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978-1-108-07448-3 - Autobiographical Recollections: With a Prefatory Essay on Leslie as an Artist, and Selections from his Correspondence: Volume 1

Charles Robert Leslie Edited by Tom Taylor

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Autobiographical Recollections

The Royal Academician Charles Leslie (1794–1859) also wrote biographies of fellow painters. His life of John Constable and a two-volume work on Sir Joshua Reynolds are also reissued in this series. On his death, the Reynolds work was completed by the journalist and dramatist Tom Taylor (1817–80), who also edited Leslie's two-volume autobiography, published in 1860. Though born in London, Leslie was an American, a child prodigy in drawing, who returned to Britain in 1811 to study painting with Benjamin West and Washington Allston. He had enormous admiration for the paintings of his contemporaries and of the previous generation, and his reminiscences are intended to preserve 'some recollections of those chiefly whom I could praise'. Volume 1 of this lively and self-deprecating work, full of good-humoured anecdotes, is prefaced by an introductory essay by Taylor on Leslie and his art.

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Autobiographical Recollections

*With a Prefatory Essay on Leslie as an Artist,
and Selections from his Correspondence*

VOLUME 1

CHARLES ROBERT LESLIE

EDITED BY TOM TAYLOR



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Engraved by William Holl.

Charles Robert Leslie, R.A.

From an early portrait by himself,

in the possession of his Family.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
RECOLLECTIONS.

BY THE LATE

CHARLES ROBERT LESLIE, R.A.

EDITED,

WITH A PREFATORY ESSAY ON LESLIE AS AN ARTIST,
AND SELECTIONS FROM HIS CORRESPONDENCE.

By TOM TAYLOR, Esq.,

EDITOR OF "THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HAYDON."

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

WITH PORTRAIT.

LONDON:

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

1860.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE.



It is owing to the innate modesty of the late Mr. Leslie's character, that in his Autobiographical Recollections the part occupied by himself and his pictures is small in comparison with that devoted to his contemporaries and friends. So great is my respect for Mr. Leslie, that I have hesitated long before giving to the world any more about him than he had thought fit himself to prepare for publication.

But when I took into account his claims to consideration as a painter, I felt strongly that readers must wish to know more about the man than he had himself told them—more about the circumstances and influences under which his pictures were produced; the present state and locality of these pictures; their subjects; the way in which

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those subjects are treated, and the general characteristics of his style.

I have therefore attempted, in an Introductory Essay, to classify and describe such of Leslie's more important works as I have been able to examine personally, and to give a general appreciation of his artistic qualities, and his position in the English school.

I have, further, selected from the correspondence placed at my disposal, the parts bearing on the painter's works, and on his life as connected with his works. Without such an addition to the Autobiographical Recollections which Leslie had himself made ready for posthumous publication, this volume would not—as it seems to me—have contained the information required to give it its proper place among the artistic biographies of the time—such lives as have been published, or are preparing, of Wilkie and Constable, Etty, Haydon, and Turner.

In using the matter entrusted to me, I have been guided by the strongest regard and respect for the painter, and for the family that is left

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PREFACE.

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to lament the irreparable loss of such a husband, brother, and father. I have endeavoured to bear in mind, always, the modesty, tolerance, and good taste which ruled throughout Leslie's life and labours; and to respect the time and patience of my readers. Affectionate admiration for my subject may, however, have in some cases misled me as to what was worth printing about him —having regard, at least, to the wider public. I have little fear that the many friends of Leslie, and the large circle of them who, like myself, have loved, and benefited by, his works, will think I have extracted too much from his letters, or that I have rated the man or his pictures too highly.

His son, Mr. George Leslie, writes thus to me, of the manner in which the Autobiographical Recollections were composed.

“The manner in which my father's autobiography was written was this. He was in the habit of writing down accounts of anything of importance that occurred to him all his life, and it is from these notes and from letters which he collected, that the autobiography you have was composed.

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PREFACE.

“We have reason to believe that he commenced it about ten years ago, writing in it from time to time. The reason it ends abruptly was not on account of failing health, but because all the time he could spare from his painting was, during the last year of his life, occupied by him in writing the life of Sir Joshua Reynolds, at which he worked hard even a month before his death.”

TOM TAYLOR.

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE.



MY object has been to preserve in these pages some recollections of those chiefly whom I could praise ; and of them, not the faults and foibles that are more or less common to all men, but the merits that are rare, and on which alone their claims to distinction rest. I mention this that I may not be charged with dealing too much in panegyric.

C. R. LESLIE.

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INTRODUCTION.

ON LESLIE'S PICTURES.

IT has been my lot to be entrusted with the arrangement for the press of two artistic autobiographies—that of Haydon, and that of Leslie. It is difficult to imagine a completer contrast than is formed by the characters, lives, and works of these two painters. Haydon presents to us a nature all self-confidence, passion, and combativeness. He was exclusive in his theories; reckless in his defiance of difficulties; unscrupulous in the means he took to relieve them; untiring in his appeals to patrons, and public men, and the public. Regarding himself as a martyr to High-Art, he claimed to the full all the immunities and indulgences that the most lenient and sympathetic judgment could attach to that position. Alternately elated with

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the most buoyant hope and depressed by the deepest despair—fighting, struggling, appealing, asserting himself his whole life through, he closed a stormy and sorrowful career by suicide. But through all this tempestuous life, he loved his art passionately, and was truly and deeply attached to his wife and his children. His pictures seem to me to reflect at once his lofty aims and his practical short-comings. Their unquestionable power and vigour are marred by ever recurring evidences of haste, slovenliness, coarseness, and lack of taste.

In Leslie, on the other hand, we see the man of cautious, trustful, respectful nature from the first. Slow in the formation of his judgment, disposed to defer to others in his art and out of it, but strong in principle, and apt to hold stubbornly to convictions once grasped; not given to court notoriety or publicity, and rather shrinking from than provoking conflict; asking only leave to pursue the even tenor of his way in the practice of the unambitious art he loved, among the quiet friends he valued; equable, affectionate, self-respecting to the point of reserve and reticence;

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valuing good taste and moderation as much in art as in manners ; averse to exclusive theories or loud-sounding self-assertion in all forms ; closing a happy, peaceful, successful, and honoured life, by the calm and courageous death of a Christian, and leaving behind him pictures stamped in every line with good taste, chastened humour, and graceful sentiment—pictures which it makes us happier, gentler, and better to look upon—pictures which help us to love good books more, and to regard our fellow-creatures with kindlier eyes.

The lessons of two such lives ought not to be written in vain. For power, passion, and variety ; for curious revelation of character, eloquent criticism, and vivid sketching of men and manners, the little Leslie has left written is altogether unworthy of comparison with those bulky records of himself from which I selected the materials for the autobiography of Haydon. But scanty, and comparatively colourless, as Leslie's remains may be, they are of value in throwing light on the character, as well as on the works, of the painter—that part of him which alone has an interest for us.

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Before entering on the subject of Leslie's pictures in detail, I think it essential to fair appreciation of the painter and the man, to give the reader such knowledge as I can of his method of working, and of his daily habits.

“His painting-room,” says his son George, “differed from those of most artists in one point. He never hung up any of his own works or studies on the walls, but had a great many fine examples of other painters—chiefly copies by himself from the old masters. He considered that an artist who fed his eye with his own works was sure to get into a mannered style of painting. He painted in the simplest manner, always trying to get his work like in tone and colour to the object he painted from, as *soon* as possible. He had a particular objection to the practice of preparing his work in one colour, to be afterwards altered to another by glazing. He used to say, that unless you possessed a most extraordinary knowledge of the chemical, as well as modifying, qualities of colours, it was always very uncertain whether you would obtain by that means the exact tint you wanted.

“He was very quick in working, especially in painting heads; I don't think he ever kept a model more

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than two hours at a time, and generally finished a head the second day, though he frequently rubbed his work out, if it was not satisfactory to him, and painted it in afresh. I have often sat to him, and he had always finished before I was tired.

“He very seldom praised his own work; but I have often seen him laughing at some expression that pleased him in his picture.

“In giving instruction to young artists he used to say very little, but he would take the palette and brushes himself, and show them a great deal. He never, however, took this trouble with any student for whom he felt there was no hope. He was kind to all young artists, and never spoke to them in the way of criticism without some qualifying expression, such as, ‘I may be wrong,’ or ‘Perhaps you are right.’

“His palette was always kept clean, and he put more colour on it than he thought he should use, as he said he hated a *starved* palette. On the same principle he provided himself with a most liberal supply of brushes, in the choice of which he was a little different from most artists I have seen work. He used a great many more sable brushes than any other, and was especially fond of very small ones, with which he put the delicate touches on his heads.

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“He worked very steadily and cheerfully, keeping up a sort of whistling at times, which I think he was unconscious of, as he was always absorbed in thinking about what he was painting. I remember him once walking about looking for his palette-knife, which he was holding in his hand all the time.

“He had a very pretty habit of going into the garden before breakfast and picking either a honeysuckle or a rose—his favourite flowers—and putting them in a glass on the mantel-shelf in his painting-room. I hardly ever saw his room in the summer without these flowers, and we have a little sketch of a rose, which he picked and brought into the house so gently that he did not disturb a beautiful little moth on it.

“He took a great interest in astronomy. His knowledge of this science was very slight, but the pleasure he had in the various appearances in the heavens was unbounded, so much so, that he used to say an eclipse seemed to take place on purpose for his pleasure. He once said to me that he thought it very likely that part of our happiness in the next life would be derived from finding out the wonders of the creation which are hidden to us here.

“He entertained the greatest veneration for all cele-

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brated scientific men, and once had a correspondence with Professor Faraday on the blue colour of the sky. The professor's kind replies delighted my father beyond measure."

The following was the usual distribution of his day :—

" He would rise," writes his son, " about eight o'clock in the winter, and about seven in the summer, when he would walk in the garden before breakfast. He had breakfast at nine, and enjoyed the newspaper very much, taking great interest in politics, or any topic that occupied the public attention. He always read a chapter in the Bible to us all afterwards, and then, about half-past nine or ten, he would commence work, sometimes being read to at the same time. He did not object to the presence of any of his family in his room, but sometimes, when very busy, he would turn us out, especially the younger ones, whom he called 'trudies,' his corruption of intruders. He was never irritated by anything whilst at work, but seemed always calm and happy. He was rather absent in his mind about trivial things. He would sometimes strike a carpet-pin, mistaking it for a lucifer match, and was very apt to forget people's names, unless connected in

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some way with his art. But if anyone possessed a fine picture, however commonplace and uninteresting that person might otherwise be, he always remembered his name, and was always ready to go and see him.

“He lunched at one, and would generally leave off work about four o’clock, when he would go out, but seldom without some object, as to see pictures at the auction-rooms, or to call on people who possessed pictures.

“He dined generally at six o’clock, and, after a nap, would either play at chess, which he was very fond of, or else would read to us from Shakspeare or ‘Don Quixote,’ and sometimes passages from ‘Tristram Shandy.’ He was very fond of having friends to see him in the evening, though unless his company possessed some knowledge of the art he took but little pleasure in them.”

The Petworth Collection is richest in Leslie’s pictures of all our private galleries—having regard to the merit, if not the number, of the pictures it contains. After Petworth must be ranked the galleries of Mr. John Naylor at Leighton Hall, Welshpool, Mr. Edwin Bullock and Mr. Joseph

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Gillott at Birmingham, Mr. Thomas Miller at Preston, and Mrs. Gibbons in the Regent's Park, London. Our National Gallery, especially the Sheepshanks collection, is, happily, richer than even the richest of these.*

It is pleasant to me to think that so many of Leslie's pictures should have found a home among the mills of Lancashire and the smoking forges and grimy workshops of Birmingham. They are eminently calculated to counteract the ignobler influences of industrial occupation by their inborn refinement, their liberal element of loveliness, their sweet sentiment of nature, their literary associations, and their genial humour. I can speak from personal observation to the real appreciation of these pictures in such places, not on the part of their possessors only, but among the many, both masters and workmen, to whom these galleries are so liberally opened. Leslie testifies in one of

* The Duke of Bedford, the Earl of Essex, Mr. Harris, Mr. Bates, Mr. Bicknell, Mr. Thomas Baring, Mr. Heugh, Mr. Newsham, Mr. W. C. Sole, and other collectors in this country, possess important pictures of this master. There are others in America, in the collections of Col. Lenox of New York, and Mr. Joseph Miller of Virginia, U. S.

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his letters to the extraordinary change which he had lived to see in the source and spread of patronage for the painter. The nobleman is no longer the chief purchaser of contemporary pictures. It is mainly to our great manufacturing and trading towns that the painter has to look for the sale of his works. The class enriched by manufactures and commerce is now doing for art in England what the same class did in earlier times in Florence, Genoa, and Venice, for the art of Italy; in Bruges, Antwerp, and Amsterdam for that of the Low Countries and Holland. The change may have its evil as well as its good. There may be some risk that it will multiply the manufacture and increase the homeliness of pictures, to say nothing of less direct and obvious ill-consequences.

But against such risks is to be set the likelihood that purchasers of this class will, in the main, insist upon something like fidelity to nature, and truthfulness of expression and sentiment. They are rarely beset by prejudice in favour of old schools or time-honoured conventionalities; *ceteris paribus*,

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they are likely to prefer pictures which are the growth of the time, and appeal to the time, to those which belong to the past, and speak to the past—or, in other words—living to dead art.

In Mr. Naylor's collection the painter may be studied in his earliest and latest manners,—in the 'Sir Roger de Coverley going to Church' (1819), (the original picture painted for Mr. Dunlop), and the 'May-day in the time of Queen Elizabeth' (1821); and in one of the last works of his pencil, 'The interview of Jeanie Deans and Queen Caroline' (1859).

The two former pictures demand notice first as works of a time when Leslie was most himself; that is, when he had felt the influence of neither of two painters who materially affected his later practice—Newton on the one hand, and Constable on the other.

Both these pictures are simply painted, with a due admixture of solid and glazing colour; and neither shows the least sign of impaired tone or failing surface. They are as bright and sunny in

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effect, and as free from crack or decay, as when first painted.

The original 'Sir Roger' is finer in tone than the repetition. Parts of it indicate a close study of Hogarth, especially the old yeoman who stands to receive the Squire's greeting, with his fresh, pretty daughter on his arm. In the latter I recognise the lady who, some four or five years after the picture was painted, became the painter's wife. Sir Roger, in his full suit of crimson velvet, on his way up the pathway to the little church, pats on the head the widow's children, who look up to him with round, wondering eyes. Their mother is a sweet and comely rustic matron. The head of Sir Roger, Leslie tells us in his *Life of Constable*, was painted from an old Royal Academician, Mr. Bigg,* likelier to go down to posterity in this picture of Leslie's than in any of his own works. The Spectator, who accompanies Sir Roger, is commonplace enough. But he is, after all, but a colourless personage in

* "I thought him," he says, "in appearance and manners, a perfect specimen of an old-fashioned English gentleman. He was one of the most amiable men who ever existed."

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Addison's own hands. The rustics who line the pathway are all true to nature. Besides the group of the old man and daughter already described, there is a full-blown young woman, sticking a flower into her boddice, and a moon-faced labourer, in a smock frock, looking over her shoulder, both quite worthy of Hogarth. Even in this picture—painted in 1819, when the painter was only twenty-four,—there is no observable deficiency either in drawing, colouring, or composition, or in linear or aërial perspective.

I should say at least as much for the 'May-Day,' in which, besides all these merits in the figures, there is shown a power of effective landscape-painting, of which Leslie has left us few examples. The scene may be supposed to be in Kent. The foreground is a knoll, from which the eye ranges over a wide stretch of level and richly cultivated woodland, with a distant manor-house and church. Overhead is a bright spring sky, with wreaths of sunlit cloud. The family and guests of the manor-house furnish the foreground groups, the principal of which is made up of a fantastically

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dressed gentleman of the court in crimson velvet, and the rustic beauty of the manor to whom he is paying euphuistic court. She timidly accepts his offered hand for the dance, hardly understanding the meaning of his quaint and far-fetched phrases. She wears a tawny robe, over a blue petticoat. To the right of the foreground, a stately Elizabethan dame, in farthingale of scarlet and gold, and ample ruff, looks on at the sports, while her jester behind her in red, yellow, and green motley, slyly draws an ass in a lion's skin on the buckler of one of the blue-coated serving-men, who complete the right-hand group. A little further off, to the left, are gathered, in reclining groups on the grass, or standing under the trees, the rest of the gentry, who have assembled to watch the shooting at the butts and the May games, in full swing on the green below. You see part of the line of the merry morris-dance, where the meadow falls beyond the foreground. These dancers are drawn and grouped with a spirit and freedom not unworthy of Rubens. Near them stand the old sable-clad schoolmaster—rod in hand, and spectacles on nose—who watches the dancers