

BENJAMIN WEST AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY.

BY HON. CHARLES I. LANDIS.

(Continued from page 148.)

The Academy's general meeting was held on January 2, 1805. After West had read his paper, Farrington arose and said: "Upon this occasion I cannot refrain from expressing the satisfaction which I feel from knowing that our acts have been approved by our Sovereign and I am convinced that the hearts of the body of Academicians will be warmed by grateful sensations after having listened to the representations you have made. Sir, I now beg leave to say a few words which more immediately relate to yourself. It happened that I came into the profession to which I belong at a very early age, which enables me to say that I remember your arrival from Italy, and in a short time, at the age of 25 or 26, you produced works of such merit as to cause you to be ranked with the first men of your profession. In a few years after, you were known to be employed with a few others in planning and forming this institution, His Majesty having approved a proposal for that purpose. The catalogues of the exhibitions will show from that period, 36 years ago, you have exerted yourself professionally in a singular manner to maintain and support the credit of the Royal Academy.

"When it pleased God to take from us the great man (Sir Joshua Reynolds) who first graced the chair of the Royal Academy, one sentiment prevailed as to who should be his successor, and you were unanimously elected to fill that vacancy. In that situation you have remained 14 years. Your professional abilities en-

titled you to be placed in it; those abilities, which, however they may now be appreciated, I will commit my judgment so far as to say they will be still more highly rated at a future period. But other considerations operated in your favor. Your longstanding in the art, your age, which then compared with that of the most excellent artists which constitute this body, made you appear as a Father, are causes why you have held your rank without exciting jealousy. Thus honorably distinguished, it was natural for you to hope that you might conclude a life of great professional labour in ease and tranquillity. In this expectation you have been disappointed and have suffered many mortifications. Among other attacks you have lately been accused of neglecting the duties of your office. That charge you refuted by proofs so convincing as nothing but the greatest care and attention could have enabled you to bring forward. You have also experienced a treatment that is remembered with much sorrow. It has been declared to your face before this Assembly that you had lost the confidence of your Sovereign, and a solemn pledge was then given by a member under a penalty of suffering merited contempt that it should then be proved. It was not done, and this night you have the happiness to lay before us confutation of that unfounded assertion.

“Having been a witness to all that passed on these occasions, I should think I acted towards you with cold indifference were I not to express the satisfaction I now feel, and my hope that assured of the protection of a Sovereign whose benevolent disposition has made him the most venerated and most beloved of monarchs, you may pass the remainder of your days unmolested, and, possessing what blessings this world can afford, go to your grave in peace and security.”

his sentiments respecting the president had not always been the same, as his conduct respecting Bromley's Book in 1793 would prove. This was only concerning a difference of opinion respecting a publication, and he was cried down. Farrington replied by recapitulating much that he had said, and asked Bourgeois if he had answered any part of it. Farrington told them that he had differed at times with both the present and the former president, but that had nothing to do with his general respect for them. Bourgeois then said that Farrington had voted against Mr. West being president four or five years successively. This falsehood so raised Farrington's indignation, that he was about to answer him with great vehemence, but friends near by requested that he should not regard him. Tresham, who was one of the stormy petrels of the Academy, then spoke; but he was in no way able to exculpate himself. Lawrence rose after Tresham and spoke with great strength, and brought home his assertion of Mr. West having lost the King's confidence. He was followed by Flaxman, who said he had privately asked Yenn on the 10th of December whether he had any communication to make from the King, to which Yenn replied that His Majesty had said certain things to him, but he had no authority to state them to the Academy. On this, Tresham seemed to look eagerly about for Yenn, but about the end of Farrington's first speech, he had slunk out of the room and was seen no more. Shee then made an animated speech, in which he forcibly condemned the proceedings of Tresham and the opposition, but seemed willing to ease Tresham off by saying that he appeared to have been the *hod-man* of his party to carry their clay, but seemed to have no knowledge of the foundation on which the fabrick was to be erected. He also called him his friend and was assured he would be glad to relieve himself by an apology for what he had done.

Tresham, operated upon by this, said that he had been led into assertions which were now refuted and that he was willing to make or second a motion complimentary to Mr. West. West then spoke and said, if any other man should ever appear more proper for the chair than himself, he would cheerfully retire and still continue to give the Academy all the support in his power.

About this same time, Mrs. West wrote a letter to America, to her friend, Mrs. Trumbull, wife of John Trumbull, the painter in which she said: "Oh that I had you here for a few hours to whisper in your ears the complete triumph that His Majesty has given Mr. W. over those dirty dogs of the R. A., whose malicious endeavors have been to ruin him. They hoped for a time—they even boasted—that their purpose was effected, when His Majesty by his conduct towards the R. A. confirmed the late elections. This seemed to be (by the party) unexpected and was to their great confusion and dishonour."

But even after this, the interior troubles of the Academy did not cease. On September 11, 1805, in an interview between Lawrence, Farrington and West, the latter said that "Wyatt had ruined the Academy." On November 29, 1805, he communicated to Farrington his resolution to resign the chair. He told Farrington that "his resolution to resign was known only by Daniell and Smirke, and that even Mrs. West did not know it"; that he had attended a Council the previous night and signed Westmacott's diploma as Associate, and this was the last act of his office. He said that Dance would send his resignation as Professor of Architecture to him and he should forward it to the secretary with his own, and that Dance also wished to give up his diploma, but he had dissuaded him from doing so. Farrington said that he "perceived that West's mind was fully made up to resign the chair,

and under all circumstances" he "could not advise him against it." On December 1, 1805, West told him "that he would not continue president for £1000 a year; that he would not go to Windsor, but would send a copy of his paper . . . to be delivered to the King tomorrow noon." Farrington also saw Mrs. West, who was much an invalid, but without knowing her husband's resolution, "she expressed her dislike to his being troubled with the feuds of the Royal Academy."

On December 2, 1805, West sent the following paper to the Academy:

"Gentlemen:

"I am now the only survivor of the four artists who, in the year 1768, had the honour of presenting to His Majesty a plan for an Academy, which, being agreeably received and sanctioned by the King, was carried into effect under His Royal commands. The first members were named and created by His Majesty, and their choice of Sir Joshua Reynolds as President added splendor to the Institution.

"After the death of that eminent master, whose distinguished talents have rendered no small honour to his name and country, without solicitation on my part, the Academy unanimously elected me to the Chair, and His Majesty was graciously pleased to sanction their choice. I have now, during a period of fourteen years, endeavored assiduously to perform the duties of that distinguished situation to the best of my abilities, and I have a consolation in reflecting that I have rendered some aid to its formation, and contributed everything in my power to its prosperity.

"Thirty-seven years are nearly completed during which time I have never failed to exhibit my works in the Royal Academy; but whatever may have been my exertions, or whatever my wishes for the welfare of the institution, the occurrence which took place the 10th December last, and subsequent circumstances, have determined me to withdraw from the situation of President of the Royal Academy. I shall retire to the peaceful pursuit of my profession, and I hope that my present declination will afford you sufficient time to consider of the choice of my successor by the 10th inst.

"B. WEST."

About the same time, he wrote to John Timmons:

"Dear Sir:

"Many thanks for your polite letter as well as for your good wishes towards the fine arts in this country. The establishment of the Royal Academy under his present Majesty has given an elevation to them unknown in this country under any other sovereign; they soften the

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manners and defuse an elegance which rendered the joys of life more abundant.

"I am the only surviving one of four artists who had the honour to present to His Majesty the plan for the establishment of the Royal Academy—and received the Royal commands to carry it into effect. You will not be surprised after this information that I should for many years have laboured to maintain harmony and good order among its members, for the benefit of the country, the prosperity of the institution, and the respectability of their own characters. And it is with satisfaction, I can assure you and the friends of the Arts, that the original members of the Academy have, from its establishment in 1768, endeavored all in their power to raise it to its present elevated character among the most honourable societies in the country; and I sincerely hope that its present members may follow the example of their predecessors.

"The unpleasant circumstances arising from party spirit in the Academy commenced in the last years of my worthy predecessor; they rendered the station of the Chair as unpleasant to him as they have to me; but notwithstanding this professional warmth of passion, I was in hopes a patient steadiness on my part, to forward the best views of the Academy for cherishing the growth of genius in its three branches of art, would have the good effect so to subdue those animosities. But finding that of no avail, united to the occurrences which took place on the 10th of December last year, when the Academicians were about to re-elect me to the Chair, had so pointed a premeditated attack on me as President—united to subsequent circumstances, determined me at that time (after His Majesty graciously sanctioned the election) to go through the duties of the station for that year. On the 2nd inst., I therefore sent in my resignation as President of the Royal Academy. If the placing any other in the Chair will contribute to advance the higher excellences in the Arts, or the prosperity of the Institution, I shall rejoice; if not, I shall lament the situation of the Academy—and the state of the Arts in England.

"It is my earnest desire that, from your known love of country and the arts, united to others equally solicitous for their prosperity, that you will not relax in maintaining the higher point in Art—and the advantage which the country ought to derive from its advancement.

"I have the honour to be, with profound respect,

"Dear Sir.

"Your much obliged

"BENJ. WEST.

"P.S. When your friendly letter was brought to me, I was then confined to my bed by indisposition. I am much better, but still under the necessity to keep my room."

West exhibited every year until 1805. In 1766, Sir Joshua Reynolds said: "The great crowd of the year

is around Mr. West's pictures, 'The Continnence of Scipio,' 'Pylades and Orestes,' 'Cymon and Iphigenia,' 'Diana and Endymion,' and 'Ladies at Play.' " Of the "Pylades and Orestes," Northcote, who studied under Sir Joshua, said: "West's house was soon filled with visitors from all quarters to see it. . . . But the most wonderful part of the story was that notwithstanding all this vast bustle and commendation bestowed upon this justly admired picture, . . . no mortal ever asked the price. One gentleman was asked why he did not buy it, and he answered: " 'What could I do if I had it? You surely would not have me hang up a modern English picture in my house, unless it was a portrait.' "

Horace Walpole, in 1769, in his correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, said: "We have at present three exhibitions. One West, who paints history in the taste of Poussin, gets three hundred pounds for a picture not too large to hang over a chimney. He has merit, but is hard and heavy, and far unworthy of such prices. The rage to see these exhibitions is so great, that sometimes one cannot pass through the streets where they are."

In 1806, he did not exhibit, but he had just finished his "Death of Lord Nelson," and he placed it with his "Death of General Wolfe," painted in 1769, and his "Battle of La Hogue," painted in 1783, in his own gallery. He issued sixty-five hundred cards of admittance, and about thirty thousand people came to his house to see them, among whom was Robert Fulton, "the great Machinist of Margaret Street." Some came in parties of eight or ten, and, besides numbers who were personally known to him, many wrote notes to have their friends introduced.

His picture of "The Treaty between William Penn and the Indians" was painted about 1772. It was exhibited in that year. It was criticized by some, because

his father and step-brother appear in it as Quakers. On February 2, 1805, he wrote to H. Darton concerning this picture:

Feb'y 2nd, 1805.

"Sir:

"Indisposition for several days last deprived me the satisfaction of answer your enquiries respecting the portraits in the picture of the Treaty between Wm. Penn and the American Indians. When I painted the picture of that Treaty for the late Thos. Penn, every enquire was made to obtain portraits of those who accompanied his distinguished Father into the wilderness of North America, but without effect, except in the portrait of Wm. Penn—and for that I am indebted to the Medallion made in wax by Silvinius Bevan and the description given to me by my father of Wm. Penn's person.

"The great object I had in forming that composition was to express savages brought into harmony and peace by justice and benevolence, by not withholding from them what was their right, and giving to them what they were in want of, as well as a wish to give by that art a conquest made over native people without sword or dagger.

"The leading characters which make that composition are the Friends and Indians—the characteristics of both have been known to me from my early life—but to give that identity which was necessary in such a novel subject, I had recourse to many persons then living for that identity—and among that number was my honoured Father and his eldest son, my half-brother, Thos. West, and by possessing the real dresses of the Indians, I was able to give that truth in representing their costumes which is so evident in the picture of the Treaty. Those were the principles and my reasons in giving that picture of the Wm. Penn Treaty to the civilized world.

"The object in composing that picture and the materials to give it truth I have above presented, and if they should be found by you to any way contribute to that information you are about to give in a Biographical History on Portraits, they are much at your service.

"With great respect, I have the honour to be, Sir,

"Yours with Friendship,

"B. W."

"To

H. DARTON, Esq."

Till the "Death of General Wolfe" was painted, in 1771, no work of that character was produced by a painter of high art which aimed at the literal representation of a contemporary event. The Archbishop of York and Sir Joshua Reynolds both endeavored to dissuade West from making such an attempt. But, after the picture was painted, Reynolds examined it minutely

and said to Drummond: "West has conquered; he has treated the subject as it ought to be treated." "I wish," said the King when West told him the story, "that I had known all this before, for the objection has been the means of Lord Grosvenor getting the picture; but you shall make a copy for me." And so he did, and another for General Monckton, who is the wounded officer looking at the dying hero.

West said that his great motive in painting the "Death of Lord Nelson" was to show the Academy what they had done in causing him to withdraw as president and in replacing him with an architect; and that this had been principally effected "by a despicable in and out of the art, a reptile,—such was Tresham." He added that, for himself, he had secured his own comfort, and that he could now waken in the morning without the unpleasant consideration of having those people to meet in the evening, and it was a happy release.

At the exhibition of 1817, his picture of "Death on the Pale Horse" was shown. It was painted by him about that time, though the sketch had been exhibited in Paris some years before. It was sold to a Mr. Kershaw for 2,000 guineas. In some way, it afterwards came back to West, for it was re-sold at the sale of his pictures on March 22-23-25, 1829, after his death. It was acquired by the Academy of Fine Arts of the City of Philadelphia in 1836; but from whom it was purchased and at what price I am told is not disclosed in its records. His pictures at this sale brought £25,040. 12s. His "Christ Rejected" was sold to a Mr. Smith for 3,000 guineas, and his "Death of Lord Nelson" was knocked down at 850 guineas, and the picture of "Hagar and Ishmael," which caused so much friction between West and some of his fellow artists of the academy, now hangs on the walls of the Metropolitan Museum of New York. The latter picture was included

in the collection sold by his executors after his death. I have not traced it to its present location.

I saw this summer his picture of "Daniel Interpreting to Belshazzar the Handwriting on the Wall," which was first exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1775, in a small but very well selected gallery of paintings, called the "Museum," at Pittsfield, in the State of Massachusetts.

West, from the time of his engagement by the King, received £1,000 a year; but in 1811, owing to the King's final mental illness, the pension was stopped. On May 25, 1811, he wrote to Mr. H. Rowand: "I am not an arrogant man, but on this occasion it is highly proper that I should state what is the truth. The quarterly payments which you have made with promptitude and punctuality being now withdrawn, I must be under the painful necessity to seek some other means of support." He was attacked by the press, wherein it was alleged that he had plundered the King to the amount of £34,000. West calmly answered that it was true that he had received approximately that sum, but it was earned by thirty-three years of untiring labor. He said that, before the war (Napoleonic War), he expended £1,600, keeping six servants. Afterwards, he kept only three servants, and he reduced his expenditures to £1,200 a year.

In 1797, he told Farrington that his fortune of £15,000 was in the King's hands; that he had received a letter of acknowledgment, but that he was conscious that his security depended on the life of the King, and that he was not in circumstances to quit his profession, unless he was to sell his collection. He remarked that "the King is so shy, when money is touched upon." For himself, he said, he was indifferent, but that he felt for his family; that if the King withheld his income, he must manage his property, and alter his plans so as to suit his circumstances, and with regard to his

profession he must do like others for the few years he had to reckon. Evidently the account due him was afterwards settled.

At one time he spoke of the little encouragement he had had for historical painting, and that he would have been obliged to have turned to portraits, had he not been patronized by the King. In 1804, he stated that what he had received from various persons to that time had not exceeded 6,000 guineas; that after the death of an artist of merit, his pictures get into the hands of persons who endeavor to make them property, when no more can be had; that this had been remarkably the case with Wilson, Hogarth, Gainsborough and others. In the same year, in a conversation with Farrington, West said "that were he ten years younger he would go to America, where he was sure much might be done, as the people had a strong disposition to the Arts, and it would be easy to encourage a spirit of rivalry in that respect between the Cities of Philadelphia and New York. Trumbull, he said, should settle at the latter place, and he at the former, and raise the spirit as high as it could be."

It has been said that West was scholarly rather than imaginative, and that his faith in himself was so great that he "would have undertaken to illustrate anything on earth below or in heaven above, . . . yet he could do nothing but what he had seen, and that supremely well." Of course, this criticism is highly exaggerated. The character of his pictures refutes it. He painted few landscapes and a limited number of portraits outside of some which appeared in his larger compositions. He could see none of his scriptural or historical pictures, and they were necessarily creatures of his brain. His paintings were perhaps not in accord with the present-day taste, but they were of a high standard according to the progress of the arts at the time they were painted.

Mr. Charles Henry Hart, in his article entitled "Benjamin West not a Quaker," written for the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, January Number, 1903, said properly: "Benjamin West is one of those unfortunate characters in history, whose poise has been shaken, if not entirely lost, when regarded through the perspective of time. This is especially wrong in his case, and is due largely to the false plane of the viewpoint. We must not consider West's work as though he was one of us, painting in our midst; but we must look upon him and it in the period and atmosphere and environment when he did paint. At that time, he was entitled to his preeminence as easily first among history painters. . . . For one achievement alone he is entitled to and should receive the highest consideration, both for his conception of it and for his grit in carrying it out. I mean, of course, the revolution he wrought by the stroke of his brush in his painting, 'The Death of Wolfe,'—the abandonment of classic costume in the treatment of a contemporary historical subject."

It was said that West was generous, and, considering the troubles he had to contend with, he seldom lost his temper. On one occasion, Sir Joshua Reynolds took Miss Burney by the hand, and, wishing her a Merry Christmas, kissed her according to the old form, and then presenting her to Mr. West, characterized him "as a very pleasant man, simple, soft-mannered, cheerful and serene." Mrs. West told Farrington "that in the forty years she had been married, she had never seen him intoxicated and never saw him in a passion."

On September 21, 1805, he wrote to William Rawle: "I have to assure you that yourself and those young gentlemen from Philadelphia, who have visited this Capital since my residence in it, it has always given me much pleasure to render them any little civility in

my power, and to have given them that attention which I thought was due to my countrymen." And on August 4, 1815, Thomas Sully addressed a letter to West as follows: "A friend of mine, Dr. Diweese, has selected four pictures from his collection to be sold in London. They are consigned to the care of Mr. Bell, who will send them to your house, if you will have the kindness to pass on their merits. I would not thus presume to take up your valuable time, but that I think you will be pleased with one of the paintings. With love and veneration . . . Thomas Sully." West's practice was to receive students in the morning before he began to paint.

I have chiefly endeavored to present some of the facts appearing in Mr. West's relations with the Academy, and have made reference to some of his paintings, without any pretensions as a critic of art. Conscious of the insufficiencies of this paper, and realizing as I do that others could probably present the story on such a topic more gracefully and intelligently, I crave your indulgence for such defects as may have manifested themselves to you.