



A Genius for Failure: The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon

Paul O'Keeffe

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* Haydon's **first attempt at suicide** ended when the low calibre bullet fired from his pistol fractured his skull but failed to penetrate his brain.

* His **second attempt** also failed: a deep slash across his throat left a large pool of blood at the entrance to his studio, but he was still able to reach his easel on the opposite side of the room.

*Only his **third attempt**, another cut to the throat which sprayed blood across his unfinished canvas, was successful. He died face-down before the bespattered 'Alfred and the First British Jury', his final bid 'to improve the taste of the English people' through the High Art of historical painting.

* Such **intensity, struggle and near-comic inability to succeed** encapsulate Haydon's career. Thirty years before his death his huge, iconic paintings had made him the toast of early 19th-century London, drawing paying crowds to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly for months and leading to nationwide tours.

* However, his attempt to repeat such success three months before his death was to destroy him: barely a soul turned up, leaving the desperate painter alone, humiliated, and facing financial ruin.

* In *A Genius for Failure* Paul O'Keeffe makes clear that the real tragedy of Haydon lay in the extent to which **his failures were unwittingly engineered by his own actions** - his refusal to resort to the painting of fashionable portraits, for example, and his self-destructively acrimonious relationship with the RA.

* The company he kept - Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington, among many others - and the momentous events he lived through - The Battle of Waterloo, the Coronation of George IV, and the passing of the first Parliamentary Reform Bill - make *A Genius for Failure* not only the **definitive biography** of this **fascinating and tragic** painter, but a **stirring portrayal of an age**.

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