on the question of the public employment of artists,—and a letter (also printed in Appendix I.) from Mr. Bewicke, Haydon's pupil and model for Lazarus, giving an interesting account of the painting of that picture.

Besides these additions, many trifling errors have been corrected; and some inaccuracies in Haydon's recording, referred to by the Quarterly Reviewer, are noticed in foot-notes. An Index and Table of Contents have been also added.

It would be superfluous here to express my satisfaction at the interest with which these Memoirs have

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been received. This is clearly due to the painful, but powerful, exhibition they contain of a brave, though vain, passionate and often erring man, struggling with the consequences, partly of evil times, mainly of personal mistakes, misdoings and miscalculations,—and all these converging to a tragic end.

I believe that good has resulted to the memory of the painter from giving to the world this *Autobiography*—for such it is. Some of the reviewers think otherwise, and attribute the publication to other and lower motives than a wish in Haydon's family to exhibit the beloved husband and father as he was, with all his strength, weakness, heroisms, vanities, triumphs, follies, disappointments, humiliations, joys and agonies.

I think, for my part, that they consented to this publication in a loyal spirit of regard and reverence for the dead, believing that the study of his whole life, so shown, would leave behind a result of sympathy and regard far overbalancing the more transient impressions of disapproval and disgust, while the lessons of the tale are unmistakeable and of wide application.

If I have contributed in any way to the favourable reception of the book by my manner of discharging my editorial duty, I confess it is a source of pleasure to me, the only one I have any right to look for.

The balance of expressed opinion seems to be in favour of the way in which I have done my part of the work. Of course there are great differences of opinion as to the

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good or bad taste of my omissions and retentions in a work which does not profess to be an imprint of the MSS. out of which it has been made up.

I do not intend to discuss any of the questions arising out of these differences of opinion, satisfied that the discussion would be useless. After all, it is precisely in such points that an editor must exercise his own judgment; and, if he honestly satisfy that, his best course seems to me to “jowk and let the jaw gae by” before his critics in or out of print.

Chiswick Lodge,
Nov. 12. 1853.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

TO

THE FIRST EDITION.

THAT part of my editorial remarks which may by many be thought the proper matter of a preface will be found at the end of these volumes instead of the beginning.

Here I only wish to put my readers in the right point of view for judging the book. Before my work comes to judgment I am bound to tell my judges what it is that I have done, or rather aimed at doing.

This is not the biography of Haydon, but his *autobiography*,—not a life of him by me, but his life by himself.

It may be the biographer's part to paint his subject with as heroic lineaments as he can manage to give him, without falling into glaring disproportion or taking too great liberties with truth. I do not say this is my conception of even a biographer's duty: but readers appear to expect this of those who write lives.

But the editor of an auto-biography is relieved from

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all difficulty on this point. He has only to clean, varnish and set in the best light the portrait of himself which the auto-biographer has left behind him. He may wipe away chills or mildew ; he may stop a hole, or repair a crack ; he may remove impurities, or bring obscure parts into sight : but he has no right to repaint, or restore or improve.

Haydon is presented to the readers of these volumes — I will not say “in his habit as he lived” — but as he thought, or, at any rate, wished the world to believe, he lived. Whether the portrait be a true likeness it is for those who knew him to say. On this point there will probably be as many opinions as critics. At any rate it is better than any other man can draw. The vainest human being knows himself better than the most clear-sighted observer knows him, and his own description of himself will always be the best we can obtain (if he have the needful power and habit of record), for even his mis-statements, exaggerations and perversions are characteristic, and like no other man's.

No man who has left an auto-biography has ever succeeded in making himself out a hero in the world's opinion, however strenuously he may have been bent on so doing. It is apparent throughout the twenty-seven folios from which these volumes have been compressed that Haydon believed himself a hero, and thought the world would believe it when these records of him came to light.

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My task has been that of presenting the self-portraiture which Haydon has left behind him within reasonable dimensions of canvas, and, as I said before, in such a light as may show the work intelligibly.

My labour has been one mainly of condensation and arrangement. I have tried to preserve everything which belonged to the portrait; and, for the sake of this I have left on one side much interesting matter, especially in the shape of correspondence. I would rather the book had been shorter. But this seemed impossible consistently with fair-dealing towards its subject. Such as it is, I commend it to my readers alike as a curious piece of psychological revelation and a not uninteresting though mournful picture of artist life.

Chiswick Lodge,

June, 1853.

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