

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07894-8 - The Life of Sir David Wilkie: With His Journals, Tours, and
Critical Remarks on Works of Art: Volume 3

Allan Cunningham

Excerpt

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L I F E
OF
SIR DAVID WILKIE.

CHAPTER I.

LETTERS TO ANDREW WILSON, SIR ROBERT PEEL, AND SIR WIL-
LIAM KNIGHTON. — ROYAL ACADEMY EXHIBITION OF 1829. — THE
KING PURCHASES WILKIE'S FOUR SPANISH PICTURES. — LETTERS
FROM SIR WALTER SCOTT. — WILKIE IN SCOTLAND.

LONG ere Wilkie arrived once more among us, we had heard that health, with a slow and reluctant step, had begun to return to him, and that he had delineated with a true though hesitating hand some of the domestic and devotional scenes of Rome; but fear mingled with our wonder, when we were told that he had suddenly quitted Italy, traversed Spain, and was working such miracles of art in Madrid as had not been seen there since the days of Murillo and Velasquez. Nor did rumour neglect to add, that he had stepped out of the style with which he had acquired his fame, and formed or invented one which required fewer figures, less detail, but which accomplished more, with less outlay of labour, than his earlier compositions. Letters from

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Lord Mahon and Washington Irving intimated this, and that Wilkie was astonishing the court of Spain with visions of historic glory acquired in her fight for independence. When with these pictures, and this increase of honour, won on a new field, the painter arrived in England, the King, to whom he submitted them, was so struck with their beauty, that they were marked at once for the royal collection. Some indeed, who desired to become buyers, regretted this; others, who regarded the fame of the artist as a national matter, rejoiced in the taste of the King; while all longed to look on the first fruits of the great painter's returning health, and see how he had succeeded in the historic style in which he had dipped his brush. The day was distant, however, when these pictures could be publicly seen: time was required to consider and reconsider, touch and retouch them; and to accomplish this he had to revive his studies at Kensington. We shall now resume his history in his correspondence.

TO ANDREW WILSON, ESQ.

Dear Wilson,

Kensington, 30th June, 1828.

I have already been a week in London, but have nothing to tell you. Seguier told me the other day that he had got *two pictures*, bought by Mr. Peel by *my express command*, but I did not choose to ask Mr. S. what he thought of them. My own Vandyke looks extremely well. I have it here with the Correggio, which I have examined with great interest. The naked child, with the female heads, are delicious,

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and in a perfect state. I have seen the small Holy Family from Spain in the National Gallery; of course a true, but by no means a virgin, picture. It has the granular effect of rubbing all over.

1st July.

To-day I saw Lord Londonderry's two Correggios. These are extensive specimens, but not virgin; indeed, I should like to know how much has been done to them. Correggio doubtless glazed and painted, and painted and glazed, in a complicated manner. Still there are things in them this will not account for.

Seguier since my arrival has done me personally a real service. He brought me a message from the King, requiring to see me and my Italian studies; and the result is, that his Majesty has bought the one of The Pifferari and The Princess washing the Female Pilgrims' Feet, which I made at Geneva.

I have ordered a mahogany case for the Correggio, and mean to regild the frame: as yet not a soul has seen it. Query, Is not the yellow sleeve and petticoat (a sort of crome yellow) of the brown woman, seated with the child, somewhat like a repaint? Did you look at this? The Doria one has the same kind of yellow.

Your two letters about the Vandykes I have just again read. You have anticipated every thing that has occurred. At the same time, if the pictures are put properly in order, which Seguier seems to be doing, I doubt not they will make a fair impression. If The Senator is a failure, then I have no faith in any of the untouched pictures of Italy or Spain.

D. W.

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TO THE RIGHT HON. ROBERT PEEL.

My dear Sir, Kensington, 15th July, 1828.

I have not seen the two half-lengths, in armour, which Mr. Wilson describes, but from his estimate of them, compared with the many Vandykes he has found at Genoa—he calls *one* of them “of the highest order,” I think that one or both might be desirable acquisitions to your Gallery.

I wrote to Mr. Wilson a few days ago, as you desired, to authorise him to secure the Bishop in the Carega, by such an advance as his judgment might direct.

D. W.

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Dear Sir, Kensington, 30th Aug. 1828.

Permit me to inform you that the two pictures of Roman Pilgrims, which the King has done me the honour to purchase from me, are now *framed*, and ready to be delivered whenever his Majesty may be pleased to command.

The picture which I painted at Madrid, and which his Majesty was graciously pleased to express a wish to see upon their arrival, I am also ready to submit to his Majesty’s inspection whenever I shall be honoured by the royal commands to that effect.

D. W.

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TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

My dear Sir,

Woburn Abbey, 11th Sept. 1828.

I have just had the honour to receive your letter of the 10th, and the royal command you therein convey to me, intimating that it is his Majesty's pleasure I should complete, for his Majesty's collection, the series of Spanish subjects "containing the three pictures I showed to you, and the fourth, which I propose to paint," has given me the most unfeigned pleasure.

This undertaking, by which I feel so highly honoured, I hope to get accomplished by next Spring Exhibition.

D. W.

TO ANDREW WILSON, ESQ.

September, 1828.

I have already sold my four Italian subjects; and the four Spanish pictures, a *series* of illustrations of the late war, now in progress, are bespoke. I have also just finished a full-length portrait, size of life, of Lord Kellie, for the county of Fife. Still, with all this, I work slowly, and with much pain and fatigue.

Callcott has written to complete the purchase of Wallis's Vandyke at the price stated. I find Vandykes here a good article: still I doubt if much business can be done, and to speculate will not do. Of the Duchess of Orleans I saw at Madrid, I find

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a duplicate at Woburn—it is from the Orleans collection—and a finer picture. Woodburn admired very much my Cardinal by Vandyke, but Seguier not much. Doctors cannot agree.

I hope to hear of your own labours. Fear not oil nor glazing. What I see around me here is dryness, littleness of objects, and multitudes of detail—the white and the flat light, the poor and the laboured shadow. I hope when Turner gets to Rome he will for once try to leave the haze and the fog of London behind him.

D. W.

Littleness of object—multitudes of detail—the white and the flat light—the poor and the laboured shadow—observed by Wilkie, haunted them like evil spirits, and still haunt the English school: he did much to lay them or drive them away. “All your painters,” said a distinguished foreigner, “seem standing still, save Wilkie!”

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Dear Sir William,

Kensington, 10th Oct. 1828.

In regard to the dedication to the engraving of The Chelsea Pensioners, permit me to observe that, as I owe my whole interest in it to the Duke of Wellington, and must hope for great indulgence from him before it can be completed, the dedication to his Grace is all I have to offer him as an acknowledgment for so important an obligation, and the only way in which his name can appear upon the plate.

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The list of subscribers, on the other hand, is an affair not of mine, but of Messrs. Moon and Co., the print-sellers, who, wishing to make it as much as possible a national work, and to interest as much as possible the public in its favour, humbly and respectfully desire that the name of our great and distinguished sovereign should be placed in their book, and, if possible, by autograph, as patron to their arduous undertaking.

D. W.

TO LADY BEAUMONT.

Dear Lady Beaumont, Kensington, 12th Nov. 1828.

For the last two months I have been at the sea-side, and part of the time with Sir Willoughby and Lady Gordon in the Isle of Wight, who were both of them speaking of your Ladyship and of the late Sir George in terms of great affection. I have also been to Dover, near to which I called upon Mrs. Siddons, whom I found visiting Lady Byron. She naturally mentioned the circumstances of her last visit to you, and had much to say expressive of her esteem and regard for the late Sir George Beaumont. Indeed I am frequently reminded of him. I have just been to the National Gallery, where I was much attracted by those works he used so justly to admire. In conversation with my brother artists, particularly with Collins, our discussions upon matters of art bring us constantly to refer to the opinions and principles of Sir George Beaumont as a landmark, showing us in

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what way new and original ideas should be regulated, by bending to those rules which have been sanctioned by the approval of ages.

For myself, I feel somewhat better now than on my arrival from the Continent, and I am again trying to work. The fatigue of writing, however, is such, that you must excuse this not being written in my own hand, &c.

D. W.

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Dear Sir William,

Kensington, 23d Dec. 1828.

Mr. Ackermann has made me a proposal for permission to engrave *The Spanish Girl* for his annual publication "*The Forget-me-not*." Presuming upon the kind consent you have given me, I have answered him in the affirmative. Your *silence* I shall consider as a confirmation of this arrangement.

The picture in question I completed three days ago, but the arrangement will, of course, delay its being sent home to you for some time.

D. W.

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Dear Sir William,

Kensington, Dec. 1828.

His Majesty's most gracious bounty in allowing me the loan of the picture of *The Scotch Wedding* to engrave from, I feel most humbly grateful for. Thus readily granted, it is an additional proof

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of his generous wish, so handsomely evinced to me on my first landing, to restore me to *better times*.

The small sketch of my picture at Munich (The Will) I would let go, with frame, at 35 guineas.

The head of Walter Scott I am proceeding with. It comes better than I expected. I have ordered a frame, and hope to have it nearly done by the time you see it.

Indeed, upon the subject of working, you have in your kindness given me great encouragement. You have cheered me extremely, in assuring me that I work as much as is necessary. My best thanks for your kind wishes, and most friendly encouragement and good offices, of all which I feel deeply sensible.

D. W.

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Kensington, 29th Dec. 1828.

Nothing can exceed the gratification your letter of the 26th has given me, by your assurance of the kind manner in which you have thought of me. I could make a good deal of the public, if I could feel somewhat more independent of the public.

My three Spanish subjects will be completed about the end of January, and, if agreeable, will then be ready to be submitted to his Majesty's inspection. I shall then be free to recommence The Entry to Holyrood House. I think I am able for this, as it is far on towards completion. Might this be shown also, to have his Majesty's pleasure expressed about it?

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Save the time spent in a short excursion to the Isle of Wight, where he visited his steadfast friend, Sir Willoughby Gordon, in his romantic residence at Undercliff, Wilkie laid out all his leisure in perfecting his Spanish pictures, which he desired to exhibit; and as he knew that he must stand or fall in the new style which he had adopted, he submitted them to the remarks of all whose opinion he either feared or loved. Some, and amongst them was the King, observed, in his new style, a little of Rembrandt and Velasquez, with which the artist was much pleased.

TO SIR WILLIAM KNIGHTON, BART.

Dear Sir William,

Windsor, 12th Feb. 1829.

My Spanish pictures have just been submitted, and the approval has been to my satisfaction. The Posada is preferred, as best of all, and the fourth picture commanded to be gone on with.

Some directions were given me about the chief figure in the Holyrood House, when all at once I was asked what I was doing about the large one in the Highland dress. I said I was ready to begin it whenever commanded: the reply was, "whenever you please."

Now the sketch I showed you in the Highland dress I did not bring, but have proposed sending it to Sir Frederick Watson, to be shown, and if it comes near the mark, which I have a strong idea it will, shall lay every thing aside for so important an object.

The interview was flattering to me in the highest degree. The pictures were looked at twice over, and