

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07381-3 - Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon Historical Painter: From
His Autobiography and Journals: Volume 3

Edited by Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
OF
BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON,
FROM HIS JOURNALS.

VOL. III.

B

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1835.

HAYDON inaugurated this year with a picture of Achilles revealing his Sex at the court of Lycomedes, by his sudden forsaking of womanly ornaments for arms. But he was soon compelled to quit a large and heroic subject for smaller and more saleable works. His necessities this whole year through were severe; and embarrassments, continually accumulating, were met by every expedient that urgent wants and sanguine hopes could suggest. The year was one of keen political excitement. The Peel Ministry resigned, and the Whigs returned to power under Lord Melbourne. The burning of the Houses of Parliament the year before had given an opening for hope that some arrangement for Art-decoration might be made in the new building, and provision for this was urgently pressed on the Ministry by Haydon in and out of season.

The appointment of Mr. Ewart's select committee of inquiry into the means of extending a knowledge of the arts and principles of design, including an inquiry into the constitution of the Royal Academy, and the effects

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produced by it, (the appointment of which may be attributed in a considerable degree to Haydon,) afforded him an opportunity he had long sought of impressing his views on Parliament and the people. But these prospects and hopes were dimmed by the loss of one of his children, and his anxieties were not lessened by the birth of another.

“*January 6th.**—A pupil of David spent the evening with me. David said a good thing to him, ‘When you cease to struggle, you are done for.’ This is more like Napoleon.

“At the Polish ball the Lord Mayor (who squints) said to Lady Douglas, ‘Which do you prefer, my Lady, Gog or Magog?’ ‘Of the *three*,’ she replied, ‘your Lordship.’

“Rubbed in Milton and his daughter selling Paradise Lost, and Eloïse and Abelard at their studies. Preparing for the year’s work.

“The people are in a dreadful condition;—the excitement beyond all belief. I have not stirred from my painting-room. I hate to have my mind disturbed. The Tories say the people must go through a crisis. It is their obstinacy which has produced it.

“*7th.*—Rubbed in two new subjects—Milton at his Organ, dear Mary at her Glass. Saw Lady Blessington to borrow an armlet.

“*10th.*—Read Mignet’s History of the Revolution. Extraordinary that all the murders of the French Revolution were perpetrated according to law, and on an abstract principle of virtue. ‘*La terreur sans vertu est une crime: la vertu sans terreur est une faiblesse*,’ said Robespierre.

* The 21st volume of the Journals begins with this year, with the motto, “A man shall not be established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous shall not be moved. They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Sion, which cannot be moved, but abideth for ever.”

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1835.] APPLICATION TO THE DUKE FOR A SITTING. 5

“ 16th. — In the city on business; much harassed in money matters.

“ 17th. — Rubbed in Samson and Dalilah.

“ Raced the town to raise money. Got a commission to paint the Duke on the field of Waterloo, from Boys the printseller. Sentiment with the Duke won't do.

“ ‘ 4, Burwood Place, January 19th, 1835.

“ ‘ May it please your Grace,

“ ‘ To permit me to intrude a moment, and to inform your Grace, with your leave, that I have received a commission to paint your Grace musing on the field of Waterloo, to be engraved as a pendant to the picture I had the honour to paint for Sir Robert Peel, of Napoleon musing at St. Helena — conqueror and captive.

“ ‘ 1st. May I presume to ask your Grace to give me leave to make a chalk sketch of your sword and dress, such as you wore at Waterloo under your cloak?

“ ‘ 2nd. Would there be any hope of being allowed to attend your Grace for half an hour, and make a rapid sketch of your Grace's figure, at any time early or late?

“ ‘ I acknowledge to your Grace I approach you with every delicacy, and prepared to withdraw with every apology, should this intrusion, considering my feelings as a conservative, Reformer and Whig, be considered unwarrantable or impertinent. But as I never scrupled to express my enthusiasm for your genius to any party, I anticipate your pardon, even if your Grace refuses consent.

“ ‘ With the same respect as dictated my letter to your Grace when you relinquished the Government in 1830,

“ ‘ I remain,

“ ‘ Your Grace's faithful servant,

“ ‘ B. R. HAYDON.

“ ‘ To his Grace the Duke of Wellington, &c.’

“ ‘ The Duke of Wellington presents his compliments to Mr. Haydon, and has received his note.

“ ‘ The Duke hopes Mr. Haydon will excuse him, but he really has not leisure at present to sit for a picture.

“ ‘ London, March 22nd, 1835.’

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“31st.—All of a sudden yesterday a new conception of the Duke burst into my head. I took up a canvas and in two hours dashed in the best conception by far,—the one that shall be engraved. Wrote a strong letter to the Times on the National Gallery.

“The month ends, and I have worked well. I have had comparative peace. I consider it a good beginning to have had an order connected with Wellington. The next month begins to-morrow, and a dreadful pecuniary want I anticipate; but my old fire is revived. I have begun again on public encouragement, and again will I be in the thick of the fight. I trust for extrication and salvation to that Being to whom I have always trusted, and feel confident I shall not trust in vain.

“*February 1st.*—Sunday. Called on Lord Melbourne. He was lounging over the Edinburgh Review. He began instantly, ‘Why here are a set of fellows who want public money for scientific purposes, as well as you for painting; they are a set of ragamuffins.’ ‘That’s the way,’ said I; ‘nobody has any right to public money but those who are brought up to politics. Are not painting and science as much matter of public benefit as political jobbing? You never look upon us as equals; but any scamp who trades in politics is looked on as a companion for my Lord.’ ‘That is not true,’ said he. ‘I say it is,’ said I; and he then roared with laughter, and rubbed his hands.

“He had been to Woburn, where he had met Chantrey and Landseer; I could not get him to touch on politics. ‘Lord Melbourne, will you make me a promise?’ ‘What is that?’ ‘Pass your word to get a vote of money for Art, if you are premier again.’ Not a word.

“No old politician ever speaks on politics so as to give you a notion of what is going on.

“After chatting a good while about everything, I bid him good bye.

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1835.] A DIFFICULTY ABOUT THE DUKE'S CLOTHES. 7

“*3rd.* — At the Duke’s, and sketched the cloak he wore at Waterloo, the coat, plain hat, &c. To-morrow they are to be sent to me. The contrast of his house with Lord Grey’s was extraordinary. I was shown into a waiting parlour full of pistols and muskets. All about Lord Grey was anti-military, while everything seems to be martial about the Duke.

“Mugford, his steward, told me the Duke had given him the cloak, and God only knew where the hat was. Is this simplicity, absence of vanity or want of sentiment in the Duke? Napoleon dwelt on, often looked at and left to his son the coat he wore at Marengo and the sword of Austerlitz.

“*9th.* — Worked unsatisfactorily. The Duke lent me his hat, belt and coat.”

Unluckily Haydon wrote to thank him for his kindness.

This, it appears from the next letter, was rather a mistake.

“London, February 7th, 1835.

“Sir,

“I received last night your letter of the 6th, in which you inform me that you had applied to and obtained from my servant one of my coats, and that you had painted a picture of me which you wished me to see, and which was ready for the engraver.

“You wrote to me on the 19th January to inform me that you had received a commission to paint a picture of me. I told you in answer that I had not time to sit for a picture. You then wrote to desire that I would order my servant to let you see my coat, &c., to which letter I gave no answer.

“You thought proper, however, to go to my servant, and procure from him one of my coats, &c., without any order or consent on my part, and you now come to me to desire me to inspect the picture before it goes to the engraver.

“I have no objection to any gentleman painting any picture of me that he may think proper; but if I am to

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have anything to say to the picture, either in the way of sitting or sending a dress, or in any other manner, I consider myself, and shall be considered by others, as responsible for it.

“I must say that I by no means approve of the subject of the picture which you have undertaken to paint. Paint it, if you please, but I will have nothing to say to it.

“To paint the Emperor Napoleon on the rock of St. Helena is quite a different thing from painting me on the field of battle of Waterloo. The Emperor Napoleon did not consent to be painted. But I am to be supposed to consent; and moreover, I on the field of battle of Waterloo am not exactly in the situation in which Napoleon stood on the rock of St. Helena.

“But a painter should be a historian, a philosopher, a politician, as well as a poet and a man of taste.

“Now if you will consider the subject of the picture to which you desire me to be a party in the year 1835, in any one of these characters, you will see full reason why you should not choose that subject; and why I should not consent to be a party to the picture.

“I have the honour to be, Sir,

“Your most obedient, humble servant,

“WELLINGTON.”

Haydon wrote at once to explain the impression he had been under that it was with the Duke's permission that the valet had furnished the clothes, and afterwards sent this letter in addition: —

“London, February 8th, 1835.

“My Lord Duke,

“Having, I hope, exculpated myself from the accusation of going to your servant, contrary to your wishes, to obtain, by tampering with him, what your Grace objected to grant, though I was ignorant of such objection, may I now venture to reply to the latter part of your letter?

“Your Grace says ‘a painter should be a philosopher, a historian, a politician, a poet and a man of taste.’

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1835.] CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE DUKE. 9

“It really appears to me, your Grace, that imagining a great general visiting the field of his greatest battle after many years is both natural and poetical; that the musings that must occur to him there would be philosophical, and though it would not be strictly historical if it had not happened, yet there is surely no bad taste in contrasting the conqueror with the vanquished, or in showing the one in his deserved desolation, and the other in his deserved triumph.

“I on the field of Waterloo am not exactly in the same situation as Napoleon on the rock of St. Helena,’ your Grace adds. Certainly, I reply. It is because your Grace is in a different situation, that I glory in placing you there, and that the public and the army will glory in seeing you there.

“With respect to the subject, it occurred to me at the time I painted Sir Robert Peel’s picture of Napoleon. I had always resolved to do my best to honour, as far as my pencil could honour, that man who dared in face of the world to break the chain of an imagined invincibility, who returned to his own country encircled by a splendour of fame which will last as long as the earth he inhabits, who came back from the command of a victorious army a simple citizen, subjecting himself to the same laws and paying allegiance to the same sovereign as the humblest individual in the land he saved.

“Ah, your Grace, you were wanted, and your genius had full scope, because you were necessary; but it is not impossible to imagine a genius in another way, who loves his country with equal devotion and feels equally conscious of being able to honour it, but whose talents are not in demand and who is only aware of the extent of his power from the torture of suppression, who passes his life in vain aspirations for opportunities which will never be granted him, and who will go out of the world pitied, disappointed and ruined.

“With respect to the immediate facts connected with the commission alluded to, they are as follows:—

“It was accidentally proposed by a printseller who had purchased the copyright of Napoleon that I should paint your Grace at Waterloo. I naturally seized the order with avidity, for I was totally without employment. Your Grace

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MEMOIRS OF B. R. HAYDON.

[1835.]

cannot blame me for this, when I tell you I have six children, one a midshipman in the *Wolf*, Captain Stanley, one a scholar at Wadham College, Oxford, and four at home, and that, as Johnson said, I have still to provide for the day that is passing over me. Your Grace cannot wonder then that I was ready to do what I conceived would honour you, as well as provide subsistence for my family, at least for a month more.

“Two-thirds of the purchase-money was paid; so that there is no method of stopping publication, but by purchasing the picture of them and the copyright, and this it is not worth your Grace’s while to do.

“With respect to the large picture which I have begun and prepared for completion, the same size as Sir Robert Peel’s *Napoleon*, which is entirely my own property, that, *now* I know your feelings, I pass your Grace my word of honour to proceed with no further without your leave, and to obliterate it without delay if you desire it.

“I trust, therefore, I shall now regain your opinion as a gentleman, and remain

“Your Grace’s admirer and servant,

“B. R. HAYDON.

“His Grace the Duke of Wellington, &c.”

“London, February 9th, 1835.

“Sir,

“I have had the honour of receiving your letter of the 8th inst. In the letter which I wrote to you on Saturday I stated my reason for disapproving of your having applied to my servant for my clothes without my previous consent.

“The same reason still exists. I am not and cannot be a party to or an encourager of the picture which you are painting of me. Do as you please with it. But I have nothing to say to it.

“There can be no doubt that your communication with my servants, without my previous permission, was not regular. I cannot say otherwise.

“I have the honour to be, Sir,

“Your most obedient, humble servant,

“WELLINGTON.”