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978-1-108-07449-0 - Autobiographical Recollections: With a Prefatory Essay on  
Leslie as an Artist, and Selections from his Correspondence: Volume 2

Charles Robert Leslie Edited by Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF  
CHARLES ROBERT LESLIE.

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EXTRACTS FROM LESLIE'S CORRESPONDENCE.

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WHEN a little above seventeen Leslie landed in England, as we read in his Autobiography, in December, 1811. He kept up a regular correspondence with his family at Philadelphia, from which, however, only extracts have been placed at my disposal. It is principally from these extracts and his correspondence with Washington Irving, that the following selections have been made. Leslie was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy from 1813 to 1859, the year of his death, with the exception of 1815, 1817, 1818, 1823, 1828, 1830, 1834, and 1853. His life was uneventful; spent in the affectionate discharge of family duties—which no man ever fulfilled better—and in the happy practice of his art. Its

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public interest lies entirely in its connection with his pictures. I have therefore enumerated, for each year, the pictures of that year, with selections from his letters which throw light on the progress of his pictures, or on the occupations, ideas, and associations of the painter. I have been fuller in my extracts from the earlier letters, as of importance in illustrating the growth of the writer's mind, both as regards art and general culture.

Leslie's letters paint the man—affectionate, social, candid, modest, and eager for instruction and improvement; always seeking the society of the best and most eminent persons to whom he could gain access, without intrusion or forwardness.

1812.

*Pictures Painted this Year.*

TIMON OF ATHENS. — HERCULES. — PORTRAITS OF MISS VISSCHER; MISS SMYTHE; MR. INSKEEP; MR. COATE; BENJAMIN WEST, P. R. A.; MR. WEST (of Salem, Massachusetts); MR. EARLE.

Leslie's first year in London was a memorable one, especially to citizens of the United States residing in England. On the 29th of June, 1812, the orders in council, affecting the trade of neutrals were revoked, as regards America, in consequence of the

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revocation of Napoleon's Berlin and Milan decrees. But unluckily for the specific effect of our revocation in the United States, Congress had already declared war with England on the 18th of the same month.

This war continued till the conclusion of the treaty of Ghent, on December the 24th, 1814. Leslie's letters extending over this period contain allusions to the hostile relations of the two countries and regrets at the obstruction to correspondence thus caused, but it is remarkable that these allusions show scarcely any trace of bitterness against this country. The young writer, though thoroughly national, seems, already, to have felt that, let the governments differ as they might, the nations were kindred. To him London was, above all, the seat and nursery of the arts he loved. Politics occupy him little.

His chief associates were the American artists, Allston, King and Morse. His days were spent in study at the Academy, the British Museum, and Burlington House, where the Elgin marbles were then deposited, or in portrait painting. Before beginning work, he tells his sister, he often bathed in the Serpentine. The favourite amusement of his evenings was the play. This was the year of Mrs. Siddons' retirement from the stage, and he followed her through

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the round of her farewell performances. His earliest letters are almost equally divided between his own art and the theatre.

Thus, writing to Miss Leslie, 19th April 1812, he tells her

“I have just returned from seeing ‘The Gamester.’ It is the last time Mrs. Siddons is ever to perform the character of Mrs. Beverley; I never saw so perfect a piece of acting. She appeared very much affected at the commencement, and really shed tears. In the scene between her and Stukely, she was uncommonly fine. Although she is now very large, she appears as easy in her motions as a young girl, and is extremely graceful. In the last scene, she almost surpassed herself. A lady in the boxes went into hysterics and was carried out. The look of speechless agony she cast on the body of Beverley as she went off, surpassed everything I had ever seen. Beverley was played by Young, who is very like Wood\* in his manners (the latter I believe copies him), though a much better stage figure, and has a fine head, though I will not say a more expressive countenance. His voice too is very good. He stands certainly next to Kemble in tragedy. Lewson was very well

\* An Actor in Philadelphia.—Ed.

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played by C. Kemble. Stukely, by Egerton, was but ordinary. King has seen Cooke in that character, with Kemble and Mrs. Siddons. What a treat! I can scarcely bear to think of it. I did not stay to see the farce, which was the 'Child of Nature.'

"In the Exhibition, which will open in a few days, there is to be a picture of Kemble in 'Cato,' by Lawrence, which he has just finished. I have seen that of him in Hamlet—it is very fine.

"A new Romance by Murphy has appeared, called 'The Milesian Chief.' Allston, who is a great admirer of this man's works, says it is much better than 'The Fatal Revenge.' It is a modern story; the scene is in Ireland. I have seen the first volume, but have not been able to get the others from the library. The language abounds in poetical images. Morse and myself subscribe jointly to a very large library in Bond Street. We take out seven volumes at a time. The days now are quite long, and the weather begins to be very fine.

"When it grows warmer I shall go to the British Museum every day, to draw from the antiques, of which there is a fine collection there. I have begun to study the Vault Scene in Marmion, which I shall finish for the next Exhibition. I wished to have done something for

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this year; but it was impossible. You know it requires some time to use oil colours with facility, and as I never painted in that way until I came here, my first essays were wretched daubs, and I could have sent out nothing that would not have disgraced me. I have painted several portraits, and have improved myself so much that I shall soon be able to earn something in that way.

“You wish there may be an accommodation between the two countries. I think there will soon be. You can have no idea of the distress our non-intercourse has caused here. There is nothing to be heard of but riots in the manufacturing towns. The poor are in a state of starvation. The Prince is abused by everybody. You would be astonished at the audacity of the public papers against him. He is caricatured in all the print shops. I am sure he cannot be less popular in America than he is here. The ‘Examiner,’ a violent opposition paper, said the other day, ‘it was reported that the Prince and his brothers were going to the Continent in person.’ He observed that, ‘it would be a most refreshing sight to see those royal personages quitting the country for the good of the state.’ Cooper will be a very great loser by his bet. The King may live these twenty years yet,

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for aught I know ; he is now doing very well. I dare say I shall not stay here long enough to witness his funeral. I went the other day to see Barker's Panorama of Lisbon. It is admirably painted, and said to be exactly like it. I think I mentioned in another letter that I had seen two other paintings of the sort. They are certainly perfect in their way. The objects appear so real, that it is impossible to imagine at what distance the canvas is from the eye.

“ I went lately to see an Exhibition of Water Colour Drawings, from the Old Masters. They have brought that kind of painting to greater perfection in this country than, I believe, ever was known before.

“ The colours appear equally brilliant with oil, but I cannot see any advantage in it, as it is quite as much trouble to use them as oil, and the pictures will not last so long.”\*

On May the 11th, Perceval was assassinated. Leslie writes next day

TO MISS LESLIE.

LONDON, *May 12th*, 1812.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ There has been a violent sensation excited here to-day by the assassination of Mr. Perceval. You will no

\* They sometimes last longer. — LESLIE.

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doubt have heard of this shocking affair before this reaches you. He was shot last evening in the passage to the House of Commons just as he was entering, by a man who had posted himself there for the purpose, said to be a bankrupt merchant of Liverpool. The ball penetrated his heart, and he instantly expired. The perpetrator of the deed surrendered himself immediately to the officers of justice; indeed it was very evident he had no wish to escape. As soon as it reached the ears of the mob they assembled in vast bodies about the house crying out, 'Burdett for ever.' I am told there has been chalked on many of the walls near it, 'Peace, or the Regent's Head.' There seems to be some mighty event about to take place here. It appears to me like a great play, at which I am an unconcerned spectator.

"I have just returned from seeing Mrs. Siddons in 'Venice Preserved.' The afterpiece being one I had seen before, I thought I should much better employ the remainder of this evening in writing home. I have beheld Belvidera herself to-night. It is the fourth time I have seen this play and by very far the best. Kemble was uncommonly animated in Pierre. I think the scene of the Senate and that between him and Jaffier afterwards were inimitable. The



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words of Aufidius seemed exactly to apply to him :—

Thy face  
Bears a command in't ; tho' thy tackle's torn,  
Thou show'st a noble vessel.

“ I like him equally well with Cooke, but I think it is hardly right to draw a comparison between them, as the line of characters they each excel in is quite different. Kemble could not play Sir Pertinax like Cooke, nor could the latter perform Pierre or Coriolanus like Kemble. I saw Mrs. Siddons about a week ago in the ‘ Grecian Daughter,’ in which character I have sent you a drawing of her. She played the character as well as possible, though it is not a play that I like much. It appears to me to be one of those works which you cannot find fault with, and yet has no striking beauties. Young played Evander extremely well, and Charles Kemble Dionysius. The scenery, dresses, &c., were very splendid and perfectly classical. The after-piece was the ‘ Secret Mine,’ a foolish melodrama they have got up for the sake of exhibiting the horses. The scenery, &c., were as usual very superb. They are performing this piece again to-night, which caused me to come away, for I never wish to see anything after a tragedy excepting a good broad farce.

“ I have sent you two other drawings, one of Young

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as Rolla, and the other Liston as Diego in 'The Virgins of the Sun.' They are thought to be pretty good likenesses. Liston is the first comic performer at Covent Garden. He is equivalent to Jefferson with us. The moment he comes on, the whole house begins to roar with laughter.

"I have just begun to copy a small picture of Mr. West's of 'Arethusa Bathing;' it is a most beautiful thing; when it is finished I shall endeavour to send it over, together with a design I intend making. Mr. West gave Morse and myself a recommendation to the British Museum, which we delivered this morning, and shall go there in a day or two to commence drawing. I have just finished a half-length portrait of Mrs. Visscher, an American lady, whom I mentioned in a former letter as looking so much like Anna. I have also begun to paint Miss Smythe, a daughter of Mr. Maxwell's, whom I also mentioned.

"This young lady is governess in a family, and owing to her engagements through the week, she can only sit to me on Sundays; her portrait therefore will proceed but slowly. She has many accomplishments, among which, her drawing very well is not the least. She is a beautiful girl, and appears to be very amiable.

"I have two acquaintances that I believe I did not