

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07380-6 - Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon Historical Painter: From  
His Autobiography and Journals: Volume 2

Edited by Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS  
OF  
BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON,  
FROM HIS JOURNALS.

VOL. II.

B

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AT this point Haydon's autobiography breaks off. Henceforward his life must be traced by help of his journals. These journals are curious volumes, twenty-six in number, bulky, parchment-bound, ledger-like folios. He has recorded in them the incidents of his days, his deductions from books he has read or pictures he has seen, and such passing thoughts as seemed to have been worth arresting and fixing in this way. By their help one may follow the progress of all his pictures from the first conception, — often the best, — through all the alterations in composition, the trials of effects in light and shade, studies of groups, single figures, and parts of figures. All these drawings are dashed in with pen and ink, careless and hasty, but almost always spirited and instinct with characteristic action. Under sketches of the same subject in different arrangements are often written the reasons why one is better than another; and so with draperies, hands, and feet. From these may be determined with tolerable precision the time each picture was in hand from first to last.

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I find the earliest sketches for Lazarus about June, 1820; but it was not till his return from Edinburgh that he fairly began the work on canvas.

It may be worth remarking that after the first scarcely intelligible sketch — little more than an arrangement of lines — comes a composition almost exactly the same as that finally adopted for this picture, which now hangs on the staircase-landing of the Pantheon in Oxford Street.

Long before I knew anything of Haydon or his life, I have often paused before the awful face of Lazarus in that picture, wondering how such a work came to be in such a place, and how the same mind that conceived the Lazarus could have fallen into the coarse exaggeration of some of the other figures of the composition.

I am much mistaken if this picture does not bear an impress of power which will hardly be found in the work of any other English historical painter. In spite of obvious blemishes and the exaggeration of parts, I cannot but think it worthy of a place of honour in any part of a future National Gallery which may be appropriated to the works of British artists.

Haydon had written to his friend William Allen of his returning to London and work from his Edinburgh visit: —

“I felt as if for a fortnight I had been sailing with a party of fine fellows up a placid and beautiful river, now putting in and dancing on the shore, now singing and laughing and revelling, when suddenly the course of the river had brought me again to the turbulent sea on which my destiny was fixed to buffet. I declare to you I plunged into it with that sort of feeling a man has when he takes a dive in a gale of wind, watching each wave as it mounts, and then

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1821.]

LAZARUS: WILKIE.

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darting through it before it has time to smother him.

1821.

At the beginning of 1821 \* he says, "I now see difficulties are my lot in pecuniary matters, and my plan must be to make up my mind to meet them, and fag as I can ; — to lose no single moment, but seize on time that is free from disturbance and make the most of it. If I can float and keep alive attention to my situation through another picture, I will reach the shore. I am now clearly in sight of it, and I will yet land to the sound of trumpets and shouts of my friends."

Already by the 3d of January he was settling his Lazarus ; balancing his composition so as to make the Christ the leading figure of the group, while Lazarus should share attention by his expression. "The author of the miracle first strikes the eye. He is alone, — as he ought to be ; standing erect and visible from head to foot ; while the object of his power, on the point of appearing, is sufficiently seen to account for the agitation, without interfering with Christ, the first cause."

Wilkie writes more eagerly than usual (January 2nd), "that he has a great deal to tell him ;" arrives, his look, his walk important, his form dilated ; and sits down breathing with that consciousness of victory a man has after a successful argument. Drawing near the fire and chuckling with inward triumph, out it comes at last. He has made his maiden speech at the Academy, has carried his motion, has been praised, and begins to

\* The journal for that year bears the motto "Ἐργα, Ἐργα, Ἐργα, and this (from Tacitus de Mor. Ger.) : "Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt . . . et duces exemplo potius quam imperio ; si *promti, si conspicui, si ante aciem agant*, admiratione præsent." The italics are his own.

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feel his weight. He tells Haydon his wonder at finding himself listened to, and is all eagerness for speech-making. "The next time he dines with me I am perfectly convinced he will get up and say, 'Mr. President, I propose that the candle be snuffed.' He is now off," adds Haydon, "for the next fortnight; and actually told me, when I asked how Lord Wellington's picture (the Chelsea Pensioners) was going on, that it was too cold to paint! What a character! Never were such simplicity, such genius, such prudence, such steadiness, and such inconsistency united."

Among his correspondents of this date was Sir Walter Scott, who gave him (December 27, 1820), an outline of a course of Scottish history, and (January 7) sent him the story of "The Laird's Jock," as "a good subject for a sketch, in the mode of Salvator, though perhaps better adapted for sculpture."

Sir George Beaumont (Feb. 14) renewed his judicious advice: "Paint down your enemies (if you have any) rather than attempt to write them down, which will only multiply them. There is no man so insignificant as not to stand his chance of having it in his power to do you a serious injury at some time or other," — advice which Haydon felt the full value of, but always forgot on the first provocation.

(*March 10th.*) Haydon spent an evening with Mrs. Siddons to hear her read Macbeth. "She acts Macbeth herself," he writes, "better than either Kemble or Kean. It is extraordinary the awe this wonderful woman inspires. After her first reading the men retired to tea. While we were all eating toast and tingling cups and saucers, she began again. It was like the effect of a mass bell at Madrid. All noise ceased; we slunk to our seats like boors, two or three of the most distinguished men of the day, with the

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1821.]

JOHN SCOTT'S DEATH.

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very toast in their mouths, afraid to bite. It was curious to see Lawrence in this predicament, to hear him bite by degrees, and then stop for fear of making too much crackle, his eyes full of water from the constraint; and at the same time to hear Mrs. Siddons' 'eye of newt and toe of frog!' and then to see Lawrence give a sly bite, and then look awed, and pretend to be listening. I went away highly gratified, and as I stood on the landing-place to get cool, I overheard my own servant in the hall say, 'What! is that the old lady making such a noise?' 'Yes.' 'Why, she makes as much noise as ever!' 'Yes,' was the answer; 'she tunes her pipes as well as ever she did.'

On the 15th of February, 1821, John Scott, Haydon's old and warm friend, editor of the *Champion* and of the *London Magazine*, was killed in a duel.\*

\* The duel took place in consequence of the following circumstances. Mr. Lockhart, the reputed author of "Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk," having been violently and personally attacked in the *London Magazine*, came to London for the purpose of obtaining from Mr. Scott an explanation, an apology, or a meeting. Mr. Scott declined unless Mr. Lockhart would first deny that he was the editor of *Blackwood's Magazine*. This Mr. Lockhart did not consider it necessary to do, and the correspondence ended with a note from Mr. Lockhart containing very strong and unqualified expressions touching Mr. Scott's personal character and courage. Scott published his account of the affair, and Mr. Lockhart published his, in which he stated that a copy had been sent to Mr. Scott. The copy circulated by Mr. Lockhart contained a denial of his being the editor of *Blackwood's Magazine*. The copy sent to Scott did not contain this denial. Scott on this charged Mr. Lockhart with falsehood. The discrepancy between the copies arose from an oversight in printing the statement. But Scott's charge produced a reply from Mr. Christie, who had acted as Mr. Lockhart's friend in the affair, and Mr. Christie's reply led to a challenge from Scott, which was accepted. The parties met at Chalk Farm at nine o'clock at night, an unusual hour chosen on Mr. Christie's suggestion. Two shots were exchanged: Mr. Christie

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There had been a coolness between him and Haydon for some time before the sad event. But this catastrophe broke down the pride which had kept Haydon aloof from his friend, and he thus (March 9th) records the impression made upon him by the funeral:—

“Poor John Scott! and thou at last ‘home hast gone, and ta'en thy wages.’

“For a fortnight before his burial, I exhibited a fine instance of wounded pride struggling to keep down the urgings of former affection. I held out to the hour before his funeral, and then a sudden blaze of light on my brain showed me his body, stretched out dead! My old affections burst in like a torrent and bore down all petty feelings of irritation. I hurried on my clothes and drove down to his door. As the room began to fill, I felt my heart heave up and down; my feelings were too strong to be restrained. I hung back and suffered every one to go before me; my very nature was altered! I, who was always panting for distinction, even at a funeral, (for I felt angry at Opie's that I wasn't in the first coach,) now slunk away from observation with my lips quivering, my eyes filling, and my mind struggling to subdue its emotions into a stern feeling of painful sorrow; nature would not be commanded; when I got into the coach I hid my face in my cloak and cried like a child. By the time we reached the church, I was relieved; happily I was so, for the world would have regarded any exhibition then (however genuine) as affectation. As I squeezed by the coffin that contained the body of my former friend, with the long pall and black plumes waving and trembling as the

fred wide the first time intentionally; but, unhappily, this fact was unknown to Mr. Scott or his second. On the second fire Mr. Christie's ball entered Mr. Scott's side, and the wound was fatal, Mr. Scott dying on the 27th. (Abridged and altered from the Annual Register for 1821.—ED.)



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DEATH OF KEATS.

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wind moaned up the aisle, I shivered. All our conversations on death and Christianity and another world crowded into my mind.

“As the coffin was carried to the vault, the plumes were taken off, and as they nodded against the light window, I thought them endowed with human features, — fates that bowed as we walked in submission to their power!

“I descended the steps into a dark chamber and saw at a distance doors open and piles of black coffins, each with a trembling light fixed to its side. The mourners crowded forward: I felt too much to move; I heard the dry scraping of the cords, and then a dead jerk as the body sunk into its place. Immediately a voice rose breathing forth the beautiful words of our funeral service. Poor Scott! I took a last look at the coffin and walked away.

“Daylight was painful; the stir in the streets seemed disgusting. I went into an obscure alley and so home.

“Poor Scott, peace go with him! It is a consolation to think that in those very fields where he was shot, he told me, last summer (after his boy's death), that he felt life as a bridge over which he was walking to eternity.”

The same month brought news of a heavier loss, (March 29). “Keats too is gone! He died at Rome, the 23rd February, aged twenty-five. A genius more purely poetical never existed!

“In fireside conversation he was weak and inconsistent, but he was in his glory in the fields. The humming of a bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of the sun, seemed to make his nature tremble; then his eyes flashed, his cheek glowed, his mouth quivered. He was the most unselfish of human creatures: unadapted to this world, he cared not for himself, and

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put himself to any inconvenience for the sake of his friends. He was haughty, and had a fierce hatred of rank; but he had a kind gentle heart, and would have shared his fortune with any man who wanted it. His classical knowledge was inconsiderable, but he could feel the beauties of the classical writers. He had an exquisite sense of humour, and too refined a notion of female purity to bear the little sweet arts of love with patience. He had no decision of character, and having no object upon which to direct his great powers, was at the mercy of every petty theory —'s ingenuity might start.

“One day he was full of an epic poem; the next day epic poems were splendid impositions on the world. Never for two days did he know his own intentions.

“He began life full of hopes, fiery, impetuous and ungovernable, expecting the world to fall at once beneath his powers. Poor fellow! his genius had no sooner begun to bud, than hatred and malice spat their poison on its leaves, and sensitive and young it shrivelled beneath their effusions. Unable to bear the sneers of ignorance or the attacks of envy, not having strength of mind enough to buckle himself together like a porcupine, and present nothing but his prickles to his enemies, he began to despond, and flew to dissipation as a relief, which after a temporary elevation of spirits plunged him into deeper despondency than ever. For six weeks he was scarcely sober, and—to show what a man does to gratify his appetites, when once they get the better of him—once covered his tongue and throat as far as he could reach with Cayenne pepper, in order to appreciate the ‘delicious coldness of claret in all its glory,’—his own expression.

“The death of his brother wounded him deeply, and it appeared to me that he began to droop from that hour. I was much attached to Keats, and he had a