THE STUDY OF HISTORICAL PORTRAITS

By H. M. HAKE

The history of the study of historical portraits has not been attempted: in the minds of many such study is associated with the makers of portraits rather than with the sitters or with the limited number of specialized collections and catalogues of historical portraits which are not widely known and are troublesome of access; this is natural enough because drawings, sculpture, paintings, engravings are mainly studied in terms of artists or regions or schools and not in terms of subjects. Still the body of work now available makes it more possible to advance a plea for wider attention to a class of document which can illumine biography and provide a commentary on the quality and durability of individual fame. These notes are confined to the history of the study of portraits in our own country and before describing the course of this study it will be helpful to advance a main thesis, which is this: that there is with us an abiding and passionate interest in historic persons whence the detailed descriptions of notable men which have been handed down in writings[1] and in images; the strength of the interest may vary from time to time but it abides. The key to its understanding is the Institution or the House; a concern for recording the features of heads of Institutions and heads of families explains the peculiar temper of the British school of portraiture. The considerable body of catalogue material and engraving which began to accumulate during the eighteenth century and the founding of a National Portrait Gallery in the nineteenth stand witness.

The man that first sets out to codify traditional habits of record and point the way of study is James Granger, rector of Shiplake; he is not the first person to think of extra illustrating historical works but his

[1] A fine example of the written record is Bede's report of the appearance of Paulinus, one of the companions of St. Augustine; he got it from one who had it from a man that Paulinus baptized in the Trent. *Hist. Eccles.*, II, cap. xvi.

name is associated with the practice because his book began to bring system into this part of biographical study.[1] It is not an easy book to use but it is a book that repays usage; the conception is original and catholic; he calls the book the Biographical History of England, divides his history by reigns and his characters into twelve social classes from sovereigns to curiosities and includes every character of note of whom a portrait is recorded; he even includes contemporary foreign potentates and their leading subjects. The greater part of the portraits he describes are prints and because in his day the engraving processes were the only method of reproducing paintings and drawings he cannot be tempted to forget the secondary or translated aspect of his material; therefore where he can he records the existence of firsthand or original pieces, their nature and present ownership.

His habit of giving the inscriptions which appear on the prints is also noteworthy. The book ran to five successively revised editions between 1769 and 1824 and to its example and its effect on collectors a number of illustrated historical publications owe their existence.[2]

It would be interesting to know what was the immediate inspiration of Granger's life work. There is no doubt that such a work was needed for the habit of illustrating historical works had been growing and the search for authentic portraits must have been both laborious and inconclusive. One attempt had been made by Joseph Ames, who published in 1748 his catalogue of English heads, a mine of information but very tough in working.[3]

The inadequacy of pioneer attempts has before now inspired the compilation of classic works of reference and these in their turn have encouraged

[1] Copies of historical works provided with a series of drawings done from portraits have survived from at least the first half of the eighteenth century. See Vertue's note on Mr. Bulfinch, the printseller, *c.* 1720. *Walpole Soc.*, xviii, p. 71.

[2] Granger died in 1776. There is no very clear account of the way in which his book was continued and revised, but see Allibone for an informative article, and also Lowndes. A volume of Granger's correspondence, notably with Cole, was published in 1805.

[3] *A Catalogue of English Heads: or an account of about two thousand Prints describing what is peculiar to each . . . .* by Joseph Ames. The order is alphabetical only as far as the first letter of each name, because Ames is describing the contents of a single collection contained in 4 folio and 6 quarto volumes which dominate his scheme.

attempts in simplification which are not always improvements.

One man set himself to improve on Granger. This was Henry Bromley, who compiled a catalogue of engraved British portraits down to the year 1793; his preface is a *locus* for the effect of Granger's publication on the collecting and study of prints, but shows how his contemporaries found Granger's book troublesome to use. Bromley's catalogue is, as we say, rationalized, there are no biographies, descriptions are cut to a minimum, the inscriptions are no longer given and the painters' and engravers' names appear in separate columns on an easily apprehended page of letterpress—in fact what a student might call a handy and dangerous book whose plan was nevertheless adopted by the British Museum for the Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits, evidence of the extent to which Bromley had become a main source of quick reference. Nevertheless the British Museum collection itself is disposed in periods and classes on the model of Granger.

To resume the main thread: Ames, Granger and Bromley show us the abiding public interest in images seeking for order and guidance at a moment when the secondary or reproductive material had reached sufficient bulk to make some such attempt necessary.

A series of engraved heads with printed commentary was a well-established practice on the continent in the seventeenth century but this form of publication did not come into its own in this country until the latter half of the eighteenth century and the earlier nineteenth, in what we can call the post-Granger period of portrait study, in the form of series of older historical portraits on the one hand and series of contemporary worthies on the other. There are many examples reflecting various currents of fashionable interest and learning.[1]

A new stage is reached in the work of Edmund Lodge, who began life in the army, turned to historical studies and made a deserved reputation by his

[1] See *B.M. Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits*, vi, 1925. Appendix for one line list of Books with portraits mentioned in the text of the Catalogue.

publications of select documents ; as a member of the College of Arms his interest in family history led him to publish a series of engravings from historical portraits with biographies attached.[1] Not only is he concerned to describe each person's claim to fame but also to search out what he considers to be the most authentic portrait or document.

One of Lodge's contemporaries, Thomas Kerrich, fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and University Librarian, also contributed to these studies in a similar direction, that is to say, he was concerned to select as well as to record.

He was not only a student of historical portraits but an accomplished portrait draughtsman ; he made notes which are preserved in the British Museum and at Magdalene College on pictures in private collections and he bequeathed to the Society of Antiquaries their collection of portraits of English Kings. Many of these had originally belonged to the Paston family and the lithograph illustrations to the fifth volume of the first edition of the *Paston Letters* were selected and drawn by Kerrich himself.[2]

Evidence of growing general interest in historical portraits is next revealed by two public exhibitions which were held in London by the British Institution in 1820 and 1846.[3] Finally, and also in 1846, Lord Mahon (later 5th Earl Stanhope) made public in the House of Commons his idea for a National Portrait Gallery and ten years later in the House of Lords achieved its foundation.[4]

The gradual collection of the present series of historical portraits into a public gallery and the organization of the means of continuing study is a

[1] *Portraits of Illustrious Personages of Great Britain*, 3 vols. folio 1821 and additional vol. 1834. A number of editions of smaller format from 1823 onwards. See Allibone.

[2] It was published in 1823, more than 30 years after the fourth volume. See advertisement, p. xxxiii, for a note on these portraits.

[3] The 1820 exhibition is of 'Distinguished Persons in the History and Literature of the United Kingdom' ; that of 1846 of 'Illustrious and Eminent Persons in History, Literature and Art' and contains a few foreign portraits. The 1820 catalogue is provided with biographies : 1846 has none.

[4] See *Hansard*, March 4th, 1856; for Lord Stanhope's speech. No detailed record of the earlier stages of his idea seems to have survived but the portico of the present gallery which was not built till the early nineties may provide an indication, for it carries three portrait medallions—Lord Stanhope in the centre, with Carlyle and Macaulay either side.

separate story;[1] Lord Stanhope, the first Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and Sir George Scharf, the first Director, are its architects; the vision of the one and the untiring industry and devotion of the other have been ever present to their successors.

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These notes have been concerned with the story of the systematic study of historical portraits which takes shape in the eighteenth century with Granger. They would not begin to be adequate without some attention to the workings of that abiding interest in images in pre-Grangerian times. We could go a fair way back but it is more sensible not to attempt to elucidate isolated indications and clues but to search first for the immediate forerunners and confine ourselves to a very few people who can be described as consciously aware of the business of discovering for themselves and handing on to posterity the images of men. They merit longer treatment but must be disposed of here in a series of remarks.

Henry Holland, a son of Philemon Holland (who was a learned physician and schoolmaster in Coventry), published the first two engraved series of historical portraits in this country in 1618 and 1620.[2] Previous to this venture he had published a book on the Monuments in St. Pauls which is relevant in considering John Weever and his book on ancient funeral monuments of 1631.[3] Both these men are able and

[1] The main contributions to these studies after the year 1850 are in the successive catalogues of the National Portrait Gallery, especially that of 1888 which represents Scharf's accumulated learning; the three historical portrait exhibitions of the Department of Science and Art at South Kensington, 1866-68; the three exhibitions of Oxford Portraits, 1904-6; the Exhibition of Early English Portraiture at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1909; Mrs. R. L. Poole's Catalogue of Oxford Portraits, 1912-25. See these catalogues *passim*. Besides exhibitions of portraits a number of catalogues of the older family collections were compiled in this period, e.g. Woburn, Blenheim, Knowsley, all by Sir George Scharf. There are also two indispensable modern catalogues of engraved portraits—that of Chaloner Smith for the British mezzotints 1878-83 and the British Museum general catalogue 1908 to 1925, in six volumes.

[2] These he called Basiliωlogia and Herωologia respectively; see Lowndes for description and note on a particular copy of the Herωologia, (or series of national heroes), which contained notes on the provenance of each portrait; see also Colvin and Hind: *Early Engraving and Engravers in England*, pub. British Museum, 1905, pp. 162, 169. The Latin text of the Herωologia introduction and biographies attached to each portrait merit study.

[3] He constantly uses the expression 'portraiture', meaning the image or effigy on a tomb. To us the word more readily suggests a two dimensional likeness, but that is a comparatively late sophistication in

conscientious antiquaries and Holland the more modern.[1] There is information in their writings about contemporary awareness to portraits and image-making in general and further illumination may be found in Henry Peacham, who is more modern still than Holland and who seems to have been employed or patronized by the famous collector Lord Arundel.[2]

We begin to be on firm ground with Lord Chancellor Clarendon who deliberately collected a portrait gallery of famous men ; Evelyn records a visit to Clarendon House in 1668 and also that he then drew up a list of what he or Lord Clarendon defined as 'learned and heroic persons of England' whose portraits might be added to the collection. More than twenty years later he wrote a letter to Pepys on the subject of Pepys' collection of portraits of worthies for his library (Pepys having expressed a wish to include Evelyn's portrait) and in it once more described the visit and the advice he gave.[3]

By the end of the seventeenth century the body of engraved portraits available began to be considerable and the existence and historic interest of institutional and house collections more generally realized. In the next half century the employment of professional engravers and draughtsmen both to find out and to engrave or draw portraits for historical and family purposes (for reference that is, or publication) begins to be an accepted practice.[4]

this country where a demand for a likeness to the deceased on his tomb seems likely to have preceded attempts to render the living in form suited for display in the family house. See Albert Hartshorne: *Portraiture in recumbent effigies*, Exeter 1899 (36 pp. & plates).

[1] It is perhaps worth remarking that Thomas Fuller in his more widely known work on the Worthies of England does not in his text show any obvious interest in their surviving images. The work was published in 1662 after his death and contains a few engraved plates.

[2] Acknowledgment is made to a thesis by Miss Margaret C. Pitman on Henry Peacham. For summary see *Journal of the Institute of Historical Research*, xi (1934), p. 189.

[3] Diary 1668, December 20th. Correspondence Evelyn to Pepys, August 12th, 1689.

[4] George Vertue, the engraver and antiquary, is the most distinguished example; see his autobiography in *Walpole Society*, xviii.