



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl Of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

Life of Mr. George Vertue

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-59887](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-59887)

T H E

L I F E O F M R . G E O R G E V E R T U E .

THE ensuing account is drawn from his own notes, in which the highest praise he ventures to assume is founded on his industry—How many men in a higher sphere have thought that single quality conferred many shining others! The world too has been so complaisant as to allow their pretensions. Vertue thought the labour of his hands was but labour—the Scaligers and such book-wights have mistaken the drudgery of their eyes for parts, for abilities—nay, have supposed it bestowed wit, while it only swelled their arrogance, and unchained their ill-nature. How contemptuously would such men have smiled at a ploughman, who imagined himself authorised to abuse all others, because he had turned up more acres of ground!—and yet he would have toiled with greater advantage to mankind.

George Vertue was born in the parish of St. Martin's in the Fields, London, in the year 1684. His parents, he says, were more honest than opulent. If vanity had entered into his composition, he might have boasted the antiquity of his race: two of his name were employed by Henry VIII. in the board of works:—but I forget; a family is not ancient, if none of the blood were above the rank of ingenious men two hundred years ago.

About the age of thirteen he was placed with a master who engraved arms on plate and had the chief business of London; but who, being extravagant, broke, and returned to his country, France, after Vertue had served him between three and four years. As the man was unfortunate, though by his own fault, the good-nature of the scholar has concealed his name. As it is proper the republic of letters should be acquainted with the minutest circumstances in the life of a renowned author, I question if Scaliger would have been so tender.

Returned to his parents, Vertue gave himself entirely to the study of drawing for two years; and then entered into an agreement with Michael Vandergutch for three more, which term he protracted to seven, engraving copper-plates for him; when, having received instructions and advice from several painters, he quitted his master on handsome terms, and began to work for himself. This was in the year 1709. The first twelvemonth was passed in drawing and engraving for books.

The art was then at the lowest ebb in England. The best performers were worn out: the war with France shut the door against recruits; national acrimony and the animosity of faction diverted public attention from common arts of amusement. At that period the young engraver was recommended to sir Godfrey Kneller, whose reputation, riches, parts, and acquaintance with the first men in England supported what little taste was left for virtù, and could stamp a character wherever he deigned to patronize. My author mentions with dutiful sensibility what joy this important protection gave to his father, who had his education warmly at heart, and who dying soon after, left a widow and several children to be supported by our scarce-fledged adventurer. His own words shall tell how he felt his situation, how little the false colours of vanity gave a shining appearance to the morning of his fortune; "I was," says he, "the eldest, and then the only one that could help them; which added circumspection in my affairs then, as well as industry to the end of my life."

At intervals of leisure, he practised drawing and music, learned French and a little Italian. It appears that he afterwards acquired Dutch, having consulted in the originals all that has been written in those three languages on the art to which he was devoted.

His works began to draw attention, and he found more illustrious patronage than Kneller's. Lord Somers employed him to engrave a plate of archbishop Tillotson, and rewarded him nobly. The print will speak for itself. It was the ground-work of his reputation, and deserved to be so. Nothing like it had appeared for some years, nor at the hour of its production had he any competitors. Edelinck was dead in France, White in England, Van Gunst in Holland: "It seemed," says he himself, "as if the ball of fortune was tossed up to be a prize only for Vertue." One cannot estimate success at a
lower

lower rate, than to ascribe it to accident; the comparison is at once modest and ingenious. Shade of Scaliger, which of your works owed its glory to a dearth of genius among your cotemporaries?

In 1711 an academy of painting was instituted by the chief performers in London. Sir Godfrey Kneller was placed at the head; Vertue was one of the first members, and drew there for several years.

To the end of that reign he continued to grave portraits from Kneller, Dahl, Richardson, Jervase, Gibson, and others.

On the accession of the present royal family he published a large head of the king from a painting by Kneller. As it was the first portrait of his majesty, many thousands were sold, though by no means a laborious or valuable performance. However, it was shewn at court, and was followed by those of the prince and princess. All concurred to extend his business. In any recess from that he practised in water-colours, sometimes attempting portrait; oftener copying from ancient or curious pieces which he proposed to engrave. So early as the year 1713 he commenced his researches after the lives of our artists, and began his collections; to which he added prints by former masters, and every thing that could tend to his great work, the History of the Arts in England. Wherever he met with portraits of the performers, he spared no pains in taking copies. His journeys over England with the same view will appear in the course of his Life. These travels were assiduously employed in making catalogues, observations, and memorandums of all he saw.

His thirst after British antiquities soon led him to a congenial Mæcenas. That munificent collector, Robert Harley, second earl of Oxford, early distinguished the merit and application of Vertue. The invariable gratitude of the latter, expressed on all occasions, implies the bounty of the patron. "The earl's generous and unparalleled encouragement of my undertakings, by promoting my studious endeavours," says he, "gave me great reputation and advantage over all other professors of the same art in England." Another lesson of humility! How seldom is fame ascribed by the possessor to the countenance of others! The want of it is complained of—here is one instance,

perhaps a singular instance, where the influence is acknowledged—after the death of the benefactor.

Another patron was Heneage Finch * earl of Winchelsea, whose picture he painted, and engraved; and who, being president of the society of Antiquaries on the revival in 1717, appointed Vertue, who was a member, engraver to it. The plates published by that society from curious remains were most of them by his hand as long as he lived, are a valuable monument, and will be evidence that that body is not ufeless in the learned world.

The University of Oxford employed him for many years to engrave their almanacs. Instead of insipid emblems that deserved no longer duration than what they adorned, he introduced views of public buildings and historic events; for he seldom reaped benefit from the public, without repaying it with information.

Henry Hare, the last lord Coleraine, an antiquary and collector, as his grandfather had been, is enumerated by Vertue among his protectors. His travels were dignified by accompanying those lords. They bore the expence, which would have debarred him from visiting many objects of his curiosity if at his own charge; and he made their journeys more delightful, by explaining, taking draughts, and keeping a register of what they saw. This was the case in a journey he took with lord Coleraine to Salisbury, Wilton and Stonehenge. Of the latter he made several views: Wilton he probably saw with only English eyes. Amid legions of warriors and emperors, he fought Vandyck and Rubens, Holbein and Inigo Jones. An antique and modern virtuoso might inhabit that palace of arts, and never interfere. An ancient indeed would be a little surpris'd to find so many of his acquaintance new baptized. Earl Thomas did not, like the popes, convert pagan chiefs into christians; but many an emperor acts the part at Wilton of scarcer Cæsars.

In 1726 Vertue, with Mr. Stephens the historiographer, visited St. Albans, Verulam and Gorbambury. At the latter he made a drawing from the picture of sir Francis Bacon.

* He died in 1726.

Great part of his time was employed for lord Oxford, for whom he engraved portraits of Mr. Prior, sir Hugh Middleton, &c. For the duke of Montagu he did sir Ralph Winwood; for sir Paul Methuen, Cortez; archbishop Warham from Holbein's original at Lambeth; and for lord Burlington, Zuccherò's queen of Scots.

His prints growing numerous, many persons were desirous of having a complete collection. He made up sets for sir Thomas Frankland, for Mr. West, and for lord Oxford; the last in three large volumes, carried down to 1741, and sold after the earl's death to the late earl of Ailesbury for 50 guineas.

In 1727 he went to Wimpole for a week, and thence made a tour with lord Oxford for six weeks more, to Stamford, Burleigh, Grantham, Lincoln, and Welbeck, one of the ancient seats of the countess of Oxford, where after the earl's death she assembled the portraits of her ancestors to a prodigious number, the heroes of many an illustrious race. Thence they passed to Chatsworth, and York, where Vertue had the pleasure of conversing with Mr. Francis Place, who had been intimate with Hollar:—trifling circumstances to those who do not feel what he felt. Vertue drew up an account of this progress, and presented it to his patron.

For some years his stages were marked by noble encouragement, and by opportunities of pursuing his favourite erudition. He was invited whither he would have wished to make pilgrimages; for the love of antiquity is a kind of devotion, and Mr. Vertue had different sets of saints. In 1728 the duke of Dorset called him to Knowle. Humble before his superiors, one conceives how his respect was heightened at entering so venerable a pile, realizing to his eyes the scenes of many a waking vision. Here he drew several of the poets. But he was on fairy ground; Arcadia was on the confines; could he resist an excursion to Penshurst? One may judge how high his enthusiasm had been wrought, by the mortification he expresses at not finding there a portrait of sir Philip Sidney.

In 1730 appeared his twelve heads of poets, one of his capital works. Though poetry was but a sister art, he treated it with the affection of a relation. He had collected many notes touching the professors, and here and

there in his MSS. are some slight attempts of his own. But he was of too timid and correct a nature to soar where fancy only guides. Truth was his province; and he had a felicity uncommon to antiquaries, he never suffered his imagination to lend him eyes. Where he could not discover he never supplied.

After his poets, of which he proposed to enlarge the series, it was his purpose to give sets or classes of other eminent men. This was the first idea of illustrious heads, a hint afterwards adopted by others, and at last taken out of *his* hands, who was best furnished with materials for such a work. Some branches he executed himself with deserved applause.

About this time he again went to Oxford, copied some original paintings, and took an account of what portraits they have of founders and benefactors, and where deposited. Thence to Gloucester to draw the monument of Edward II. having for some years been collecting and making drawings of our kings, from images, miniatures or oil-paintings; a work soon after unexpectedly called forth. On his return he stopped at Burford to view the family-piece of sir Thomas More, and visited Ditchley and Blenheim. His next tour was to Cambridge, where he had been privately engaged to draw by stealth the portrait of old Mr. Thomas Baker of St. John's, then an eminent antiquary, earlier in his life the modest author of that ingenious and polished little piece, *Reflections on Learning*.

Vertue's next considerable production was the heads of Charles I. and the loyal sufferers in his cause, with their characters subjoined from Clarendon. But this was scarce finished, before appeared Rapin's History of England, "a work," says he, "that had a prodigious run, especially after translated, infomuch that it became all the conversation of the town and country; and the noise being heightened by opposition and party, it was proposed to publish it in folio by numbers—thousands were sold every week." The two brothers Knaptons engaged Vertue to accompany it with effigies of kings, and suitable decorations. This undertaking employed him for three years. A fair copy richly bound he presented to Frederic prince of Wales at Kenfington. A volume of his best works he gave to the Bodleian library.

In 1734 he renewed his journeys about England. With Roger Gale the antiquary

antiquary he went to St. Alban's, Northampton and Warwick. In 1737 the earl of Leicester carried him to Penhurst; and the end of the same year lord Oxford took him again to Oxford, to Compton Verney the seat of the master of the rolls, to Warwick, Coventry, Birmingham, and to lord Digby's at Colehill, to view the curious picture of queen Elizabeth's procession, since removed by the late lord to Sherborn-castle in Dorsetshire. They returned by Stratford (Vertue did not want true devotion to Shakespear), by Mr. Sheldon's at Weston, where are a few curious pictures, saw Blenheim, and Mr. Waller's at Beaconsfield. The next year he went into Hertfordshire to verify his ideas about Hunsdon, the subject as he thought of queen Elizabeth's progress. The old lord Digby, who from tradition believed it the queen's procession to St. Paul's after the destruction of the Armada, was displeased with Vertue's new hypothesis. The same year he saw Windsor, and Mr. Topham's collection of drawings at Eton.

He next engaged with the Knaptons to engrave some of the illustrious heads, the greater part of which were executed by Houbraken, and undoubtedly surpassed those of Vertue. Yet his performances by no means deserved to be condemned as they were by the undertakers, and the performer laid aside. Some of Houbraken's were carelessly done, especially of the moderns; but Vertue had a fault to dealers, which was a merit to the public: his scrupulous veracity could not digest imaginary portraits, as are some of those engraved by Houbraken, who living in Holland, ignorant of our history, uninquisitive into the authenticity of what was transmitted to him, engraved whatever was sent. I will mention two instances; the heads of Carr earl of Somerset and secretary Thurloe are not only not genuine, but have not the least resemblance to the persons they pretend to represent. Vertue was incommode; he loved truth.

Towards the end of 1738 he made another tour with lord Oxford through Kent and Suffex, visiting Rochester, Canterbury, Chichester, Portsmouth, Southampton and Winchester; and the principal seats, as Petworth, Goodwood, Stansted, and Coudray—the last alone worth an antiquary's journey. Of all these he made various sketches and notes; always presenting a duplicate of his observations to lord Oxford.

He had yet another pursuit, which I have not mentioned; no man had
studied

studied English coins more; part of his researches have appeared in his account of the two Simons.

He still wanted to visit the east of England. In 1739 his wish was gratified; lord Coleraine, who had an estate at Walpole in the borders of Norfolk in Lincolnshire, carried him by Wantsted, Moutham, Gosfield, St. Edmundsbury, sir Andrew Fountain's and Houghton, to Lynn, and thence to Walpole; in which circuit they saw many churches and other seats.

In 1740 he published his proposals for the commencement of a very valuable work, his historic prints, drawn with extreme labour and fidelity, and executed in a most satisfactory manner. Queen Elizabeth's progress he copied exactly in water-colours for lord Oxford, who was so pleased with it, that he sent Mr. Vertue and his wife a present of about 60 ounces of plate.—But thus arrived at the summit of his modest wishes, that is, rewarded for illustrating English history—his happiness was suddenly dashed; he lost his noble friend the earl, who died June 16, 1741. "Death," says he emphatically, "put an end to that life that had been the support, cherisher, and comfort of many, many others, who are left to lament—but none more heartily than Vertue!"

So struck was the poor man with this signal misfortune, that for two years there is an hiatus in his story—he had not spirits even to be minute.

In 1743 he was a little revived by acquiring the honour of the duke of Norfolk's notice, for whom he engraved the large plate of the earl of Arundel and his family. For his grace too he collected two volumes of the works of Hollar, chiefly of those graved from the Arundelian collection; and having formed another curious volume of drawings from portraits, monuments, pedigrees, &c. of the house of Howard, the duke made him a present of a bank-note of 100*l*.

His merit and modesty still raised him friends. The countess dowager of Oxford alleviated his loss of her lord: their daughter the duchess of Portland he mentions with equal gratitude; the late duke of Richmond and lord Burlington did not forget him among the artists they patronised. But in 1749 he found a yet more exalted protector. The late prince of Wales sent
for

for him, and finding him master of whatever related to English antiquity, and particularly conversant in the history of king Charles's collection, which his royal highness wished as far as possible to re-assemble, he often had the honour of attending the prince, was shown his pictures by himself, and accompanied him to the royal palaces, and was much employed in collecting prints for him, and taking catalogues, and sold him many of his own miniatures and prints.

He had now reason to flatter himself with permanent fortune. He saw his fate linked with the revival of the arts he loved; he was useful to a prince who trod in the steps of the accomplished Charles; no Hugh Peters threatened havoc to the growing collection—but a silent and unexpected foe drew a veil over this scene of comfort, as it had over the former. Touched, yet submissive, he says, after painting the prince's qualifications, and the hopes that his country had conceived of him,—“but alas, Mors ultima rerum! O God, thy will be done! Unhappy day, Wednesday March 20th, 1751!” His trembling hand inserts a few more memorandums of prints he engraved; and then he concludes his memoirs in melancholy and disjointed sentences, thus,—“Observations on my indifferent health—and weakness of sight increasing—and loss of noble friends, and the encouragement from them less and less daily—this year—and worse in appearance begins with 1752.”

He lost his friends; but his piety, mildness, and ingenuity never forsook him. He laboured almost to the last, solicitous to leave a decent competence to a wife* with whom he had lived many years in tender harmony. His volumes of the works of Hollar and the Simons I have mentioned here and elsewhere. The rest of his works will appear in the ensuing List.

He died July 24th, 1756, and was buried in the cloisters of Westminster-abbey on the 30th following, with this epitaph:

Here lyes the body of George Vertue
Late engraver
And fellow of the Society of Antiquaries,
Who was born in London 1684,
And departed this life on the 24th of July 1756.

* Margaret his wife survived him, and died March 17, 1776, in the 76th year of her age. His brother James, who followed the same profession at Bath, died about 1765.

With manners gentle, and a grateful heart,
 And all the genius of the Graphic Art,
 His fame shall each succeeding artist own
 Longer by far than monuments of stone.

Two other friends—not better poets indeed—inferred the following lines in the papers, on viewing his monument :

Proud artist, cease those deeds to paint on stone,
 Which far above the praise of man have shone :
 Why should your skill so vainly thus be spent ?
 For Vertue ne'er can need a monument.

Another.

Troubled in mind, and press'd with grievous smart,
 Her happy mansions left the Graphic Art,
 And thus to Science spoke : " What ! can it be ?
 " Is famous Vertue dead ?—Then so are we."

These are well-meant hyperboles on a man who never used any. He was simple, modest, and scrupulous ; so scrupulous, that it gave a peculiar slowness to his delivery ; he never uttered his opinion hastily, nor hastily assented to that of others. As he grudged no time, no industry, to inform himself, he thought they might bestow a little too, if they wished to know. Ambitious to distinguish himself, he took but one method, application. Acquainted with all the arts practised by his profession to usher their productions to the public, he made use of none. He only lamented he did not deserve success, or if he missed it when deserved, it was some merit that carried such bashful integrity as far as it did go.

He was a strict Roman Catholic ; yet even those principles could not warp his attachment to his art, nor prevent his making it subservient to the glory of his country. I mention this as a singular instance. His partiality to Charles the first did not indeed clash much with his religion ; but who has preserved more monuments of queen Elizabeth ? Whatever related to her story he treated with a patriot fondness ; her heroes were his. His was the first thought of engraving the tapestry in the house of lords ; his a project of

giving a series of protestant bishops—for *his* candour could reconcile toleration and popery.

His collection of books, prints, miniatures and drawings were sold by auction May 17, 1757. Lord Besborough bought there his copies in water-colours of the kings of England, as I did a large piece of Philip and Mary from the original at Woburn, which he intended for his series of historic prints. There too I purchased his drawings taken from Holbein; and since his death, the best piece he ever painted, a small whole-length of the queen of Scots in water-colours.

The length of this account I flatter myself will be excused, as it contains a few curious particulars, which are not foreign to the subject, and which concomitantly illustrate the history of arts.