

Constable in Love

Love, Landscape, Money and the Making of a Great Painter

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John Constable was late in flowering. For seven long years he courted Mary Bicknell, twelve years his junior, before he was finally able to marry her¹. The match was opposed on both sides of the family, although the opposition was much more determined on her side, than on his, where only the father had some mild objections, while his mother supported it. Constable was born in 1776 a resident of East Bergholt in East Anglia, where his father conducted a successful milling business, and his bride to be consequently born in 1788. They had met before, but only in 1809, when she was twenty-one and he having reached the mature age of thirty-three did they declare their mutual love. What was the problem?

It was a period of great social mobility as well as great social and financial inequality, often within the same family. Golding Constable, the father of Constable, did not approve of his son's painterly ambitions, being a businessman himself, but could of course tolerate it as long as he was able to make a decent living out of it. There were no indications by his early thirties that he would do so. Constable Sr was not willing to support his son and a burgeoning family, John would have to fend for himself. On the side of Mary, there was more formidable opposition, led by her maternal grandfather an old but very vital man, a certain Reverend and Dr Durand Rhudde, who was the rector of the parish of East Bergholt and rumored to have considerable wealth². There was also her father Charles Bicknell, a successful lawyer with connections to the court of the Regent, whose affairs, among others, he was involved with. John Constable, was simply not a good enough match for his daughter. His social standing was not up to par, being a painter, although a painter could of course be a gentleman too, if part of the Royal Academy, membership to which Constable would appeal unsuccessfully for many years. In short the drama is one which would have been quite at home within the covers of a Jane Austen novel. In fact the characters seem to come out of one. And the author - Martin Gayford, an art and music critic, with a couple of artist biographies under his belt, does indeed make a big point of comparing the time and life of Constable with that of Austen, particularly as portrayed and mirrored in her writing. He goes so far, as to make constant analogies, between say the characters of Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram and those of his book, and to speculate whether Jane Austen actually saw the same performance of Richard III in the newly erected Covent Gardens, as did John and Maria.

The irony is that Constable was no pauper, he had connections and wealthy relatives, who, however, as is usually the case did not let him share in any ways in their bounty,

¹ The book manages though to keep up the suspense

² (1734-1819) son to John Rhudde (1704-1778) another reverend with a literary reputation during the 18th century

except for the occasional crumb. But divisions in society being so unforgiven and mostly based on wealth, meant that the marriage of a woman, might literally mean the difference, if not between life and death, so at least between misery and comfort. This is of course the overriding concern that give to the novels of Austen their plot, and ignorance of which, make them incomprehensible. Austen is a mordant commentator, but more on social mores than society at large, which she seems to take for granted. The same conservative spirit characterizes also the life of Constable, and it is this spirit which retroactively have given the age this romantic aura, so well adapted to recent television costume dramas. But in truth those were not idyllic time, there was unrest abroad, and unrest at home. The Napoleonic Wars were raging on the Continents, a fact which famously gets no mention in Austen, and at home there were labor unrest at the onset of the mechanization which would result in the Industrial Revolution. There were, partly as a result, widespread agrarian unemployment, with riots, some very close to Constables parental home in East Bergholt. Prices of food were going up, the Parliamentary concern of which is known as the Corn Law, as well as protests against enclosures and the disappearing of Commons. The mood of the Agrarian poor, was however one of conservatism, they wanted to keep the old ways. And this was also the prevailing mood of Constable.

Early in his youth Constable was painted by his erstwhile friend Reinagle (the two soon fell out on matters of painting, Constable had set opinions and was not very flexible socially), and the portrait shows a very handsome young man, with striking and regular features. Closer scrutiny though, reveals a certain softness, almost effeminate, with the effect of whiskers being cancelled by innocently rosy cheeks. The voluminous correspondence that provides the basis on which this book was written, shows a moody young man, getting on in years, frustrated prone to melancholy and despondency, more and more shunning civil society, which he finds more and more shallow and inconsequential. He had one passion in life, apart from his love with Maria, namely that of painting to which he took early on in his life. The pre-vocational phase of a painter is usually extended, as it takes time to find your own place and style, and most never find it, thus his continued lack of recognition in his thirties, is also a testimony to his stubborn commitment to his own originality.

What was original about Constable was his insistence that one should paint from nature, anything else was just mannerism. Everything has to be based on your own studies and observations, never picked up second hand. This would later inspire many French painters, from Delacroix to the Impressionists later in the century, and it was in France where he met with the deepest and most widespread recognition, and the author regrets that Constable did not travel to France to cash in on it in terms of wealth and fame. But Constable was deeply wedded to the soil, to the particular English landscape, and more than anything else, to his childhood home, the East-Anglian environs of East Bergholt. This bespeaks an almost excessive fixation on childhood. What charmed and fascinated Constable was to depict the settings and modes of an old agricultural society which was on its last leg. He remarked, that what makes the beauty of objects, are the associations they are laden with, making short shrift on more abstract notions of beauty and sublimity, advocated by say Edmund Burke. No wonder that the landscapes around his childhood home exerted such an irresistible attraction to him, that he kept returning

there summer after summer, abandoning his London abode. He spent his days roaming the fields, doing sketches and studies, acquiring a more and more intimate grasp. Not surprisingly, apart from his admiration of Claude Lorraine his inspiration mainly derived from the Old Dutch Masters such as Ruisdael, who combined landscape paintings with scenes of daily life. One does not just paint landscapes, Constable explained, one paints moods and atmosphere, and the traditional rural life during which he had grown up, must have exercised a powerful emotional pull, wishing for its timelessness, a dream that lies at the heart of conservatism.

The book concentrates on seven years of frustrating courting. Constable in constant struggle to succeed as a painter, with his own principles and visions intact, as well as secure the woman he loved, but with whom he was hardly allowed to carry on a correspondence, much less to drop in on her, the door being slammed in his face, by his prospective future in law³. How many times did he not loiter in St. James' Park, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, maybe even catch her attention and having the privilege to exchange a few guarded words with her. It almost became an obsession, not so surprising in a character so stubborn, and threatened to lead to serious neglect of his painting, the one activity through which he may entertain hope to win her against the obstacles cast by society. Did not his father, the successful and hardworking miller, caution him against laziness and imprint the importance of diligence, virtues of which he was himself familiar. In particular the father thought his pictures were unfinished, a sentiment actually shared by a more knowledgeable expertise, and which until foreign appreciation emerged, would work against his quest for recognition.

Things happen. Mary's mother, always in delicate health, continues her physical decline and eventually dies. Her father, the reverend Dr Rhudde, gives a sermon in which he cautions against exaggerated grief. No doubt commendable on general Stoic principles, but on the occasion of the death of his own daughter a bit heartless, as the author remarks. More surprisingly Constable's own mother dies. She suffers a mild stroke, which, however, has complications which a few weeks later leads to her death. Her son is too busy involved with the submission to the Royal Academy that he does not show up for the funeral, but nevertheless is able to persuade his family of the necessity not to do so. Maybe he was too stricken by the death of her mother to face it, the author speculates. His father, who has had a few brushes with death, but having rallied, dies not long thereafter, which of course on one hand means a nice inheritance for Constable, but for that to be paid out, the selling of the parental home is necessitated, severing his strong ties with the village. Dr Rhudde, an octogenarian of unusual vitality, goes on living undiminished by age. In fact, in a somewhat ironic twist in the unfolding of the drama, he shows great indignation, when the rich maternal uncle of Constable, fails to leave anything for Constable in his will. That by a man, who has for a long time threatened to cut out Maria out of his inheritance would she have the temerity of marrying her ardent suitor. But in the end the couple decide to go through with it anyway. Letters are sent both to Rhudde and his son-in-law, Maria's father Bicknell announcing what is about to happen, but they are ignored. The wedding takes place in the church St-Martins-in-the-Fields, familiar to all habitués of Trafalgar Square,

³ As the author remarks, this successful lawyer, with the very best of connections, and a regular attendee at dinners and member of important committees, will chiefly be recalled by posterity, for the shabby way he treated an upcoming artist.

and no family is attending. Marias, because of choice, Johns, because of short notice. The ceremony is conducted by John Fisher, a friend of Constable, and the nephew of the Bishop of Salisbury. The couple settles down for what seems to be a very happy domestic scene. There is an immediate pregnancy, which softens the heart of the old Rector, getting his first great grandchild, remarking that he now owes additional respect as a Patriarch. Soon thereafter he goes into mental and physical decline, looking for his long since dead wife, and dies.

Domestic happiness would not last too long though. Maria suffers eight pregnancies during twelve years of which six results in births. Her dormant consumption, during the winters of her twenties she was regularly stricken by chest infections, eventually breaks out and she dies at the age of forty in 1828. Although fame and recognition have come Constables way before, maybe the sweetest - full membership in the Royal Academy, is awarded to a widower. He dies suddenly at the age of 61 in 1837, most likely from a heart attack.

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