

II.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A NATIONAL EXHIBITION OF SCOTTISH PORTRAITS
IN EDINBURGH, IN THE YEAR 1855; INCLUDING A COMMUNICATION
ON THE SUBJECT FROM THOMAS CARLYLE, Esq. BY DAVID LAING,
Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Several years ago it was proposed, under the sanction of the Honourable the Board of Trustees, to form a public Exhibition in Edinburgh of Portraits of distinguished or remarkable characters connected with Scotland. The scheme, I believe, originated with the Honourable Lord Murray, one of the Commissioners, and a Committee was appointed to mature the plans for its accomplishment. My knowledge of the scheme consisted in having been invited to attend the meetings of the Committee; but the scheme itself proved at the time unsuccessful.

¹ The centre part in the smaller specimen is nearly the same pattern as that which appears on the mitre of Thomas à Becket, figured in *Shaw's Dresses and Decorations*, vol. i., No. 13, and both have a great resemblance to the pattern on a maniple preserved at Beville, in the department of La Manche, figured by M. de Caumont, in his *Abecedaire d'Archéologie: Architecture Religieuse*, p. 451; "of which," he says, "I have found the same design in a great number of galloons of the 13th and end of the 12th centuries."

When last in London, happening to call upon Mr Carlyle, he said, he never saw any one from Edinburgh without suggesting an Exhibition of that kind, which, he thought, would be of the greatest interest. I referred to the former project, and added, that possibly it might be revived when the new buildings on the Mound were completed. In order to call attention more directly to this point, I suggested whether he might not write a letter expressing his views on the subject, as such a communication might enable me at least to renew the proposal in a definite form. In reminding him lately of our conversation, I have been honoured with the letter which I now beg to submit to the Society, with this brief explanation:—In a separate note, inclosing this communication, Mr Carlyle adds, “You must make of it what you can. It will give me real pleasure if the project do take root, and one day come to perfection in sight of all the world.”

“ To DAVID LAING, Esq., Signet Library, Edinburgh.

“ MY DEAR SIR,

“ CHELSEA, 3d May 1854.

“ With regard to that *General Exhibition of Scottish Historical Portraits*, it is certain there are many people more qualified to speak than I. In fact, it has never been with me more than an aspiration; an ardent wish, rather without much hope: to make it into an executable project, there are needed far other capacities and opportunities than mine. However, you shall at once hear what my crude notions on the subject are or have been, since you wish it.

“ First of all, then, I have to tell you, as a fact of personal experience, that in all my poor Historical investigations it has been, and always is, one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage inquired after; a good *Portrait* if such exists; failing that, even an indifferent if sincere one. In short, *any* representation, made by a faithful human creature, of that Face and Figure, which *he* saw with his eyes, and which I can never see with mine, is now valuable to me, and much better than none at all. This, which is my own deep experience, I believe to be, in a deeper or less deep degree, the universal one; and that every student and reader of History, who strives earnestly to conceive for himself what manner of Fact and *Man* this or the other vague Historical *Name* can have been, will, as the first and directest indication of all, search eagerly for a Portrait, for all the reasonable Portraits there are; and never rest till he have made out, if possible, what the man's natural face was like. Often I have found a Portrait superior in real instruction to half-a-dozen written ‘Biographies,’ as Biographies are written;—or rather, let me say, I have found that the Portrait was as a small lighted *candle*

by which the Biographies could for the first time be *read*, and some human interpretation be made of them; the *Biographied* Personage no longer an empty impossible Phantasm, or distracting Aggregate of inconsistent rumours—(in which state, alas his usual one, he is *worth* nothing to anybody, except it be as a dried thistle for Pedants to thrash, and for men to fly out of the way of),—but yielding at last some features which one could admit to be human. Next in directness are a man's genuine Letters, if he have left any, and you can get to *read* them to the bottom: of course, a man's *actions* are the most complete and indubitable stamp of him; but without these aids, of Portraits and Letters, they are in themselves so infinitely abstruse a stamp, and so confused by foreign rumour and false tradition of them, as to be *oftenest* undecipherable with certainty.

“ This kind of value and interest I may take as the highest pitch of interest there is in Historical Portraits; this, which the zealous and studious Historian feels in them: and one may say, all men, just in proportion as they are ‘*Historians*’ (which every mortal is, who has a *memory*, and attachments and possessions in the Past), will feel something of the same,—every human creature, something. So that I suppose there is absolutely nobody so dark and dull, and every way sunk and stupified, that a Series of Historical Portraits, especially of his native country, would not be of real interest to him;—*real* I mean, as coming from himself and his own heart, not *imaginary*, and preached in upon him by the Newspapers; which is an important distinction.

“ And all this is quite apart from the *artistic* value of the Portraits (which also is a real value, of its sort, especially for some classes, however exaggerated it may sometimes be): all this is a quantity to be *added* to the artistic value, whatever it may be; and appeals to a far deeper and more universal principle in human nature than the love of Pictures is. Of which principle some dimmer or clearer form may be seen continually active wherever men are;—in your Antiquarian Museum, for example, may be seen, giving very conspicuous proofs of itself, sanctioned more or less by all the world! If one would buy an indisputably authentic *old shoe* of William Wallace for hundreds of pounds and run to look at it from all ends of Scotland, what would one give for an authentic visible shadow of his face, could such, by art natural or art magic, now be had!

“ It has always struck me that Historical Portrait Galleries far transcend in worth all other kinds of National Collections of Pictures whatever; that in fact they ought to exist (for many reasons, of all degrees of weight) in every country, as among the most popular and cherished National Possessions:—and it is not a joyful reflection, but an extremely mournful one, that in no country is there at present such a thing to be found. What Louis-Philippe may have col-

lected, in the way of French Historical Portrait, at Versailles, I did not see : if worth much (which I hear it is not), it might have proved the best memorial left by him, one day. Chancellor Clarendon made a brave attempt in that kind for England ; but his House and ' Gallery ' fell all asunder, in a sad way ; and as yet there has been no second attempt that I can hear of. As matters stand, Historical Portraits abound in England ; but where they are, or where any individual of them is, no man knows, or can discover except by groping and hunting (*underground*, as it were, and like the mole!) in an almost desperate manner : even among the intelligent and learned of your acquaintance, you inquire to no purpose. Nor is the English National Gallery poorer in this respect than others,—perhaps even much the reverse. The sad rule holds in all countries. In the Dresden Gallery, for instance, you find Flayings of Bartholomew, Flayings of Marsyas, Rapes of the Sabines : but if you ask for a Portrait of Martin Luther, of Friedrich the Wise, nay even of August the Big, of Marshal Saxe or poor Count Brühl, you will find no satisfactory answer. In Berlin itself, which affects to be a wiser city, I found, not long ago, Picture Galleries not a few, with ancient and modern *virtù* in abundance and superabundance,—whole acres of mythological smearing (Tower of Babel, and I know not what), by Kaulbach and others, still going on : but a *genuine Portrait of Frederic the Great* was a thing I could nowhere hear of. That is strange, but that is true. I roamed thro' endless lines of Pictures ; inquired far and wide, even Sculptor Rauch could tell me nothing : at last it was chiefly by good luck that the thing I was in quest of turned up.—This I find to be one of the saddest of those few defects in the world which are easily capable of remedy : I hope you in Scotland, in the ' new National Museum ' we hear talk of, will have a good eye to this, and remedy it in your own case ! Scotland at present is not worse than other countries in the point in question : but neither is it at all better ; and as Scotland, unlike some other countries, *has* a History of a very readable nature, and has never published even an *engraved* series of National Portraits, perhaps the evil is more sensible and patent there than elsewhere. It is an evil which should be everywhere remedied : and if Scotland be the first to set an example in that respect, Scotland will do honourably by herself, and achieve a benefit to all the world.

“ From this long Prologue, if you have patience to consider it over, you will see sufficiently what my notion of the main rules for executing the Project would be. The grand interest to be held in view is that which I have defined as the *Historian's*, the ingenious sincere *Student of History's*. Ingenious and sincere student ; not *pedantic*, fantastic and imaginary ! It seems to me all

real interest for the other classes of mankind, down to the most ignorant class, may well be considered as only a more and more diluted form of that interest. The rule therefore is, Walk straight towards that ; not refusing to look to the right and left, but keeping your face steadily on that : if you can manage to secure that *well*, all else will follow from it, or attend it. Ask always, What would the best-informed and most ingenuous Scottish soul like most to see, for illuminating and verifying of Scottish History to himself? This is what it concerns us to try if we can get for him and for the world ;—and on the whole this only ; for it is certain, all other men will by and by follow this best-informed and most ingenuous one ; and at the end of the account, if you have served him well, you will turn out to have served everybody well.

“ Great zeal, great industry will of course be needed in hunting up what Portraits there are, scattered wide over country mansions in all parts of Scotland ;—in gathering in your raw-material, so to speak. Next, not less, but even more important, will be skill,—knowledge, judgment, and above all, fidelity,—in selecting, exhibiting and elucidating these. That indeed, I reckon, will be the vitallest condition of all ; the cardinal point, on which success or failure will turn. You will need the best Pictorial judgment (some faithful critic who really *knows* the Schools and Epochs of Art a little, and can help towards the solution of so many things that will depend on that) ; especially all the *Historical* knowledge and good sense that can be combined upon the business will be indispensable ! For the rest, I would sedulously avoid all concern with the vulgar Showman or Charlatan line of action in this matter. For though the thing must depend, a good deal at least, on popular support, the real way to get that (especially in such a matter) is, to deserve it : the thing can by no means be done by *Yankee-Barnum* methods ; nor should it, if it could.—In a word, here as everywhere, to winnow out the chaff of the business, and present in a clear and pure state what of *wheat* (little or much) may be in it ; on this, as I compute, the Project will stand or fall. If faithfully executed,—the chaff actually well suppressed, the wheat honestly given,—I cannot doubt but it might succeed. Let it but promise to deserve success, I suppose honourable help might be got for it among the wealthier and wiser classes of Scotchmen.

“ But to come now to your more specific questions, I should be inclined, on the above principles, to judge—

“ *1st.* That no living Scotchman’s portrait should be admitted, however ‘ *Historical* ’ it promised to be. And I would farther counsel that you should be extremely chary about such ‘ *Historical men* ’ as have died within the last twenty-five or thirty years ; it requires always the space of a generation to discriminate between popular monstrosities and *Historical realities* in the matter of

Men,—to let mere dust-clouds settle into their natural place and bulk. But from that point, especially from the beginning of this century, you have free scope, and ever freer, backwards to the very beginning of things,—which, alas, in the Pictorial respect, I fear will only be some two or three centuries, or little more! The oldest Scottish portrait I can recollect to have seen, of any worth, is that of James IV. (and only as an engraving, the original at Taymouth), though probably enough you may know of older. But for the earlier figures, —I would go back to Colm and Adamnan,—if I *could*, by any old illuminated missal or otherwise? You will have engravings, coins, casts of sepulchral monuments—I have seen Bruce's *skull*, at least, cast in plaster!—and remember always that any genuine help to conceive the actual likeness of the man will be welcome, in these as indeed in all cases. The one question is, that they be genuine (or, if not, well marked as *doubtful*, and in what degree doubtful); that they be 'helps,' instead of *hindrances* and criminal misguidances!

“ 2*d*, In regard to modern pictures representing historical events, my vote would clearly be, To make the rule absolute *not* to admit any one of these; at least not till I saw one that was *other* than an infatuated blotch of insincere ignorance, and a mere distress to an earnest and well-instructed eye! Since the time of *Hollar*, there is not the least *veracity*, even of intention, in such things; and, for most part, there is an *ignorance* altogether abject. *Wilkie's John Knox*, for example: no picture that I ever saw by a man of genius can well be, in regard to all earnest purposes, a more perfect failure! Can anything, in fact, be more entirely *useless* for earnest purposes, more *unlike* what ever could have been the reality, than that gross *Energumen*, more like a boxing butcher, whom he has set into a pulpit surrounded with draperies, with fat-shouldered women, and play-actor men in mail, and labelled *Knox*? I know the picture only by engravings, always hasten on when I see it in a window, and would not for much have it hung on the wall beside me! So, too, I have often seen a *Battle of Worcester*, by some famed Academician or other, which consists of an angry man and horse (man presumably intended for Cromwell, but not like him),—man, with heavy flapping Spanish cloak, &c., and no hat to his head, firing a pistol over his shoulder into what seems a dreadful shower of rain in the distance! What can be the use of such things, except to persons who have turned their back on real interests, and gone wool-gathering in search of imaginary? All that kind of matter, as indisputable 'chaff,' ought to be severely purged away.

“ 3*d*, With respect to *plurality* of portraits, when you have the offer of more than one? The answer to that, on the principles already stated, will come out different in different cases, and be an affair of consideration and com-

promise. For the earlier (and more uncertain) figures, I should incline to admit *all* that could be got; certainly all that could be found genuine, that were 'helps,' as above said. Nay, such even as were only half genuine, if there were no others; marking well their doubtful character. As you come lower down, the selection will be stricter; and in quite modern times when pictures are plentiful, I should think *one* portrait would in general be the rule. But of course respect must be had to the importance of the man, the *excellence* of the portraits offered (or their peculiar worth for your objects), the quantity of house-room you are like to have, &c., &c., and the decision will be the summary and adjustment of all these considerations.

"For example, during the *Reformation period* I would take of John Knox, and his consorts and adversaries (Lethington, Kirkcaldy, Regents Murray, Morton, Mar, Buchanan, Bothwell, even Rizzio, and the like), any picture I could get; all attainable pictures, engravings, &c., or almost all, unless they be more numerous than I suppose,—might promise to be 'helps,' in that great scarcity, and great *desire* to be helped. While, again, in reference to *The Forty-five*, where pictures abound, and where the personages and their affair are so infinitely insignificant in comparison, I should expect that one portrait, and that only of the very topmost men, would well suffice. Yet there is a real interest, too, in that poor Forty-five,—for, in fine, we lie very *near* it still, and that is always a great point; and I should somehow like to have a *Hawley*, Sir John Cope, Wade, and Duke of Cumberland smuggled in, by way of 'illustrative Notes,' if that were possible. Nay, I really think it should be done; and, on the whole, perceive that *The Forty-five* will be one of your more opulent fields.

"The question 'Who is a Historical Character?' is, in many cases, already settled, and, in most cases, will be capable of easy settlement. In general, whoever *lives* in the memory of Scotchmen, whoever is yet practically recognisable as a conspicuous worker, speaker, singer, or sufferer in the past time of Scotland, he is a 'Historical Character,' and we shall be glad to see the veritable likeness of him. For examples, given at random:—George Buchanan, David Rizzio, Lord Hailes, Lord Kames, Monboddo, Bozzy, Burns, Gawin Douglas, Barbour, Jamie Thomson. I would take in, and eagerly, David Dale (of the cotton manufacture), less eagerly Dundas (of the suffrage ditto), and, in general, ask myself, Who said, did, or suffered anything truly memorable, or even anything still much remembered? From Bruce down to Heathfield and Abercromby, the common History books will direct you plentifully as to one class; and for the others, knowledge and good judgment will be the methods.

"*4th*. Lastly, as to the Catalogue. I am accustomed to conceive the Catalogue, if well done, as one of the best parts of the whole. Brevity, sound know-

ledge, exactitude, fidelity, ought to be the characteristic of every feature of it. Say you allow, on the average, not more than half a page to each, in by far the majority of cases; hardly more than a page to any: historical, lucid, above all things exact. I would give the *essence* of the man's history, *condensed* to the very utmost; the dates, his birth, death, main transactions,—in short, the *bones* of his history; then add reference to books and sources (carefully distinguishing the good from the less good), where his history and character can be learned farther by such as wish to study it. Afterwards, in a line or two, indicate the actual *habitat* of the picture here exhibited; *its* history, if it have one; that it is *known* to be by such and such a master (and on what authority), or that it is only guessed. What value and excellence might lie in such a Catalogue, if rightly done, I need not say to David Laing; nor what labour, knowledge, and resources would be needed to do it well! Perhaps divided among several men (with some head to *preside* over all), according to the several *periods* and classes of subject;—I can perceive *work* enough for *you*, among others, there! But, on the whole, it could be done; and it would be well worth doing, and a permanently useful thing. I would have it printed in some *bound* form, not as a pamphlet, but still very cheap; I should expect a wide immediate sale for it at railway stations and elsewhere while the Exhibition went on, and a steady and permanent sale for it afterwards for a long time indeed. A modern *Nicolson*, done according to the *real want* of the present day; and far beyond what any 'Historical Library,' with its dusty pedantries, ever was before!

"But enough now. Your patience must not be quite ridden to death, and the very paper admonishes me to have done. Accept in good part what hasty stuff I have written; forgive it at least. I must say, this small National Project has again grown to look quite beautiful to me,—*possible* surely in some form, and full of uses. Probably the real '*Crystal Palace*' that would besem poor old Scotland in these days of Exhibitions,—a country rather eminently rich in men perhaps, which is the pearl and soul of all other '*riches*.'—Believe me yours ever truly,

"T. CARLYLE."

In some respects I fear Mr Carlyle is much too sanguine, and he evidently is not aware how comparatively few genuine and well-attested Portraits of an early date are preserved. But at present it is unnecessary to enter upon details, which would have to be maturely considered by those who undertook the charge of such an Exhibition. It is, however, most certain that, if the attempt shall be made, it would be attended with great trouble and considerable expense. Although the sale of season tickets and the price of admission might not be equal

to the expense, the scheme is at least worthy of consideration ; yet it is with no intention of proposing that the Society should undertake this that I have brought it under their notice. To be successfully attempted would require the influence and means of the Honourable the Board of Trustees, possessing apartments the most suitable for the purpose.

In proof, however, of the interest taken in an exhibition of this kind, I may refer to that of "the Raeburn Portraits," exhibited in the College during the meetings of the British Association in this place in July 1840. It consisted in a series of about forty genuine portraits of men of distinction, and afforded so much gratification that it was kept open for some time by special request. The interest consisted more in the variety of character of the individuals represented than as a collection of works of art, inasmuch as, owing to the hasty or unpremeditated way in which the portraits were brought together, many of the finer pictures of Sir Henry Raeburn could not be obtained in time so as to be put in competition with the collection of his Portraits, which were exhibited after his death in his house, York Place.

What I propose, therefore, is, if agreeable to the meeting, that our secretary, Mr Christie, be requested to communicate with the secretary of the Board of Trustees, that the subject may be specially brought under their notice, in order to ascertain whether the former scheme might not be revived ; and if so, at what time it could most conveniently be attempted.

In the hope that the proposal will be favourably entertained, I beg further to propose, that a small committee of the Society be appointed to co-operate in maturing and carrying forward the arrangements, and that the Royal Scottish Academy be respectfully invited to name a committee of their own body for the same purpose. One of the first steps, I imagine, would be the preparation of circulars, to be addressed to some of the nobility, public bodies, and other parties, with the view of forming lists of Portraits most worthy of a National Exhibition, and of ascertaining whether the proprietors would consent to grant the use of such as might be selected for that purpose.

The meeting, in returning thanks to Mr Carlyle and Mr Laing for their communication, cordially approved of the scheme, and named as a committee the Honourable Lord Murray, Mr Gibson Craig, Mr Laing, and Mr Christie, with power, if necessary, to add to their number. At the same time the Secretary was ordered to communicate with the Board of Manufactures on the subject of Mr Laing's paper, with a view to ascertain how far that body might be favourable to such a scheme as had just been proposed to the Society.

July 10, 1854.

PROFESSOR J. S. MORE in the Chair.

Before proceeding to the business of the day, Mr Laing said it was proper to bring under the notice of the Meeting the lamented decease of one of their most valued Members; the Society, in the person of Mr Chalmers of Aldbar, having lost not only one of its Office-bearers, but an enlightened and liberal encourager of all matters connected with Antiquarian pursuits. On the present occasion, he added, it was not required to pronounce a detailed eulogium on his character; and he would simply move, that the loss which the Society and the cause of Archæology have sustained by the decease of Patrick Chalmers of Aldbar, Esq., one of the Vice-Presidents, be formally recorded in the Minutes.

This motion was unanimously approved of by the Meeting.

The following Donations were exhibited—

Half-length Portrait of John Clerk, Esq. of Eldin, Author of the "Essay on Naval Tactics," painted by James Saxon: by W. H. CARPENTER, Esq., Keeper of Prints and Drawings, British Museum.

In reference to this Portrait, the following Note is given by the Editor of a Volume of the "Eldin Etchings," folio, now completed for the Members of the Bannatyne Club.

"In the Edinburgh Directory for 1803, occurs the name of James Saxon, Portrait Painter, No. 14 Terrace. For the following information I am indebted to the kindness of Mr Carpenter, who was personally known to Saxon in his younger days. He was a native of Manchester or its neighbourhood, and was a great admirer of Opie. On his first visit to Scotland, he painted this portrait of Mr Clerk, and also that of Sir Walter Scott, seated with a large dog in his lap. The portrait of Scott was engraved for the quarto edition of *The Lady of the*

Lake. He afterwards went to Petersburg, where he practised successfully for several years. On his return, he spent a short time at Glasgow; and died in London about the year 1816 or 1817. Mr Clerk's portrait was bought from the artist by Mr Carpenter's father, who employed Anderson to paint the distance in which the breaking of the line is introduced."

Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society, for the years 1847 to 1852, 3 vols. 8vo: by the SOCIETY.

Proceedings and Papers of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, for 1852-3, small 4to: by the SOCIETY.

Mémoires de la Société d'Emulation d'Abbeville, 1849-1852, 8vo: by the SOCIETY.

Notices from the Local Records of Dysart; printed for the Maitland Club, 4to: by WILLIAM EUING, Esq., Glasgow.

The first Communication was—