



## Little Trips Among The Eminent.

BENJAMIN WEST.

(1738-1820.)

In art, as in other things, it sometimes happens that a man who really possesses comparatively little genius, is received in his own day with great acclamation, showered with riches and honors, and proclaimed among the great for all time. It usually requires the perspective of the years to set one in his proper place, the consensus of opinion of the critics of generations to determine who is he upon whom the gods have condescended to bestow the spark of their own fire.

Among those so mistakenly honored was Benjamin West, whose work is now considered somewhat tame and uninspired, although hailed during the lifetime of its creator as equal to that of the great masters. The life-story of the man is, however, interesting enough to merit a place among these brief records of the artists of Britain.

Although born in America, West was of English descent, his grandparents having turned Quaker and emigrated to the New World in 1667. Here, then, at Springfield, Pennsylvania, the lad destined to be one of the most honored artists of his time was born, tenth child in the family, October 10th, 1738.

His aptitude for drawing soon showed itself. When six years of age he was set, one day, to keep the flies off his sister's baby. Whether he succeeded in his task is not told,—probably the baby suffered, for, to while away the time, young Benjamin drew its portrait, with such success, too, that his father immediately declared that he would one day be very eminent.

Young West's immediate prospects, however, were somewhat handicapped, since at this time there were neither great painters, paintings, nor even schools of art in America. Strangely enough, his first real help came from a party of travelling Indians who chanced to camp, for a time, near his home. Greatly pleased with the drawings the little lad, now but eight years of age, made of the birds, wild fruit and flowers that they knew so well, the red men taught him the simple secrets of their craft in basket-making, showing him how to make red and yellow stains. His mother gave him some indigo, so he was now equipped with the three primary colors. To keep himself supplied with brushes was not so easy, but when the will exists the way is usually found. About this time the family cat began to present such a distressingly ragged appearance that it was thought that she was diseased, and there was talk of disposing of her. To save her, the boy confessed, and displayed his brushes, tufts of the cat's hair bound to little bits of wood.

No doubt, hearing of this, a cousin sent the lad a box of paints and pencils, brushes, canvas, and six engravings,—the rarest gift ever! So delighted was the child that he could not sleep. He got up at dawn and began copying one of the engravings in the garret. School might go to the winds. Back again to the garret after breakfast, after luncheon—and so on, steadily and secretly for several days, then a visit from the irate schoolmaster brought a jar to the new bliss. A search for the lad was instituted, and finally, his mother found him, angry enough that he should have deceived her so. Her anger, however, soon subsided, when she saw what he had done, for from two of the engravings he had composed and painted a picture differing substantially from either. He was

kissed and made to beg pardon from the schoolmaster, and so the storm passed.

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When West was nine years of age, a relative took him to Philadelphia and introduced him to a painter of some local repute, Williams by name. On seeing the paintings the latter had made, the lad burst into tears.

"What books do you read?" asked Williams, adding, "You should read the lives of great men."

"I read the Bible and the Testament," replied the little lad, "and I know the history of Adam, and Moses, and David, and Solomon, and the Apostles."

"You are a fine boy," said Williams, "and ought to be encouraged. I will send you two books."

These books—on art—decided the lad to become a painter.

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The first pictures that he sold were done on three poplar boards that a carpenter had given him, and he received a dollar apiece for them from a neighbor. A few years later, when about fifteen years of age, he went to visit at the town of Lancaster, and while there people flocked to have their portraits painted by the young prodigy. On his return, his future course was made a subject of anxious deliberation by his parents, and, indeed, the whole community; it was not every day that the little Quaker settlement turned out an artist. A meeting of the Friends was called, and all sat in solemn conclave, with young West before them. Addresses were given, then the women arose and kissed him, and the men, one by one, laid their hands on his head. The ceremonial made a strong impression upon West. He felt that he had been solemnly consecrated to a great career,

and Alhani, who held out both hands to greet him, asking, "Is he black or white?" "He is very fair," replied Lord Grantham. "As fair as I am?" queried the Cardinal, much to the amusement of those present.

When the youth went to see for the first time the great Italian works of art, thirty of the most magnificent equipages in Rome, filled with noblemen and others anxious to see the effect upon him, accompanied him. The Apollo was first tried on him, and when the case in which the statue was enclosed was opened, the exclamation flew to West's lips, "My God—a young Mohawk warrior!" and he proceeded immediately to describe to an interested audience the grace and dignity of the American forest rovers.

To prove his right to be received on an equal footing with other artists, West now painted a portrait of Lord Grantham, which was placed in the gallery of Crespiigny, and much admired. Every one was ready to help him; friends in America and elsewhere supplied him with money in plenty; at Parma, Florence and Bologna, he was elected member of the Academy; and finally he was asked to appear before the reigning Prince, which he did, in true Quaker fashion, with his hat on—much to the consternation of the courtiers.

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In June, 1763, the young artist arrived in London, and here again a warm welcome awaited him. He was introduced to Reynolds and Wilson, and soon set up a studio for himself in Covent Garden. With no competitors in historical painting in England, he soon received many commissions, for the sake of his personality as well as that of his work. His skating at the Serpentine was an advertisement—for skating was then but little known in London; more-

this picture will occasion a revolution in art."

Subsequently, West painted many historical pictures, most of which were on very large canvases, for the King (George III.); also a series on the progress of revealed religion, which, after a solemn conclave of church dignitaries, found place in His Majesty's chapel, the sum of £21,705 being paid him for the portion of the series, 28 in number, which he completed.

On the death of Reynolds, in 1792, he was chosen as President of the Royal Academy, a position which he held for 28 years. He was also offered a Knighthood, but refused on the ground that he could not afford to leave his posterity enough to maintain the rank.

But to West as to most others, a duller day—but for him a short one—drew near. When the mind of the King became clouded, his strongest ally was lost. The work on the Windsor Chapel was suspended, and his salary of £1,000 a year stopped.

Again he gave himself up to painting for the public, and, at the age of 65, completed an immense canvas, "Christ Healing the Sick," primarily intended for a Quaker Hospital in Philadelphia. The picture, however, was placed on exhibition, immense crowds crushed upon one another to see it, and it was finally sold to the British Institute for 3,000 guineas, a replica being sent to Philadelphia.

After this, the artist took to painting other huge canvases, but they did not sell. After his wife's death, in 1817, his own health broke down, and he sank rapidly, although he was calm and cheerful to the last. He died March 11th, 1820, in his eighty-second year, and was buried near the grave of Reynolds in St. Paul's Cathedral.

The pictures now considered his best are, "Death on the Pale Horse," "The Death of Wolfe," "The Battle of La Hogue."

## The Bay Chaleur Portage

By Margaret Grant MacWhirter.

Half a century ago, the District of Gaspé—as it was then called—was a very out-of-the-way corner of British North America. In winter it was virtually shut off from communication with the outer world. The inhabitants in the various settlements, with few exceptions, raised only enough beef for their own consumption. There was no outside market, and little, if any demand, as in those days it was not used in the lumber-woods,—pork being the staple. Every fall a number of farmers would cross the bay with fat porkers to New Brunswick, and receive in exchange their winter's supplies of groceries and clothing.

With the advent of the I. C. R., a brighter day dawned for Bonaventure County; at last there was a market, and good wages. When winter came, the vessels carrying supplies were compelled to go into winter quarters. The workmen employed on the railway at Campbellton, Matapedia, and along the line, must be fed; so the supplies were drawn by horses the whole extent of the county. Many persons were engaged in this profitable traffic, there being often as many as twenty teams on the road at once, loaded with fish, beef, pork, butter, eggs, hay, oats, etc.

The distance was long, a number travelling as much as one hundred and forty miles. The cold and difficulties endured on this long, exposed road, along the bleak northern shore of Bay de Chaleur, would make interesting reading. While thinking how much we of the present day owe to these pioneers, I had the good fortune to meet a man who was



Port Daniel.

On the Bay Chaleur Portage.

and henceforth, for the most important work of his life he chose to paint almost exclusively historical and religious subjects—"subjects of rectitude and purity."

After the death of his mother, which occurred during his eighteenth year, he established himself in Philadelphia, where he received so many commissions that he was enabled to save up some money for future travel and study. Later, he went to New York, where, eventually, he got a chance of a passage to Italy on a boat laden with wheat and flour.

In July, 1760, he arrived in Rome. In those days, an American artist was a great novelty on the Continent, and everywhere the greatest interest was evinced in West, even noblemen outdoing one another in showing him kindness. He was brought before the aged and blind and very dark-complexioned Cardi-

over—an American!—A Quaker!—Why not have a painting by this wonder? And so quickly the noblemen, and even the king, became his patrons.

West was one of the founders of the Royal Academy, and, in one particular at least, exercised an important influence upon art. Before his time all Englishmen in historic pictures had been costumed as Greeks and Romans. West, perceiving the ridiculousness of this, determined to work according to his own judgment, and, when painting his "Death of Wolfe" (now in the Dominion Art Gallery, Ottawa), attired his soldiers in modern garb. The innovation was sufficiently startling, but its advisability was confirmed when Reynolds, after studying it a second time for half an hour, said: "West has conquered.—I retract my objections. I foresee that