

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# A Genius for Failure

Paul O'keeffe

Haydon's first attempt at suicide ended when the low-calibre bullet fired from his pistol fractured his skull but failed to penetrate his brain. His second attempt also failed: a deep slash across his throat left a large pool of blood at the entrance to his studio, but he was still able to reach his easel on the opposite side of the room. Only his third attempt, another cut to the throat which sprayed blood across his unfinished canvas, was successful. He died face down before the bespattered Alfred and the First British Jury, his final bid 'to improve the taste of the English people' through the High Art of historical painting.

Such intensity, struggle and near-comic inability to succeed encapsulate Haydon's career. Thirty years before his death his huge, iconic paintings had made him the toast of early nineteenth-century London, drawing paying crowds to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly for months and leading to nationwide tours. However, his attempt to repeat such success three months before his death was to destroy him: barely a soul turned up, leaving the desperate painter alone, humiliated, and facing financial ruin.

In *A Genius for Failure* Paul O'Keeffe makes clear that the real tragedy of Haydon lay in the extent to which his failures were unwittingly engineered by his own actions - his refusal to resort to the painting of fashionable portraits, for example, and his self-destructively acrimonious relationship with the Royal Academy.

The company he kept - Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington, among many others - and the momentous events he lived through - the Battle of Waterloo, the Coronation of George IV and the passing of the first Parliamentary Reform Bill - make *A Genius for*

*Failure* not only the definitive biography of this fascinating and tragic painter, but a stirring portrayal of an age.

# A Genius for Failure

*The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*

# **A Genius for Failure**

*The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*

**PAUL O'KEEFFE**



THE BODLEY HEAD  
LONDON

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To Sian Hughes

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**A CATALOGUE**  
OF THE  
**VALUABLE EFFECTS**  
OF THE LATE  
**B. R. HAYDON, Esq.,**  
Historical Painter,

Comprising A NOBLE GALLERY PAINTING OF  
**ALFRED and the FIRST BRITISH JURY,**  
Being One of the Series of SIX Paintings originally intended for the HOUSE OF LORDS.  
**A FINE GALLERY PAINTING of SATAN and URIEL,**  
Several Valuable SKETCHES for the Paintings of NAPOLEON and  
WELLINGTON. Finished and Unfinished Paintings and Designs of  
Historical and Emblematical Subjects, and Portraits of Eminent Characters.

The Valuable SKETCH BOOKS for the large Paintings of  
**ARISTIDES, THE REFORM BANQUET,**  
And others of his well-known Paintings & Drawings in Chalk, Crayons, &c.

**A Select Collection of Casts and Busts,**  
Of the APOLLO de BELVIDERA, the VENUS de MEDICI, ILYSIUS;

**SPECIMENS FROM THE ELCIN MARBLES,**  
Colonial Casts and others. A Portfolio of Choice Engravings and Framed  
Presentation Prints.

**400 VOLUMES OF BOOKS,**  
Many of which are considered rare, and generally interspersed with his  
MS. REMARKS.

**CONTENTS OF THE LAMENTED ARTIST'S STUDIO,**  
CONSISTING OF

The Colour Stone and Mullers of the late JOHN BARRY, Esq., R.A.;  
Palettes, Maul-Sticks, 20 Dozen Sable, Hair, and other Brushes, Ground and  
Unground Colours, &c. Curious Items of Taste and Vertu, and a variety of  
Interesting Objects of Art. Also the whole of the

**HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE,**

OF THE USUAL DESCRIPTION;

Which will be Sold by Auction, by

---

**MR. NUTTER,**

---

ON THE PREMISES,  
14, BURWOOD PLACE, NOFFOLK CRESCENT, HYDE PARK,  
On **WEDNESDAY, 5th August, and Following Day, at 12.**

May be Viewed the Day preceding and Mornings of Sale, and Catalogues  
obtained (at 6d. each) on the Premises, and of the Auctioneer, No. 8, Upper  
Berkeley Street West, Hyde Park Square.

**LOT 343**

As Mr Nutter cracked his hammer down and declared the nine-foot-by-twelve expanse of painted canvas sold, the auction of 'Valuable Effects of the late B.R. Haydon, Esq., Historical Painter' was all but at an end. It was nearly seven o'clock in the evening of Thursday 6 August 1846 and only five lots remained to be disposed of. However, the total of four pounds eleven shillings confirmed by those five subsequent hammer blows was a negligible sum compared with the single bid of £200 that had just secured Lot 343 for an absentee buyer, understood to be the former Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. The catalogue declared this 'Noble Gallery Painting', unfinished though it was, to be 'in an exceedingly forward state', and it was 'the general opinion that this would have been the lamented Artist's chef d'oeuvre'.<sup>1</sup> Neither the auctioneer nor the catalogue mentioned the rumour that a portion of this canvas - *The Blessings of Justice or King Alfred and the First Trial by Jury* - had been spattered with the dying painter's blood.<sup>2</sup>

\*

The sale had begun at noon the previous day, on the premises in Burwood Place<sup>3</sup> so recently visited by tragedy, Mr Nutter inviting bids for the contents of the back attic. A half-tester bedstead, two japanned tables and a deal table fetched sixteen shillings; seven chairs, a basin stand and fittings, fender and fire-guard, just five. There were eleven lots in the front attic. These included a variety of furniture, japanned, mahogany and deal, two more bedsteads - one of them painted and of French design - sundry mattresses, blankets, counterpanes and a feather bolster. The bedroom at the rear of the second floor yielded more of the same, while the second-floor front offered buyers a five-foot

mahogany four-poster with 'carved pillars, green furniture and straw palliasse' and a 'high japanned shower bath with curtains'. Lot succeeded lot, down through the house: fender and fire-irons in the second-floor anteroom; nineteen yards of Brussels carpet on the staircase, along with seven yards of Wilton, and twenty-nine brass stair-rods; the 'capital 8-day clock in high mahogany case' made by Tyler's of the Strand, in the hall; six cane-seat chairs and cushions, a circular mahogany table, two ranges of bookshelves either side of the fireplace in the back parlour. Clearly, the most desirable furniture was in the dining room, where a set of ten mahogany-framed and two elbow-chairs attracted a successful bid of eight pounds, 'a mahogany framed reclining chair, spring stuffed, and covered with leather' three pounds. More bedding, dressing and shaving mirrors, chamber pots and a 'night convenience' in the butler's room and the assorted copper, tin, iron and china contents of the front kitchen - the mundane paraphernalia of pans, gridirons, tureens, buckets, bowls, kettles, candlesticks, clothes horses and dinner services - brought to an end the auction of domestic furniture. Sale of the seventy-five lots had raised a little over sixty pounds to meet the substantial demands of the deceased's creditors.

The contents of a private library can reveal much about its owner, and the 400 or so books that Mr Nutter next set about selling provided numerous insights into the tastes and preoccupations of the sixty-year-old man who had destroyed himself at this address.

A Greek lexicon, a Latin dictionary, volumes of Pliny, Cicero, Tacitus, Horace, Xenophon, Virgil, Livy and Ovid might have been found on the shelves of any classically educated gentleman of the period, as might Apollonius Rhodius, Justinian, Martial, Thucydides and Theocritus, not to mention Theophrastus, Suetonius, Juvenal, Pausanias and Plutarch. But for an 'Historical Painter', the creator of *Alexander Taming Bucephalus*, *The Assassination of*

*Dentatus, Xenophon and the Ten Thousand, Curtius Leaping into the Gulf, The Burning of Rome by Nero and The Banishment of Aristides*, they had constituted essential research material.

Lest it be thought that his subject matter had been drawn entirely from pagan sources, the painter of *Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem, The Judgement of Solomon, The Raising of Lazarus, Christ's Agony in the Garden* and *Christ Blessing Little Children* also numbered among his possessions an Italian translation of the Gospels, *Sacra Biblia*, John Brown's *Dictionary of the Bible*, anonymous works on scriptural narrative and the land of Israel, John Collinson's *Observations on the History of the Preparation for the Gospel* and *Compositions from Morning and Evening Prayers*, by the Reverend Andrew Bell, 'presented by the author'.<sup>4</sup> At the Coroner's inquest the deceased had been described as 'a very pious man',<sup>5</sup> and it was remarked that his diary entries towards the end of his life frequently began with prayer: 'O God, bless me through the evils of this day.'

There were books that would have rested as easily upon the shelves of a medical man as upon those of a painter: John Bell's *Anatomy of the Bones, Muscles and Joints*; Thomas Nunneley's *Anatomical Tables* containing concise descriptions of the muscles, ligaments, fasciae, blood vessels and nerves; the *Myographiae Comparative Specimen* by James Douglas, MD, was subtitled 'a comparative description of all the muscles in a man and in a quadruped', to which was added, with admirable thoroughness, 'an account of the muscles peculiar to a woman'. There was also a volume that no occasional painter of quadrupeds could afford to be without: George Stubbs's *The Anatomy of the Horse*.

The creator of more than thirty canvases of Napoleon Bonaparte had devoted part of his library to the late

Emperor of France: ten volumes of the *Code Napoléon*, seven volumes of the *Correspondence de Napoléon, Inédite, Officielle, et Confidentielle*, a two-volume *Histoire de Napoléon* by the Comte de Ségur, together with related works such as *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*, by De Staël, and *Discours sur les Révolutions*, by Cuvier. In a spirit of historical even-handedness, if not of opportunism, Haydon had also painted half a dozen versions of Napoleon's nemesis 'musing on the Field of Waterloo'. *The Duke of Wellington's General Orders* formed part of a lot that was knocked down for eleven shillings.

Many of the books being sold that Wednesday afternoon were concerned with a subject their owner had always referred to as 'the Art', definite article and capital letter giving his chosen calling due weight and stature. Works included Giovanni Battista Armenini on *Painting*, Callcott on *Painting*, a *Critical Essay on Oil Painting* by Raspe, Shee's *Elements of Art*, Hoare's *Epoch of the Arts*. There were Lives of Michelangelo, Rubens, Fuseli, Lawrence, Northcote and West. There was an unbound ten-volume set of Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. Lot 122, which sold for one pound seven shillings, comprised: 'Walpole's Anecdotes of Painting; Webb's Beauties of Ditto; Buchanan's Memoirs of Ditto; Idea of Ditto'.

The first day's sale concluded with a collection of thirty-seven lots, described in the catalogue as 'Portfolios of Engravings, Etchings, &c.'<sup>6</sup> Among these were four engravings of Napoleon, two of the Duke of Wellington and one of Lord Nelson. There were engravings after famous masterpieces by Michelangelo, Raphael and Rubens, and a number of etchings, engravings and lithographs intended to disseminate, in a popular and inexpensive form, the works of Benjamin Robert Haydon himself.

The second day's sale was advertised to begin at noon, but did not actually start until one o'clock. It was held in the 'principal saloon' on the first floor, used by the late artist as his painting room. It was here, in front of the 'Noble Gallery Painting', the sale of which would constitute a fitting climax to the day's proceedings, that his body had been discovered, face-down in a wide pool of his own gore.

As the auction got under way again, the room was 'densely crowded', *The Times* reported, 'principally by artists',<sup>7</sup> and it was to these gentlemen that the first thirty or so lots would be expected to appeal. There were 'bottles of linseed oil and sundry bottles of turps', more than 200 artist's brushes, a 'quantity of ground and unground colours, in jars and loose', twenty or so prepared canvases of various sizes ranging from kit-cat to whole length, and a 'large roll of well-seasoned canvas, about 76 yards'. Of the three easels, one was designed to accommodate large 'gallery paintings', and there was 'a pair of high steps' upon which to work at it. Mr Nutter attempted especially to talk up Lot 217. It was an 'excellent octagon colour stone and two mullers',<sup>8</sup> used for grinding paints. Originally the property of James Barry, RA, it had then been owned by another Academician, John Hoppner, from whose sale it had been bought for the considerable sum of thirty-five pounds.

It might, at this point, have occurred to the more censorious elements of the audience to speculate on the course of Haydon's career, had he not been so profligate with his resources. Four incarcerations for debt in the King's Bench Prison would not have blighted that less-tragic span governed by thrift; nor would it have ended in death by his own hand, with the wreckage of his life now falling under Mr Nutter's hammer.

For all the auctioneer's efforts, the colour stone and mullers sold for just one pound thirteen shillings. Lot 214 had fared even worse. The palette, maulstick and crayon

holder, 'used by the late Mr Haydon on the morning of his death',<sup>9</sup> as Mr Nutter informed the crowd, sold for only a guinea.

Lots 220 to 255 consisted of casts: three legs; eighteen hands and feet; eighteen children's hands, legs and feet; twelve female hands and feet; 'sundry casts of youth's legs, arms, &c' and 'four cast legs of horses'. In addition there were three 'colossal casts of feet', two 'colossal casts of arms' and a 'cast of colossal limbs'. There were casts from the Elgin Marbles, including 'a fine cast of Ilissos, the first cast ever made, 1815'. A seven-foot-high *Apollo Belvedere* sold for a guinea, the more modestly proportioned 'Venus de Medici, life size' for fourteen shillings. One notable item in this section of the sale was a bronze cast of the hand of Napoleon's sister, Pauline, Princess Borghese, by Antonio Canova, which went for one pound fifteen shillings.

The next ten lots were described in the catalogue as 'Curious Items' and included a pair of Persian boots, a stuffed peacock and a 'pair of swan's and duck's wings for study'. There were two pieces of 'curiously inlaid armour' and 'two antique shields and [a] roman sword'<sup>10</sup> - the last-named weapon was that depicted bouncing on the thigh of Marcus Curtius riding his terrified horse into the ravine. Also offered was a saddle purporting to be Henry VIII's, presented by Lord Audley to the artist, and a steward's staff, a relic of Haydon's vast portrayal of the Reform Banquet in the Guildhall, 11 July 1832. A coat worn on the same occasion by Earl Grey, 'with ribbon and the garter', was withdrawn from the sale when no advance was made beyond a bid of seven shillings. A frock coat and waistcoat employed for the portrait of the Duke of Wellington sold for eleven shillings, and the much-used facsimile of Napoleon's coat for six.

As the sale proceeded into the late afternoon, there were a number of items considered by the *Times* correspondent

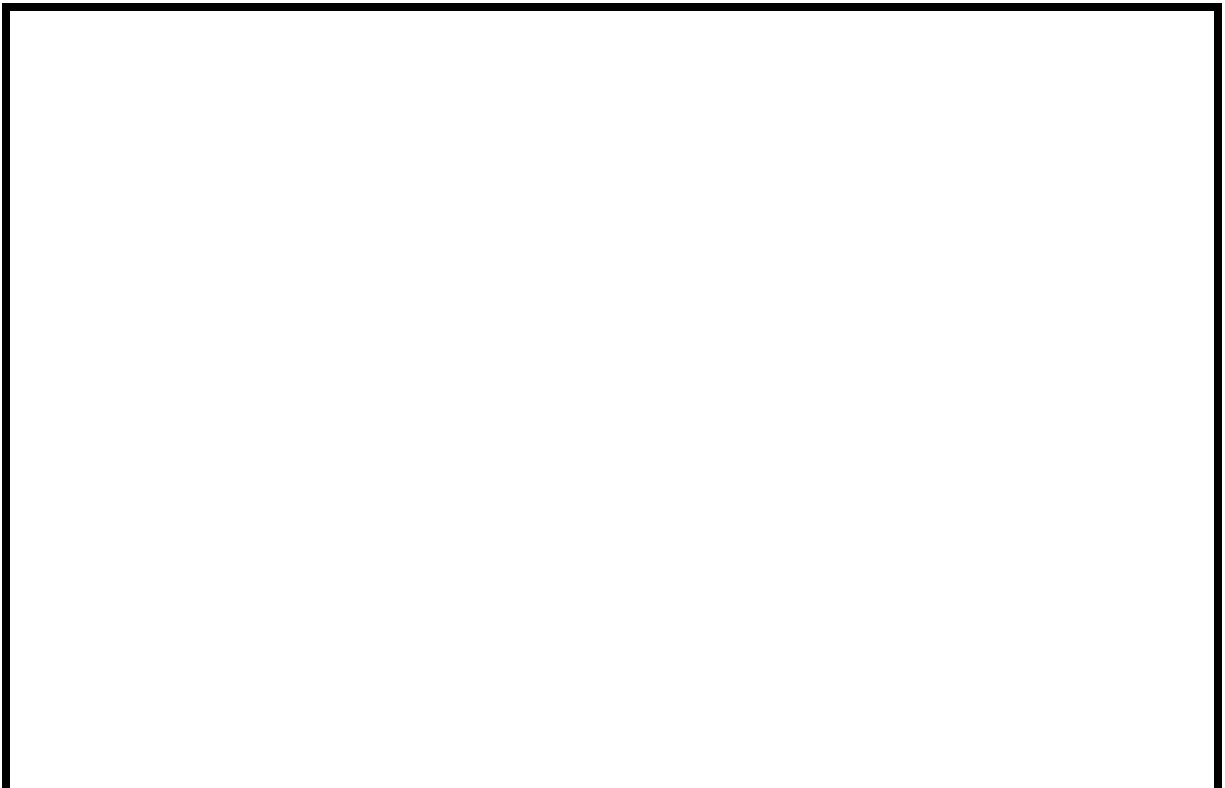
as 'deserving of notice'.<sup>11</sup> Lot 281 was a small framed print of George IV, inscribed by Haydon with the words 'The only Monarch that felt for me'.<sup>12</sup> This was a reference to the solitary instance of royal patronage that the artist had enjoyed, his late Majesty's purchase of *The Mock Election* in 1828. Lot 291, an unfinished painting of Copenhagen, 'the charger rode by the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo', was purchased by the Iron Duke himself for seventeen guineas. A painting of his Grace's sword sold for two and a half guineas, a study of his hat for ten shillings, while a companion study, of Napoleon's hat, went for nineteen shillings. Lot 305 was an oil sketch showing the interior of a Nelson mausoleum, which - had Haydon's submission to the competition for monumental designs, held in 1839, been favourably received - would have been erected on the Trafalgar Square site in place of William Railton's column.

There were drawings derived from another ill-fated application, to the committee inviting fresco designs for the new Houses of Parliament. Having ignominiously failed to be considered for this immense scheme of state-subsidised decoration, Haydon recklessly set about executing a series of six compositions regardless. They were intended to dramatise the vices and virtues of governance: 'The Horrors of Anarchy', 'The Horrors of Despotism', 'The Horrors of Democracy' and 'The Horrors of Revolution' were to be opposed by two 'Blessings': of Justice, and of 'Freedom under Limited Monarchy'. Only 'Despotism', represented by the Emperor Nero playing on his lyre while Rome burned, and 'Democracy', by the banishment of Aristides from Athens, were actually completed. It was the exhibition of these two huge canvases, desolate and disregarded, in an upper room of Mr Bullock's Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly that provided Haydon's final, insupportable and ruinous

humiliation, worsted by the tremendous box-office receipts of an American midget appearing in the same building.

Only one more of the projected series was ever begun. Lot 343, showing King Alfred instructing the first British jury in its duties, formed a theatrical backdrop when, a little after half-past ten on the morning of Monday 22 June, the artist committed suicide. The small pocket pistol with which he had failed to kill himself did not appear in the sale catalogue, nor did the razor he employed to finish the job.

In the same first-floor room of the house, not seven weeks later, the day's business was drawing to a close, and Mr Nutter was nearing the end of his labours. The hammer fell at five pounds ten shillings for Lot 342, a large unfinished painting of a subject from Milton - *Satan and Uriel* - in which the face of the noble, muscular Guardian of the Sun, directing the fallen Archangel to Earth, might have been recognised, by those who had known the painter, as an idealised self-portrait. But before any offers could be made for the long-awaited Lot 343, a man handed the auctioneer a written note and declared, in a voice loud enough for the *Times* correspondent to quote it verbatim: 'I give you notice not to sell the large picture, for if you do you will do it on your own responsibility.'<sup>13</sup> Mr Nutter paid no heed to the mysterious intervention, or to the note, but announced that he already had a commission to purchase the picture for £200. There being no further advance on this extraordinary sum, and no further interruption from the man who imagined himself to have a prior claim upon *The Blessings of Justice*, the hammer fell again.



**PART ONE**

**NO STRANGER TO THE MUSES**

**1786-1807**

Very Dirty Weather. Wind West-South-West.

Folk living in a seaport pay closer attention to the weather than do those whose homes lie further inland. Even men pursuing relatively sheltered trades on the coast must have a sympathetic feeling for the more daring souls making a living upon the sea. That a Plymouth bookseller, stationer and printer should daily consult the weathervane is not therefore surprising. On Tuesday 24 January 1786 Benjamin Robert Haydon senior recorded in his diary 'Sally taken Bad' and expressed the hope 'it will end Well with her'. The seriousness of the crisis seemed reflected by climatic conditions: 'Very Dirty Weather,' he wrote, 'Wind W.S.W.' Four months later, a health scare would be accompanied by an easterly wind: 'My dear Sally & little one Very poorly . . . Wind at E.N.E.' Bereavement in a neighbouring household was also recounted: 'Poor Mrs Burgess died in Child Bed to the great Affliction of poor Tom Burgess who is much Distressed . . . Wind W.N.W.'<sup>1</sup> Many years later, after reading his father's diary, the painter remarked: 'There was a consolation in finding that the course of nature went on . . . Poor Tom Burgess had lost his wife, but yet he ought to be comforted, for the wind was not a south-wester.' But no mention was made of the weather on Wednesday 25 January 1786, when, at half-past nine at night, Sarah Haydon was taken in labour, delivered of 'a fine Boy' and reported to be 'as well as could be expected'.<sup>2</sup> The painter was left in ignorance of the prevailing wind, auspicious or otherwise, that fanned his own nativity.

Benjamin Robert Haydon senior had more than the common Plymouth citizen's passing interest in maritime matters. He contributed three instalments of a history of the town to the *Naval Chronicle*.<sup>3</sup> The doorway of his shop - nearly opposite the Guildhall - was 'the lounge of the more

noted individuals of the town and garrison . . . news-mongers of all grades, civil, naval and military'.<sup>4</sup> Being at the centre of this information network, he took it upon himself to act as an Admiralty 'special correspondent' to the *Bristol Journal*. 'Warmly attached to his King and Country,' his obituary noted, 'he was zealous in announcing to his friends and to the world the earliest intelligence of the valorous exploits of British heroes in various parts of the globe. The columns of the Bristol Journal have repeatedly borne testimony to the accuracy and importance of his valuable correspondence [and] regular intelligence from the West.'<sup>5</sup> This bookseller, printer and stationer no doubt regarded his vicarious participation in 'valorous exploits' as a measure of compensation for renouncing the military career that his own father had originally intended for him, because when his father died suddenly, 'from disease of the heart', the fifteen-year-old youth had been ordered by his mother to take over the family business.

The painter's grandfather, Robert Haydon, had begun his working life aged nine, apprenticed to a sign and fillet painter, one Waltham Savery of Slade Hall, Ivy Bridge, ten miles east of Plymouth. From apprentice he graduated to steward. He prospered, saved, married the daughter of a local printing family, Mary Baskerville, and, on the death of Mr Savery, established - with the financial assistance of his wife - the book shop, stationery and printing business at 75 Market Place that he would leave so precipitately to his son. He possessed some talent as a painter, and the grandson remembered a portrait, 'an old head of a brown complexion with a white beard', by his hand. He had been, for the last twenty-odd years of his life, parish clerk of Charles Church in the centre of Plymouth, and it was there that he was laid to rest by a grateful community in 1773. His widow survived him by eighteen years and her grandson wrote admiringly of Mary Haydon as a woman 'of great energy and violent

prejudices', recounting a characteristic incident that occurred during the American War of Independence:

She hated the French and she hated the Americans; and once, when an American prisoner, who had escaped, crept into her house [and] appealed to her for protection until pursuit was over, though alone in the house, she told him 'she hated all Americans', and turned the poor fellow out into the street.

Back beyond his grandparents, the painter's ancestral line blurs into unreliability. Not surprisingly, in one possessing a lifelong, unshakeable sense of self-worth, he claimed descent from an old and illustrious Devon family, the Haydons of Cadhay.<sup>6</sup> The last scion of that house and fortune, Gideon, dying intestate after a hunting accident, the birthright of his heirs was swallowed up in a Chancery suit. This served to explain grandfather Robert Haydon's lowly start in life, bound to Mr Savery, although it overlooked the fact that this apprenticeship began six years before the Chancery suit that was supposed to have ruined the family.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, imagining his forebears as masters of a great estate allowed Gideon's supposed descendant the dubious comfort of holding an ancient wrong responsible for all his troubles. 'This is the way Property and Ancestral seats change Proprietors!' declared the painter:

This is the way Families are ruined, children innocent of the faults of their Fathers, sent into the World degraded & without fortune, and a century afterwards look back with desponding gaze on their lost & decayed prospects! This is the way my own family Property has gone into other hands and I am compelled to slave for my existence, from the folly of my great Grandfather.

This stream of folly clearly ran in the genes, because the painter's father had been 'a great rake in youth'<sup>8</sup> and was said to have brought his family to the brink of catastrophe for a second time. His son left the following account of the circumstances:

In early life [my father] had been most basely treated by a man whom he had assisted in every possible way, and who returned this lavish generosity by a blow from which my father never recovered. Disgusted with the world, he plunged into dissipation to forget himself. The society of the educated and virtuous was not stimulating enough, and from one class to another he gradually sunk till nothing pleased or gratified him but the company of players. This neglect of his duties soon led to embarrassment, embarrassment to law costs, and law costs, as a matter of course, to ruin and bankruptcy.

\*

The maternal side of the painter's family comprised clergy, adventurers of both sexes, and at least one prodigal whose fiscal incompetence also flowed into the gene pool.

The wife who gave Benjamin Robert Haydon senior his only son was christened Sarah Cobley. She was the second daughter of the Reverend Benjamin Cobley, curate of Shillingford, later rector of Dodbrook, who was said to have been killed while preaching when the sounding board above his pulpit fell down on his head.<sup>9</sup> He left a wife and eight children. Undaunted by the perils of his late father's calling, one son, John Cobley, also entered the Church, as curate of Over Stowey near Bridgewater, then as curate of Shepton Mallet and eventually attaining to the living of Cheddar, and Prebendary of Wells Cathedral. The eldest daughter followed commerce, marrying a merchant named Partridge and taking two of her brothers and a sister, Harriet, to live with her in the Italian port of Leghorn. It was there that Harriet met and married Nicolay S. Mordvinov, a captain in the Russian navy who eventually rose to the rank of Admiral and the title of Count. One of the brothers, Thomas Cobley, gained a commission in the Russian army, distinguishing himself during the Turkish War of 1787-91 at the sieges of Izmayil and Ochakiv.<sup>10</sup> He became a General, then Governor of Odessa, and had the rare distinction of having a Russian village, Coblifka, named after him. The other brother, Benjamin Cobley, stayed in Italy acquiring a taste for art

and indolence. He returned to Devonshire, took possession of the estate his mother had left him, sold it and, without bothering to invest the considerable sum realised, kept it in a portmanteau for years, taking it out, 'guinea by guinea', until it was exhausted. Then he went to Plymouth on a six-week visit to his sister Sarah, and, in his nephew's jaundiced words, 'never had energy to remove, got imbedded in the family, stayed thirty years and died'. He died in sole possession of the business - Haydon senior, whom he outlived, having made him a partner.

Sarah Haydon, the painter's mother, was 'a vivacious woman, of handsome presence, rapid apprehension, and many accomplishments. She was imperious, quick tempered, tender hearted to a degree, passionately attached to her children, not very judicious in their management, and of unbounded benevolence to all in distress. She [was] known, on her walks in winter, to go up a dark passage, strip herself of her quilted petticoat and give it to some poor shivering wretch who had begged her charity.'<sup>11</sup> Such a character would have acted as a steadying influence on her husband.

She was to bear him only one more child, three years after her son: a girl, christened Harriet Cobley Haydon. A previous daughter, and namesake, Sarah, had died in infancy.

\*

The commercial scope and nature of the business at 75 Market Place was described in a newspaper advertisement in July 1788 as 'Booksellers and Printers to his ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCE WILLIAM HENRY'. The notice gave thanks to customers for 'distinguished patronage . . . received for near half a century', offering them a remarkable line of merchandise, following a recent commercial expedition to the metropolis:

Solicitous and ambitious to please . . . they are lately arrived from London, and having had an opportunity of visiting all the capital print-shops in town, they have selected the most beautiful and elegant variety of ENGLISH and FOREIGN ENGRAVINGS . . . The collection consists of historical subjects, shipping, portraits, landscapes, groups of figures, cattle, caricatures, medallions, coloured and plain, at the lowest price marked on each print, from which no abatement can be made.<sup>12</sup>

While the painter professed to remember nothing of his early childhood up until the age of five, a story told him by his mother may date from the year that his father flooded the shop with pictures:

As I was one day in a fury of rage which nothing could pacify, my mother entering the room with a book of engravings in her hand, as a last resource showed me the 'pretty pictures', at which, she used to declare, I became very silent and interested, and would not part with the book for the rest of the day.

He remembered 'a servant maid, in a passion, putting [him] to the parlour table, and to keep [him] quiet giving [him] a common half-penny Picture & a brush to paint it, ([his] father selling these things they were always lying about the house)'.<sup>13</sup>

Further artistic education was used as a cloak for domestic sexual intrigue:

Among my father's apprentices was one (George, I called him) who made love to my nurse, and under pretence of showing me prints and teaching me to draw from them, visited the nursery very frequently. In fact George became so very fond of teaching 'little master Benjamin - the little dear', to draw, that my nurse was obliged to be sent away.

In another version, the apprentice was also dismissed for neglecting the business:

[He] went to London, entered the Academy and came back full of all the Wonders of the Art to teach Drawing, he brought casts the first I had ever seen . . . He told me there was a cast of the Hercules in the Academy ten feet high!<sup>14</sup>

A severe bout of fever, for a month and a half, threatened the child's life. He was taken to recuperate in Underwood near Plympton St Mary, where his father owned a cottage, and another early memory was from this time:

I remember sitting, propped up with pillows, on a little pony, watching some gentlemen throwing the fly on the bridge opposite the church in the valley. The delight of this day, with its beautiful landscape and village church, I have never forgotten.

Then he was six years old and running to school,<sup>15</sup> his mother standing at the door watching and waving. This was in 1792, and he remembered inscribing those numbers alongside his first, middle and surname in a parchment copy-book. The school's location is not known, but, according to the painter, it was during the year he was attending this establishment that he learned his first rudimentary lesson in facial anatomy:

While I was [drawing] a schoolfellow, my father came behind me and said, 'What are you about, sir? You are putting the eyes in the forehead!' As I went to school, I observed people's eyes were not in the middle of their foreheads, as I had drawn them. To this day and hour I hardly ever paint a head without thinking of my father's remark.

He learned the power of satire, its rewards and potential consequences. He recalled that his first attempt at 'original thinking' was the caricature of a classmate who was always crying:

I drew him with a stream of tears running over his cheeks, and a hand at the corner holding a cup to catch them . . . It excited the uproar of the whole school; the usher took it and pasted it against the ceiling, and whenever the boy cried, all fingers were pointed up.

He got a reputation among his schoolfellows, 'and Haydon draw this, Haydon draw that were perpetually stunning [his] ears'.<sup>16</sup>

Following the execution of Louis XVI, on 21 January 1793, England went to war with France. The boy was seven years old and remembered Plymouth being crowded with French prisoners. Perhaps his father gave him one of the miniature guillotines carved by these unwilling visitors from mutton bones and sold at the prison gates. The deadly instrument certainly exerted a fascination on him and added a new subject to his artistic repertoire: “‘Louis taking leave of the People” in his shirt sleeves . . . copied from a print of the day’. Later, in October, he remembered his mother sitting in tears on the sofa and, when he asked her why, being told: ‘They have cut off the Queen of France’s head, my dear.’ Pros and cons of the Revolutionary War became confused in children’s play. ‘On half-holidays [he would lead] out ten or a dozen boys to the cornfields to cut off Frenchman’s heads, which meant slicing every poppy they met, shouting as each head fell, “There goes a Frenchman! Huzza!””

Later in that first year of war he was sent to the Grammar School, a substantial stone building in St Catherine Street, close to the Public Dispensary and the Workhouse. A guide book published more than twenty years after his attendance describes the school room as ‘a narrow, gloomy apartment, contain[ing] forms for seven classes’.<sup>17</sup> As master, the Reverend Dr Bidlake had accommodation in the building and a garden next to the playground at his disposal. Bidlake was ‘a man of some taste’, Haydon recalled:

He painted and played on the organ, patronised talent, was fond of country excursions, wrote poems, which nobody ever read, one on ‘the Sea’, another on ‘the Year’. I remember him with his rhyming dictionary, composing his verses and scanning with his fingers. He was not a deep classic, but rather encouraged a sort of idle country-excursion habit in the school; perhaps, however, he thus fostered a love of nature.

He further extended the boy’s artistic instruction:

Finding that I had a taste for art, he always took me with another boy from our studies to attend his caprices in painting. Here his odd and peculiar

figure, for his back was bent from fever, induced us to play him tricks. As he was obliged to turn round and walk away to study the effect of his touches, we used to rub out what he had done before he returned, when his perplexity and simplicity were delightful to mischievous boys.

Haydon did not name his co-conspirator, but a likely candidate would be the future topographical watercolourist Samuel Prout. Born in Treville Street, barely a hundred yards from the Market Place, and also the son of a shopkeeper, Prout was a little over two years older than Haydon. In the late 1840s he told John Ruskin of his time at Bidlake's school, and of his early friendship. It was information that enabled the celebrated author of *Modern Painters* to arrive at an evaluation of Haydon's disastrous career, based on the comparative temperaments of the two children:

[Prout's] first beginnings in landscape study were made in happy truant excursions . . . with the painter Haydon, then also a youth . . . The two boys were directly opposed in their habits of application and modes of study. Prout unremitting in diligences, patient in observation, devoted in copying what he loved in nature, never working except with his model before him; Haydon restless, ambitious, and fiery; exceedingly imaginative, never captivated with simple truth, nor using his pencil on the spot, but trusting always to his powers of memory. The fates of the two youths were inevitably fixed by their opposite characters. The humble student became the originator of a new School of Art, and one of the most popular painters of his age. The self-trust of the wanderer in the wildnesses of his fancy betrayed him into the extravagances, and deserted him in the sufferings, with which his name must remain sadly, but not unjustly associated.<sup>18</sup>

There is, however, one piece of evidence that shows the eight-or nine-year-old Haydon copying what he saw with a diligence and patience of observation that would have been close to Ruskin's heart. Sitting in a garret window at the top of the family home and shop in Market Place, he drew the roofscape to the west: the domed cupola and clock of the Guildhall, and the bristling of masts and spars in the dock beyond. He made notes in the outlines of the conical, ridged and domed structures in front of him, as though intending a more detailed rendition of the scene at a later date. Most