

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

BERMINGHAM, Nathaniel

Dublin ?1712 – London brd 6.IX.1779

Bermingham, or Birmingham, was born in Dublin, perhaps c.1709 (inferred from Walpole: *v. infra*), although he may be the “Nathanl. Bermingham”, son of Thomas and Dorothy, née Philipps, of Plunkett Street, christened 21.IX.1712 at St Nicholas Without, Dublin (Church of Ireland). Apprenticed to a Dublin herald painter, John Seymour (7 years from 1728, consistent with the 1712 date), Bermingham was a specialist in the technique of paper-cutting, which he used to create coats of arms (such as those of the 5th Earl of Cork, London, 7.V.2009, Lot 53) and similar découpages (“Britannia mourning Frederick, Prince of Wales”, V&A). An “Owl in cut paper” was in the Strawberry Hill sale (17.V.1842, Lot 123); Walpole also owned one of his fables from Æsop.

Bermingham moved to London before 1744, and his portraits, landscapes and other paper cut-outs were sold by Mrs Laetitia Pilkington (who described him as “a most ugly, squinting, mean-looking fellow”) in her print shop in London from 1744. Evidently he did not prosper immediately, as on 28.X.1749 “Nathaniel Birmingham of St Martin in the Fields B^r [batchelor] a Painter” married “Catherine Roberts of D^o [same parish] Widdow” in a clandestine marriage under the “rules of the Fleet”, implying that he was in prison, presumably for debt.

Some year later Bermingham was recorded as a painter of St Martin-in-the-Fields, when he took on an apprentice, one Will Sharpe (no doubt the heraldic artist who painted the sheet of vellum containing the freedom of the Painter-Stainers’ Company awarded to Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1784), for 7 years from 4.V.1758 for a premium of £5 (duty only paid 18.VIII.1761).

Bermingham advertised in Mortimer’s *London directory* of 1763 from the corner of Great Queen Street, opposite Long Acre, as “an improver of a curious art of cutting out portraits and Coats of Arms in Vellum, with the point of a pen-knife”. In the *Gazetteer and new daily advertiser* for 25.VIII.1769, “Nathaniel Birmingham, so well known to several of the Royal Family, nobility, gentry and artists of these kingdoms” advertised his newly perfected “Royal Charta Chymica, or prepared paper” which allowed mariners and others to write with a metal stylus in place of a pen.

Initially working in monochrome, at some stage he used pastel to colour cut profile heads pasted onto a dark background, with edges shaded in pastel. The handful of pastels which have survived show the resultant distinctive sharp treatment and a high quality of finish. It should be noted that this technique must have faced considerable practical difficulties, and it is unclear if the pastel was applied before or after the cut-outs were affixed to the backing. Bermingham exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1774.

Most, perhaps all, of his profiles are unsigned and the attributions must be regarded as uncertain. Many of those with Irish connections were long attributed to Hamilton, which is

evident nonsense. Similar pastel profiles were made by Lucas Bateman (*q.v.*); Bermingham’s seem to be more energetic, less sedate, and although his heads are always in profile, his bodies are sometimes seen three-quarters. A group of pastels which are closer to Bermingham than Bateman, but appear to be later than the last recorded appearance of Bermingham in 1774, could be by him, but may be by other hands, such as Susannah Sledge or Towne; among these is a small collection of profiles of members of the Sykes family, formerly attributed to Hamilton, and reattributed by Anne Crookshank to Nathaniel Bermingham; they are possibly by several hands (*v. English sch.*)..

Walpole stated that Bermingham “was drowned at Chelsea, aged near 70, September, 1779.” This is confirmed in the Greater London burial index: he was buried at Fulham 6.IX.1779.

Bibliography

Paul Caffrey, in Gorry Gallery, Dublin; exh. 2–12.III.2005, no. 11 repr.; Crookshank & Glin 1978; Crookshank & Glin 1994; Figgis 2014; McGuire 1939, pp. 13f; Sue McKechnie, *British silhouette artists and their work, 1750–1860*, London, 1978; Nevill Jackson 1938; *Memoirs of Mrs Laetitia Pilkington*, Dublin, 1776, II, p. 171; Saur; Strickland 1913; Lucy Trench, ed., *Materials & techniques in the decorative arts; an illustrated dictionary*, London, 2000, p. 343; Walpole 1937, p. 126; *The register of St Nicholas Without 1694–1739*, Exeter, 1912, p. 38

Pastels

J.146.071 Rt Hon. William BROWNLOW (1726–1794), PC, MP, in a blue coat, pstl, 24.5x20.5 ov. (Mrs Ralph Woodhouse, née Gracie Armstrong (1887–1965), cousin of Vandelenes; legs: A F. Studd... Bourton-on-the-Water, Tayler & Fletcher, 24–25.VI.2021, Lot 558 n.r., attr., with another item, attr. H. D. Hamilton, est. £200–300) [new attr., ?] φαν



J.146.101 Lady Arbella DENNY, née Fitzmaurice (1707–1792), pstl, graphite/ppr, 24x19.5 (Representative Church Body, Dublin. Sir Edward Denny; don: Magdalen Asylum, Leeson Street, Dublin –1958). Exh.: Hamilton 2008, no. 10 repr., as by Hamilton [new attr.] φαν



J.146.103 Mrs FARMER, née Burton, as Miss Burton, 24x22.8 J.146.1035 =?Miss Burton [?Mrs Farner, or a sister?], pstl, 24.4x19 ov. (Farnham, Parker, 3.VIII.2023, Lot 28 repr., as anon. 19th century) φδν



J.146.104 Mrs FARMER, née Burton, as Mrs Farmer, pstl/ppr, 25x20 ov. (La Touche family, Bellevue, Co. Wicklow; Dr Joan Buchanan Mitchell; Gorry Gallery, Dublin; exh. 2–12.III.2005, no. 11 repr.). Lit.: McGuire 1939, no. VII repr. φ



J.146.106 ?Warren HASTINGS (1732–1818), governor-general of India, in profile, pstl, 21x16 (Chester, Bonhams, 14–16.VI.2008, Lot 838 repr., as circle of Hamilton, with another, est. £200–300, b/i) [new attr., ?] φαν



J.146.108 Mrs MORTON, née Sarah Brooke of Haughton Hall, Shropshire, pstl, 12.7x10 ov., inscr. *verso* "Mrs Sarah Moreton daughter of W Brook of Haughton. Grandmother of Mrs Sarah Atkin [?Atkis]" (PC 2011) φα



J.146.117 Lawyer, from ?Trinity College, Dublin, pstl/ppr, cutout, 20x18 ov. (Aylsham, Keys. 7.X.2011, Lot 46 repr., attr. H. D. Hamilton, est. £120–150) [new attr.] φv



J.146.125 Lady in blue dress, profile, to left, pstl, ov. (Tom Wnuck of Rochester, New York; sale p.m., Geneseo, NY, Cottone Auctions, 23.XI.2002, Lot 283, \$468) [new attr., ?] φ



J.146.11 Gentleman, pstl, ov. Lit.: McGuire 1939, no. VI repr. Φ



J.146.119 Lady with pearls in hair, lace shawl, in profile to left, pstl, 24.2x19 ov. (London, Christie's South Kensington, 21.II.2007, Lot 1291 repr., as French sch., 19th century, est. £500–800; Philip Mould 2007, as by Lawrence; London, Christie's South Kensington, 11.III.2008, Lot 82 repr., circle of Lawrence, est. £300–400; London, Rosebery's, 19.III.2013, Lot 694 repr., circle of Lawrence, est. £600–800; London, Rosebery's, 13.VII.2013, Lot 454 repr., circle of Lawrence, est. £400–600; London, Rosebery's, 18.I.2014, Lot 332 repr., British sch., late 18th/early 19th century, est. £200–400) [new attr., ?; cf. Bateman] φαv



J.146.127 Lady, profile to left (n/k) φ



J.146.112 Gentleman in a brown coat, pstl, 25x19 ov. (Castletown House 0058). Attr., ?; cf. Bateman; *olim* attr. Hamilton Φ?α



J.146.121 Lady in white dress, profile, to right; & pendant: J.146.122 lady in blue dress, profile, to left, pstl on cut out sheet, on laid paper, 18x? ov. (Irish art market 2008) φα/φα

J.146.131 Lady in a pink dress, pstl, 21x17 ov., inscr. *verso* with attr. to William Hamilton by R. R. M. Sée (Paris, Drouot, Thierry de Maigret, 29.IX.2021, Lot 62 repr., as anon. XIX^e; PC) [new attr. 2021, ?] φαv



J.146.115 Young boy, profile, pstl/cut-out ppr, 25.3x20.1 ov., c.1780 (Dublin, NGI, inv. 19236. Don Matthew Russell 1985). Exh.: Dublin 2023. Lit.: *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 1870–71, repr. φ



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