

Dictionary of National Biography

D'ORSAY, ALFRED GUILLAUME GABRIEL, COUNT (1801–1852), artist, born in Paris on 4 Sept. 1801, was second son of Albert, count d'Orsay, a general in the grand army of the empire, reputed to be one of the

handsomest men of his time, by a daughter of the king of Württemberg. His eldest brother died in infancy. While yet in the nursery he was set apart to be a page of the emperor, and retained imperialist sympathies. After the restoration, however, D'Orsay reluctantly entered the army with a commission in the garde du corps. D'Orsay first visited England on the coronation of George IV, and was at the entertainment given at Almack's on 27 July 1821 to the king and the royal family, by the Duc de Grammont, then ambassador to the court of St. James, whose son, the Duc de Guiche, had married his sister. His graceful bearing, handsome face, and charm of manner placed him at once among the leaders of fashion. Returning to France in the following year, he was quartered with his regiment at Valence on the Rhône, when, on 15 Nov. 1822, he first made the acquaintance of the Earl and Countess of Blessington. At their invitation he joined them in a tour and resigned his commission, although the French army was then under orders to invade Spain. On 12 Feb. 1823 D'Orsay set out with the Blessingtons for Italy, arriving by 31 March at Genoa. Here they met Byron, who sat to D'Orsay for his last portrait. Byron describes him to Moore as having 'all the air of a Cupidon déchainé, and being one of the few specimens I have seen of our ideal of a Frenchman before the revolution.' Byron refers to a manuscript journal in which D'Orsay had given his ideas of English society, which pleased the author of 'Don Juan.' It was afterwards destroyed by its author. Charles Mathews met the party, and describes D'Orsay in his 'Autobiography' (i. 93) as 'the beau idéal of manly dignity and grace.' On 2 June 1823 Lord Blessington added a codicil to his will, setting forth that General d'Orsay had given his consent to the union of his son Alfred with the earl's daughter by his first marriage. Lady Harriet Frances Gardiner was then a child of eleven. When she married D'Orsay at Naples on 1 Dec. 1827, she was but little more than fifteen. A deed of separation was almost directly afterwards arranged between the newly married pair. Lord Blessington died in Paris on 23 May 1829. Early in 1831 D'Orsay and Lady Blessington had drifted back into England. Thenceforth, for nearly twenty years, they wielded a sort of supremacy over a considerable circle of the artistic and fashionable world of London. They gathered around them in their drawing-rooms—for five years in Mayfair, for nearly fifteen in Kensington—all the social and literary celebrities of their time. They lived scrupulously apart, though within easy distance. While the countess had her home in Gore House, the count occupied a villa next door, No. 4 Kensington Gore. During his career in London D'Orsay was recognised universally as the 'arbitrer elegantiarum.' N. P. Willis, in his 'Pencilings by the Way' (ii. 77), says emphatically that he was 'certainly the most splendid specimen of a man, and a well dressed one, that I had ever seen.' His portraits confirm the opinion. He was six feet in height, broad-chested, with small hands and feet, hazel eyes, and

chestnut hair. Sidney, in his 'Book of the Horse,' mentions him as the first in a triad of dandies, the two others being the Earl of Sefton and the Earl of Chesterfield. A characteristic engraving on p. 275 of that work, taken from an oil sketch by Sir Francis Grant, now in the collection of Sir Richard Wallace, shows D'Orsay on his park hack in Rotten Row. The happiest portrait is Maclise's outline in profile in 'Fraser's Magazine' for December 1834. In R. B. Haydon's 'Diary' of 30 June 1838, D'Orsay is described 'as a complete Adonis, not made up at all. He bounded into his cab and drove off like a young Apollo with a fiery Pegasus.' Disraeli sketched him to the life, under the name of Count Mirabel, in his love tale of 'Henrietta Temple.' To D'Orsay Lord Lytton inscribed his political romance of 'Godolphin,' referring to him as 'the most accomplished gentleman of our time.' D'Orsay was both a sculptor and a painter. He painted the last portrait of Wellington, who is said to have exclaimed, 'At last I have been painted like a gentleman!' adding immediately, 'I'll never sit to any one else!' His statues of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington secured a wide popularity. Many of his portraits, such as those of the young queen, of Dwarkanauth Tagore and of the chancellor, Lord Lyndhurst, were popular in engravings. His profile sketches of his contemporaries to the number of 125, nearly all of them visitors at Gore House, were published in rapid succession by Mitchell of Bond Street. They include among them nearly all the literary, artistic, and fashionable celebrities of that time. D'Orsay gradually fell into pecuniary embarrassment. After his separation from his wife an agreement was executed in 1838, in obedience to which he relinquished all his interest in the Blessington estates in consideration of certain annuities being redeemed and of a stipulated sum being handed over to himself. The result of this arrangement was that with the annuities the aggregate sum paid to his creditors amounted by 1851 to upwards of 103,500*l.* During the period of his nearly twenty years' residence in Lon-

don he himself had an allowance from the court of chancery in Ireland of 550*l.* a year, and from Lady Harriet d'Orsay of 400*l.* He founded the Société de Bienfaisance, which still exists. For two years before the break-up at Gore House he was in continual danger of arrest. The final crash came in April of 1849, when D'Orsay started for Paris, taking with him his valet and a single portmanteau. Lady Blessington followed him soon afterwards. Their old friend, Prince Louis Napoleon, was president of the French Republic. According to Greville's 'Journal' (1837–52, iii. 468), 'Napoleon wished to give D'Orsay a diplomatic mission, and he certainly was very near being made minister at Hanover, but that the French ministry would not consent to it.' Meanwhile D'Orsay took an immense studio, attached to the house of M. Gerdin, the marine painter, and fitted it up with his own works of art. One of his most frequent visitors was the ex-king Jerome. He completed the model of a full-sized statue of Jerome, ordered by the government for the Salle des Maréchaux de France, and began a colossal statue of Napoleon. He executed busts of Lamartine, of Emile de Girardin, and of Prince Napoleon. The prince-president at last appointed him director of the fine arts. Directly afterwards, in the spring of 1852, the spinal affection, which eventually proved fatal, declared itself unmistakably. He went to Dieppe, but sank rapidly. He was visited by Dr. Madden, to whom he declared significantly that Lady Blessington had been a 'mother' to him. He died on 4 Aug. 1852, in the house of his sister, the Duchesse de Grammont. Napoleon III was conspicuous among the mourners at his funeral. He was buried in the mausoleum which he had raised in memory of Lady Blessington at Chambourcy, near St. Germain-en-Laye.

[Memoir of the Countess of Blessington prefixed to vol. i. of Country Quarters, pp. iii–xxiii, 1850; Madden's Life of Lady Blessington, vol. i. ch. xiii. pp. 318–72, 1855; Willis's Pencilings by the Way, p. 355, 1835; Grantley Berkeley's Recollections, vol. iii. ch. x.; Gore House, pp. 201–231, 1865; Charles Mathews's Autobiography, i. 60–165, 1879; Times, 6, 7, and 10 Aug. 1852; Emile de Girardin in La Presse, 6 Aug. 1852; Annual Reg. 1852, pp. 296–8; Gent. Mag. 1852, 308–10.]