

Constable, the Forgotten Genius

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MICHAEL K. TARVER RESIDENCE

By Bonnie CRONE

New Orleans is a town rich in French heritage. However, few people realize that it was actually a French Canadian, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, who founded the famous city. Bienville's father, Charles Le Moyne, was a native of Dieppe who had emigrated to Canada when a young man and had made a fortune in trading. He was versed in Indian languages and received many estates in feoffment. One of these, Longueuil, was opposite Montreal, and when the King raised him to nobility he took the title of Sieur de Longueuil. Each of his twelve sons was given estates named for places in Normandy and New France and adopted these names as titles. Most of them achieved renown in Canadian French colonial history, while two of them, Iberville and Bienville, played important rôles in the early history of Louisiana.

Iberville became a great hero in Canada. He entered the French navy, rapidly rising to a command, and during the War of the League of Augsburg was one of the few French commanders who fought the English with success. With a fleet of five ships he defeated a small English fleet in Hudson Bay and removed the English menace from the waters of northern Canada. A later victory off the coast of Newfoundland further enhanced his reputation. Becoming restless after the end of the war, he revived explorer La Salle's old plans for establishing a colony on the lower Mississippi, and was soon called to France, where King Louis XIV appointed him to lead the expedition which was to found Louisiana.

Iberville set sail from La Rochelle with a crew of Canadians on two frigates, the *Badine* and the *Marin*. His brother, Bienville, accompanied him and on March 2, 1699, the French Canadian explorers discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River. Seven years later, in 1706, Iberville died of a yellow fever attack.

Bienville continued to explore the area, although it was not until 1718 that he led a party of about 50 men up the Mississippi River to a spot near Lake Pontchartrain, where he landed and began to clear the ground of trees and brush and to build crude shelters. The new town was officially named Nouvelle-Orléans, or New Orleans, in honour of the King of France's grand-uncle, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, Regent of France.

A French engineer, Adrien de Pauger, arrived in the colony in 1720, and he laid out the initial settlement which was called Vieux-Carré, or French Quarter as it is known to-day. The city was designed like a French mediaeval town with a central square facing the Mississippi, Place d'Armes, now called Jackson Square. A church, government office, and official residences fronted the square. The streets of the Vieux-Carré were laid out in a grid from the square and the area comprised approximately 100 blocks.

The first homes were crudely built of ship cypress slabs and palmetto thatched. However, later buildings were much more elaborate. The warm-spirited Frenchmen lived good lives importing everything from fine chandeliers to opera singers to the "New France" as New Orleans was called.

The French ruled until 1762, when Louisiana was ceded to Spain. Although the French always steadfastly clung to the original Vieux-Carré while the Spanish, Americans, and other settlers began branching out in a crescent

around the city, the French influence did become somewhat intermingled with the other settlers. Napoleon regained Louisiana for France in 1803 and sold it to the United States later the same year for \$15 million.

Two devastating fires in 1788 and 1794 practically wiped out the original French Quarter. On Good Friday in 1788, when all pious natives lighted candles, a breeze lifted the altar hangings of a house on Chartres Street. The ensuing fire lasted five hours and destroyed more than 850 houses, which amounted to nearly four-fifths of the town. Then six years later, a second great fire came which destroyed over 200 structures. The original French town virtually disappeared. It was succeeded by a mostly Spanish-influenced city of heavily-walled brick houses — two-storied, tile-roofed, with wide arches, fan-lights, and courtyards. But the new houses had certain French elements as well. Almost everywhere was seen a gallery of cast or wrought iron across the front.

The French Quarter as we know it to-day is an architectural gem. It is a city within a city and still retains the same unique flavour that characterized it for more than two centuries. Perfectly conceived and admirably suited to the needs of its early citizens, the straight, narrow streets and brick houses of its old town remain as a monument to the people who first settled Louisiana. It has a European flavour like no other city in the United States, except, perhaps, San Francisco.

The French Quarter is one of the most popular tourist attractions in America, with its famous Jackson Square flanked by the Presbytère and Cabildo, now fine museums, St. Louis Cathedral and the Pontalba Buildings, the first apartments built in the United States where people still live on the second and third floor and shops are maintained on the first floor just as it was centuries ago. The French Quarter to-day includes grand hotels, famous restaurants, boisterous night-clubs and shops from simple grocery stores to antique emporiums with near-priceless inventories. But even more than just an area for tourists, the French Quarter is a fine residential neighbourhood where mansions are maintained in near-museum like quality. Strict regulations are enforced to make sure property owners in the French Quarter maintain their buildings properly and no architectural changes are permitted without special permission from the Vieux-Carré Commission, the architectural governing body of the area.

One of the most outstanding homes in the French Quarter is located at 828 Burgundy Street. It is a handsome stuccoed home owned by a young attorney, Michael K. Tarver. Records from the Historic New Orleans Collection show that the land transactions date back to 1722, when it was granted to a Frenchman, M. de Macarty, while the records show that the house was built in 1852. It was constructed during what is considered to be the greatest architectural period in the history of New Orleans — the quarter-century between 1835 and the Civil War. The economy was booming and more elegant houses were built during this period than at any time before or since.

Mr. Tarver purchased the lovely three-story mansion in 1969 and immediately began carefully restoring it to its original splendour. The house covers the entire lot, 30 by 175 feet deep. It has a simple floor plan on the first floor featuring a formal double parlor, each 19 by 19 feet square, dining room, garden room, kitchen, bedroom-study-sitting-room, and bath. The second and third floors have been con-

verted to apartments and the slave quarter in the rear is now an efficiency apartment.

The house has a fireplace in each room with the original Italian-imported marble mantels. All of the woodwork is cypress and the flooring is oak. The double parlors can be separated by huge folding doors. Ceilings are 14 feet high.

In furnishing the home, Mr. Tarver used fine French antiques in the double parlors. Most of the furniture dates back to the grandeur of Louis XV and XVI. An outstanding Bergère suite of furniture is featured in the second parlor. The marble-topped tables are Louis XV. Focal point of the parlor is an Empire secretary of fine crocheted mahogany inlaid with a leather writing surface. The table on the left of the Louis XVI canapé is also Empire, while the table at the right is Bouillotte with a marble top and brass gallery-rail. The two lamps on each side of the canapé are French bronzes, and the pair of lamps next to the fireplace is Empire glass with an Egyptian-influenced gold-leaf design.

French accessories are used in the room, including pillows covered in original Louis XVI needle-point tapestry on the canapé, and a pair of fine candlesticks from the same period on the fireplace. Prints on either side of the fireplace are Paris Dans Sa Splendeur.

The rugs in the double parlours are copies of Aubusson rugs made in India especially for Mr. Tarver. The chandelier is from Belgium. A Victorian screen adorns the corner.

The walls in the double parlours are painted beige-mauve and the woodwork is white.

In the dining-room Mr. Tarver chose to use a warm orange sherbet colour on the walls to create a setting for his country French pine table and chairs. The cane seats are covered in a bright plaid fabric. A fruitwood Louis XVI buffet with steel hardware is the only other furniture in the room. An eighteenth century oval painting hangs over the buffet. It is titled *Fête champêtre* — (Outing in the Country). The brass chandelier is American. Floors are of brick. Chinese porcelain plates are featured on the mantel.

The bedroom is actually a multi-purpose room that also serves as a study and a sitting-room. A handsome suede-covered screen hides the brass bed and acts as a backdrop for the Louis XV desk with brass insets and a leather top. A comfortable chaise longue and a pair of chairs create a comfortable seating pattern. The table between the chaise longue and chair is Louis XV. The lamp on the table is a bronze military figure, as is the lamp on the desk. Prints on the wall are eighteenth century French Revolution public notices.

The room is a cream colour and the carpet is a needle-point design in grey.

CONSTABLE, THE FORGOTTEN GENIUS?

By Jean-Loup BOURGET

Constable was born in 1776, a year after Turner. This bicentenary will be celebrated in London (Tate Gallery, February-March 1976) with great splendour, as was that of Turner. But the Turner commemorations (the enormous exhibition jointly presented by the Royal Academy and the Tate Gallery, and soon followed by an exhibition of water-colours in the British Museum) gave rise to numerous peremptory and unjustified statements to the

general effect that Turner is the greatest English painter, the only British painter of international stature. Ten years ago, David Piper spoke, with a more acute sense of genuine greatness, of "the three geniuses of English Romantic painting: Constable, Turner and Blake". He added that, while Constable might not have been the author of the best individual works, he was nevertheless the most important of all British painters (*Painting in England, 1500-1880*). It must also be stated that artists such as Hogarth, Gainsborough, Stubbs, Wright of Derby, Cozens, Dadd, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Bacon, ... are unquestionably "of international stature". Certainly, there seems to be little doubt that Constable, Turner and Blake constitute a trinity all the more remarkable for the fact that the three have almost nothing in common but their genius.

The obvious dissimilarity between Constable and Blake hardly needs to be emphasized. However, some of the statements they made echo each other in a curious and contradictory way. Witness Blake's dictum: "Israel delivered from Egypt is Art delivered from Nature and from Imitation." To which Constable replies: "The art of seeing nature is a thing almost as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphics." Blake and Constable are in agreement then on the equivalence of Egypt and Nature. Blake tries to escape from Nature, whereas Constable seeks to penetrate it further, but with a sense of humility, Nature being a (difficult) text to decipher. In another connection, it will be seen that Constable did not view Imitation any more favourably than did Blake.

A further contradictory echo is to be found in their respective attitudes. Blake called the president of the Royal Academy "Sir Sloshua Reynolds". In his eyes, "Sir Sloshua" symbolized all that he loathed in the artistic establishment of the time, the later-day incarnation of the Grand Manner, both classical and baroque, Italian and French. On the other hand, Constable is responsible for *The Cenotaph* (1836, National Gallery, London), which represents a monument to Reynolds flanked by busts of Michelangelo and Raphael. At the same time, however, Constable has turned his supposed homage to Reynolds into an autumnal or winter landscape; the cenotaph is surrounded by a wood of leafless trees where a passing deer majestically turns its back on the monument. Hence the impression of emptiness, death and abandon. What dominates here is not Reynolds' presence, but rather his absence multiplied. Assuredly, Constable did not bear the same hatred as Blake towards the Royal Academy, but he was so little appreciated by his contemporaries that he had to await a mature age before being elected as one of its members (27 years after Turner!). The Royal Academy persisted in preferring Danby, certainly a remarkable painter, but in the melodramatic manner of John Martin, whose style was both visionary and glacial. *The Cenotaph* is all the more strange when one considers how little Reynolds and Constable resemble each other. In fact, Constable was as much repelled as Blake by the Grand Manner, but, for him, Nature was the antidote, whilst Blake valued the inner fantasy alone, and found Nature and the Grand Manner equally detestable.

The differences between Constable and Turner are scarcely less evident, but some of these (Constable's relative unpopularity as opposed to Turner's immediate success) have disappeared in the course of time. Turner is, of course, fascinated by Nature, but not

necessarily by landscape as such, his conception of Nature being essentially an epic one. *Naturalism* and *Manner* tend, in his case, not only to alternate but to coincide with each other. As I have already said, the fact is that Turner subscribes, first and foremost, to the (neo-classical) concept of the Sublime. This category is a totally *intellectual* one, and thus foreign to Constable, who is a meditative but non-conceptual painter. To make a fashionable distinction (and one that is often specious, in this case, however, justified), Constable, unlike Blake and Turner, had a *method*, and not a *theory*.

It is true that Turner and Constable have fairly similar starting-points. They have common ancestors (Claude handed on to Constable his nostalgic greens, and to Turner his quays bathed in the gold of the morning sun, and his mythological figures). Neither were they born of English painting completely equipped, armed Minervas, as it were; as examples, they have Gainsborough (with his predilection for landscapes, but doing portraits for a living, to the extent that he is often questionably classified as a portraitist along with Reynolds, Romney, George Morland, etc.), and those highly gifted water-colourists, Alexander Cozens and his son John Robert. It was perfectly possible to adhere to such precedents and accomplish an admirable body of work, which is just what Thomas Girtin did. But what Turner retained from the lessons of his predecessors was the formal model, the intellectual plan. Constable, on the other hand, remembered the detail of place and of effect, "model" in the sense of the artist's choice of "motif". The difference between Turner and Constable cannot be reduced to the fact that the former travelled all over Europe, while the latter knew hardly more than the South of England (an important distinction, none the less, since it is reflected in their respective choice of landscapes: Turner ventures on the high seas and as far as the Alps, whereas Constable considered even the North of England to be over-explicitly «sublime», lacking the pastoral quality, with its trace, however discreet, of man's presence). The two painters are different in that one is fascinated by the (epic) struggle between *light* and *fog* or *mist* (rather than darkness), while the other is primarily a colourist, the humble, everyday chronicler of country storms, as opposed to tempests at sea. One of Constable's most obvious contributions was to adapt to his own purposes the formalism characteristic of Cozens' monochromes. The real opposition, then, is between the *epic* (the Sublime), and the *dramatic*. (Constable's canvases are among the most turbulent I know: skies, trees in the wind and reflections playing on even stagnant waters. His precise brush-work is nervous and abrupt). It must be said that the Sublime in Turner is not always exempt from the sugarness, the added spice of the Picturesque (according to neo-classical theory, the two categories were absolutely distinct), and this is never true of Constable. To him, the Picturesque and the Sublime were equally foreign.

Finally, how best to describe the opposition between the visionary, singing the glory of the Industrial Revolution (the famous *Rain, Steam and Speed*, which the National Gallery jealously refused to lend to the Royal Academy for the great retrospective of 1974-75), and the painter of pastoral England? Basil Taylor has claimed that Constable expresses nostalgia, the regretful remembrance of a rural countryside destined to be modernized and destroyed by technological progress. I am not entirely

convinced that this is so: Constable's vision is not always idyllic. Moreover, the canals and locks which he delights in painting are themselves a part of the Industrial Revolution.

What strikes me above all is that the frequently held view of Turner and Constable as "precursors" of impressionism lacks any real basis. Some of Turner's canvases are undeniably "abstract". Let it be said, however, that this can be traced back to Cozens and is not exclusive to Turner. His intentions (the Sublime is always in mind) have nothing in common with the fundamentally *realistic* aims of the impressionists. Constable's position is different. There can be no doubt that he was concerned with the same order as were Monet and his companions: the order of Nature. In terms of form, Constable's naturalism is not without its surprises. Witness the astonishing *Study of Tree Trunks* (c. 1821, Victoria and Albert Museum), "shot" from above, which heralds Caillebotte's composition (*Boulevard vu d'en haut*, 1880, or those of Bonnard or Vuillard, a technique generally ascribed to "Japanese influence", ...

A more intimate acquaintance with Constable's work will reveal that the epithet which best describes him is not "impressionistic", but, in fact, *expressionist*. This is particularly evident in some pictures of his maturity: *Sketch for Hadleigh Castle*, a mediaeval ruin on the summit of a hill, around which wheel Arthur Rimbaud's "chers corbeaux délicieux" (c. 1829, Tate Gallery); the surrealist watercolour *Stonehenge* (1835, Victoria and Albert). On even closer inspection, this trait is seen to be omnipresent in his work. *The Leaping Horse* (c. 1825, Victoria and Albert) gives a foretaste of Jack B. Yeats by its texture (the nervous brush-work, and by its composition (in the foreground, a brownish mass, restless trees and sky — a scene in sombre hues brought out by two patches of brilliant red) and by its subject (the horse). *Landscape and Double Rainbow* (1812, Victoria and Albert), with its leaden sky, reminds one of a "non-formal" composition by Fautrier. If certain works suggest impressionistic leanings, it might be that they evoke the ceramics of the Paris-Auteuil workshop. The link is the grainy texture and the green colouring, ugly in itself, but powerfully expressive — Constable would have rendered admirably the eternal pools and rain of Lorraine. The very thickness of the paint, in so far as it is "impressionistic" at all, evokes such painters as Monticelli or Ziem (the study for *The Leaping Horse* (Tate Gallery), for example, or *Waterloo Bridge: The State Opening in 1817*, c. 1819, Victoria and Albert). The crude greens, menacing skies, bloated and belly-shaped, the hollow, sodden paths foretell Vlaminck. And again, the calmness of the sketches, the daring palette and the broad, almost flat, brush strokes invoke the young Kandinsky (*Stoke-by-Nayland*, Tate).

At times, this art based on the humility of the naturalist approach reaches clearly visionary heights. It is a false humility, to be sure, since it derives from a highly-principled sense of inwardness, and explains Constable's almost total contempt for his contemporaries, for Bonington, to give but one example. Such a quality can be seen in the sepia-wash which, it is thought, depicts a *View on the Stour: Dedham Church in the Distance* (c. 1830, Victoria and Albert), and which might have been signed ... Victor Hugo. Constable has no cause to envy Turner's tachist abstraction. Or we can turn again to *Stonehenge*, flanked anew by the double rainbow.

(Translation by Eithne Bourget)