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978-1-108-07893-1 - The Life of Sir David Wilkie: With His Journals, Tours, and
Critical Remarks on Works of Art: Volume 2

Allan Cunningham

Excerpt

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L I F E
OF
SIR DAVID WILKIE.

CHAPTER I.

RECEIVES THE FREEDOM OF CUPAR.—PAINTS “DUNCAN GRAY,”
“THE DEATH OF SIR PHILIP SIDNEY,” “THE CHINA MENDERS,”
AND “THE PENNY WEDDING.”—EXTRACTS FROM JOURNAL.—
COMMENCES “THE CHELSEA PENSIONERS” FOR THE DUKE OF
WELLINGTON.—PAINTS “THE READING OF THE WILL” FOR THE
KING OF BAVARIA.—EXTRACTS FROM JOURNAL.—LETTERS TO
AND FROM SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE.

So sudden had been the march of Wilkie through the north, or so little had his intention of visiting his native land been spread abroad, that he was gone before it was known he was come; nay, Cupar, which may be called his birthplace, seems to have been ignorant that her most distinguished son was in the land till he had repassed the Forth, and was actually on the banks of the Tweed, and beyond the reach of all personal gratulation. To repair this undesigned neglect, the civic authorities of Cupar hurried the freedom of the little burgh after him to London. He welcomed this first notice of the kind, this dilatory mark of regard—for he had already been a dozen

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years eminent—as warmly as if it had been bestowed
in the day-break of his fame.

TO THE PROVOST AND TOWN COUNCIL OF CUPAR.

Gentlemen,

On returning to London a few days ago, I had the pleasure to receive an official letter from you, making known that you had done me the honour to confer upon me the freedom of your royal burgh. The instrument of the franchise did not, however, arrive till this morning; but I lose no time in making my acknowledgments for it, with full promise of future allegiance to the laws of the corporation. I beg to return to you, gentlemen, my most hearty thanks for the immunities and privileges you have conferred.

As you are pleased, gentlemen, to show me this mark of consideration, as well from my being an artist as from personal friendship, I beg to observe that an important encouragement to the arts in all countries has been the notice that has been shown to artists by public bodies and constituted authorities. The want of this has been frequently regretted in those kingdoms, and may have retarded the progress of art.

But the present instance of your obliging kindness to me, gentlemen, is an exception; and I am happy to consider it as an indication of your countenance and favour both to myself and to the art which I profess.

I have only to add, gentlemen, that, valuing highly as I do the esteem and goodwill of my countrymen, I

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feel no small gratification, that this, the first privilege of the sort I have been admitted to, should have proceeded in so handsome a manner from the head burgh of my native county. I have the honour to subscribe myself, with great consideration and respect, your very obedient and devoted Servant,

DAVID WILKIE.

Kensington, London, 7th November, 1817.

His first thoughts were on his native land; his next were on the works which had made him an object of its regard. In the year 1814, Wilkie painted a small picture from Burns's fine song of "Duncan Gray:" to make this into a work more worthy of himself, and of the subject, was a labour to which he now turned his attention; and he wrought with even more than his usual success and finish.* For what the poet called the light-horse gallop of the strain, and which art could not well imitate, the artist supplied such equivalents as Burns himself would have approved had he been a painter. Duncan, the hero of the song, a lad of grace as well as spirit, comes, according to the poet, in the merry times of Christmas, when the maids had on their best apparel, and music and joy abounded, to pay his addresses to Margaret, the sole daughter of her parents. Now the

* My father was not aware, when this was written, of the true history of Duncan Gray. It appears that in 1814 Wilkie painted and exhibited his Duncan Gray, under the name of The Refusal. Dr. Baillie became the purchaser; but in less than a year exchanged it with Wilkie for The Pedler. To lend fresh interest to an old exhibited picture, Wilkie worked anew at the Duncan Gray, gave it some of its most minute and faithful finish, and sent it to the British Institution for sale. Lord Charles Townshend was the purchaser.

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fair Margaret, it seems, did not like his outward show
and ceremonious observance; but tossed her curls,

“Look’d asklent and unco’ skeigh,”

and seemed to say to the presumptuous Duncan,
“There are better ways to catch a bird than to cast
your bonnet at her.” The wooer, thus rebuked, re-
tired a step or two to give room to the waving of her
gown: he wept, or feigned to weep; followed her out,
and followed her in; and, seeing that all this failed
to soften her heart, muttered something about

“Loupin oure a lin:”

but despair fared no better than affection had done;

“Meg was deaf as Ailsa Craig,”

till Duncan, at last, mortified with manifold slights,
said to himself, “Shall I die for this pretty piece of
haughtiness? she may go to ——;” and he was about
to name a warm place, when, looking at her, and per-
ceiving the dawn of returning tenderness, he added,
“France,” as a lesser place of punishment. Thus
far the painter has followed the poet, who allows
affection to work its own will with the maiden’s
heart; but as this growing change was difficult to
express, so the artist makes her father interpose, by
delicately laying a remonstrating hand on her
shoulder, while her mother with equal affection and
tact sits down by Margaret’s side, and looks her scorn
away. The old woman’s look of gentle intercession,
for it is plain that she opens not her lips, is one of
the finest things in modern art; and no wonder that
it triumphs over her daughter’s momentary nay-say;

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we all but see the wedding in the distance, and hear the bridal minstrelsy. The colouring of this admirable picture is as bright as it is harmonious; nor has it lost much of its splendour by the graver of Engleheart.

On the picture of *The Abbotsford Family* Wilkie bestowed much study; but his very anxiety deprived his hand of

— “that sprightly ease
Which marks security to please;”

and though he made a fine characteristic group, such as we may see on a summer eve nigh a pastoral farmer's, at milking time, it was reckoned that he had not wholly succeeded in stamping upon it the peculiar likeness and feature of that distinguished family. It may be urged that exact portraiture was not Wilkie's object; that all he desired to do was to show what Scott and his children

“In a cottage would have been;”

nor can it be denied, that by putting people of rank and station into costume such as they never appeared in, and giving them rustic work to which their hands were unaccustomed, portraiture is put to a severer trial than when costume proper to their condition is observed, and employment true to station given. Had he painted Sir Walter listening to his daughter's singing to the harp the old ballad of “*Otterburn*” in his own hall at Abbotsford, can any one say that he would not have succeeded in making memorable likenesses?*

* *The Abbotsford Family* is still at Huntly Burn.

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While these pictures were in hand, he communicated some particulars of his journey, and a few matters concerning art, to one who always heard what Wilkie had to say with pleasure.

TO SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT.

Dear Sir George,

Phillimore Place, Kensington,
19th Jan. 1818.

I believe you have not been in Scotland for many years. A journey to that quarter some summer, would interest you much. Besides the romantic scenes with which it abounds, it has subjects of interest that do not in the same degree, I think, belong to any part of England. Every district presents some memorial of the past; the scene of some remarkable event of history or of fiction. The people have also a disposition to preserve these traditions, which does not, I think, exist in any thing like the same degree among the common people of England, and of which the multitude of these traditions is the proof and the consequence. In visiting Stirling, I was particularly impressed with this. The ancient Palace and Parliament House in the Castle, with the old-fashioned town and the many fields of battle in its neighbourhood, had all the interest of a volume of history.

Since returning to London I have not seen much of what is doing. Mr. West's picture is open, and I believe very successful; though the subject, one would think, was rather forbidding. Sir Thomas Lawrence has about completed his equestrian portrait of the Duke of Wellington. This I have seen, and think it

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a happy effort. He is dressed in a plain blue coat, and a large cloak of the same colour over it. It is the dress he wore at Waterloo, and, not being a regimental dress, has a very uncommon though inherently military look about it. It is one of those images of the Duke that is likely to supplant every other; and I should not be surprised if it were to become as common throughout the country as Sir Joshua's Marquis of Granby. It is rather a dark picture, and I could wish that it had something of a quality which has almost gone out of fashion in the present day—I mean *tone* in the colouring.

The pictures have been sent into the gallery. I have sent two, but have not heard what sort of exhibition it is likely to turn out. A good number of the younger members of the Academy are exhibitors.

Mr. Wordsworth, who did me the kindness to call a few weeks ago, was, he said, to stop at Coleorton, on his way to the North. He has most likely reached you before this; and I envy you all in the possession of his society.

D. W.

Meanwhile, his friend, Mr. Dobree, pleased with the fame of The Letter of Introduction, and confiding in Wilkie's command of human character, requested his assistance in a work which he had for some time contemplated, recording the dying scenes of distinguished men. Subjects of this nature, which the painter justly regarded as tasks not coming spontaneously from the artist's heart, he was slow and reluctant to undertake. What he felt he could not

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perform with hope of success, he seldom took in hand; and though this application led finally to his picture of The Death of Sir Philip Sidney, he for the present refused, and recommended Stothard, whose genius he held in high esteem.

TO SAMUEL DOBREE, ESQ.

My dear Sir,

Kensington, 8th Jan. 1818.

It gives me pleasure at all times to hear from you; and I should be most happy to have it in my power to contribute to the work you are now engaged in*, which seems new, and I have no doubt will be interesting. My hands are, however, at present so full, that I have to regret it will not be in my power. Being out of the way I have been accustomed to, it is a doubt whether I should be able to do it with effect, as a particular line of study is necessary to paint historical and biographical incidents.

If I may be allowed to suggest to you an artist whose studies have led him the most into this line, I would recommend to your attention Mr. Stothard, of Newman Street, whose reading, and whose elegance and taste of design, would fit him better than any artist I know for illustrating the incidents you may wish to record in the lives of the great characters gone by.

I am, &c.

D. W.

Having placed his group of the Scott Family along with a little picture called the Errand Boy† in the

* The title of Mr. Dobree's little volume is "The Book of Death."

† Painted for Sir John Swinburne, Bart.

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Royal Academy Exhibition of this year (1818), Wilkie turned his thoughts on the national picture of *The Penny Wedding*, commissioned by the Prince Regent. The original name of this work was *The Scotch Wedding*, and this is retained in the first six impressions of Stewart's engraving; but in the seventh print it was changed for the present title, by which it is now generally known. But by whatever name it is distinguished, the manners and customs and character of old Scotland reign and triumph in it: the demure looks of the people, till music and liquor kindle them up; the mirth accompanied by decorum; the grave humour of the old, and the modest, nay, bashful manners of the young, are stamped on every individual face and group, not in tartan, as painters of the South erroneously limn Scottish character, for none knew better than Wilkie that Highland tartan no more represents Scotland than the Welsh leek represents England, but in the costume of lasting manners and undying character. The fun and drollery and drinking of a *Penny Wedding* have been painted in the imperishable words of King James and Allan Ramsay, and on canvas too by David Allan, who touched it with a feebler hand, indeed, but a deep intimacy with the rustic manners and moods of the North. All the glee and modest joy of the elder poets of Scotland are in the picture of Wilkie with none of their lasciviousness, for the absence of which it is whispered that the Prince hardly forgave him, for he loved a joke which touched on the delicate line of decorum, nor disliked the Muse, when, like Maggie, whose charms she sang, she went a little high-kilted.

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To the composition of this picture the painter called all his knowledge of character and all his skill in expressing it; and it cannot be denied that it breathes with life throughout its length and breadth. It is true that memories which retain clear impressions of the Penny Bridals of the north may have treasured up scenes of a noisier and more bustling kind; and I have heard men affirm that they have seen bridals where gray heads wagged merrier, and young feet moved lighter, where old dames were more joyous, and maidens warmed up by music and love look more rosy and enchanting. Against pictures of the memory, aided as they always are by the imagination, no works of any artist can stand.

Wilkie resumed during this summer the Journal which the state of his health had caused him for a long while to discontinue: his first entries are respecting The Penny Wedding.

“ *Oct. 26, 1818.* Wrote to Mr. Charles Long to state for the information of the Prince Regent that the picture of The Wedding was nearly finished and ready for His Royal Highness’s inspection.

“ 28. Had a call from Mr. and Mrs. Charles Long to see the picture; Mr. Long brought a request from the Prince that I should meet His Royal Highness at Kensington Palace, to-morrow morning at 12 o’clock, with the picture.

“ 29. Went to Kensington Palace with the picture, where it was shown to the Prince, who seemed perfectly satisfied with it.

“ *Nov. 14.* Wrote to Mr. Charles Long to inform