

Winter 2014

Artist in Residence –

Stephen Poyntz Denning and the Herne Hill Art Set

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Published on Wednesday, 17 December 2014 16:20

It is quite a coincidence that two major movies are being released at the moment, the principle characters of which were members of the Herne Hill art set. However, like the elephant in the room, a central figure - Elhanan Bicknell, has been excised in Mike Leigh's award winning film Mr Turner. As indeed has the subject of this article, the artist Stephen Poyntz Denning, a prominent member of the Herne Hill art set and friend of the Bicknell family.

The early life of Stephen Poyntz Denning is something of a mystery. His father, Thomas Denning was born in Gloucestershire in 1767 and moved to Newington, Southwark where Stephen was born in 1795. There is no information regarding his mother. His middle name, Poyntz had customarily been used by the Denning family.

There must have been some tragedy or misfortune early in Denning's life. It was partially revealed, when, soon after he was elected curator or custodian of the newly opened Dulwich College Picture Gallery he received a group of Royal Academician visitors, led by Joseph Farington and including Sir Thomas Lawrence. The reason for the visit was to inspect the pictures and select some to be copied by students at the Academy. Denning, who may already have been acquainted with Lawrence, got into conversation with them and clearly impressed Farington who wrote in his diary, "Mr Denning is an artist and excels in miniature painting. He gave us an account of his low extraction saying that when he was a boy, he was a beggar. He told us he acquired some knowledge of art - of his being an apprentice for 7 years to a person who employed him colouring prints. He informed us how he was enabled to go to Italy and the whole story of his progress is extraordinary...."

Through what good offices we do not know, but the young Denning had been taken under the wing of the miniaturist artist John Wright. John Wright was well connected, being acquainted with the leading artists of the day such as John Hoppner as well as Lawrence. Stephen's apprenticeship with Wright may have required him to spend seven years employed in colouring prints but he also learnt the art of miniature painting from his mentor. Denning actually lived with the family from 1814-17 in Burlington Gardens, perhaps as a companion to the Wright's son, John William,

whose mother had died when he was an infant. John William was a delicate child; and had to be withdrawn because of his poor health from school at Loughborough House, Brixton. John William Wright was apprenticed to Thomas Phillips and became noted for his illustrations of characters from literature, especially Shakespearean subjects, many of which were engraved.

After his own apprenticeship with John Wright, Denning travelled to Italy and had lodgings in both Bruton Street and Conduit Street, not then a fashionable area but a masculine one where single gentlemen might find a room above the shops and ticket agencies. It was in one such agency that admission tickets for Dulwich College Picture Gallery might be obtained.

Denning had his first painting, a miniature, accepted at the Royal Academy in 1814, when he was only 19 and still living with the Wrights. He had pictures accepted annually at the Academy until 1852, 48 in total. At some point he became the great friend of the artist and engraver John Burnet and co-operated with him by painting reduced size copies of Burnet's oil paintings of both Chelsea and Greenwich pensioners for engraving purposes. In 1842, Burnet dedicated his Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds to Denning.

In 1821, Denning succeeded Ralph Cockburn, the gallery's first custodian, who had died the year previously. As well as being responsible for the collection, his job description included instructing in drawing, such of the poor scholars at the College as he recommended. He received a salary of 200 guineas per annum and accommodation. He was assisted by James Bonham who was paid £80 per year and had rooms in the former French Horn and had his livery supplied. The gallery was the open daily except Fridays and Sundays and admission was free on production of a ticket. Perhaps inconveniently, tickets were only available in London at principal printsellers and bookshops

It is not known how or when precisely, Denning came to the notice of the Royal Family, but the association certainly had started by 1823 when he painted the famous portrait of Princess Victoria aged 4. The painting was never engraved despite its significant popular appeal and remained in the artist's possession. It was purchased by Dulwich Picture Gallery for 30 guineas in 1891 and immediately became the most popular picture in the collection.

Another commission for the Royal Family, possibly by Denning, took place in 1825 when a miniature (6cm) of the future Queen Victoria was painted and inscribed: "Presented by the Princess Victoria to her dear old General Wetherell" . Wetherell was the ADC and equerry to the Duke of Kent, Victoria's father. It seems likely that Denning was actually engaged by the household of the Duchess of Kent, which was at Kensington Palace, as a portrait by Denning exists (now in New York) of a sitter once believed to be Lucinda Bicknell, Elhanan Bicknell's third wife, but now believed to be that of the Duchess herself.

There has also been some discussion as to whether the painting of the infant Queen Victoria at Dulwich Picture Gallery is in fact that of her eldest daughter, also named Victoria and painted twenty years later. The fact that Denning's style never altered

throughout his career makes identification difficult. However, expert opinion comes down in favour of Queen Victoria.

Other Royal commissions followed; William IV ordered a copy from Denning of Lawrence's portrait of Sir Jeffrey Wyatville, the architect and garden designer which was presented by the King to Wyatville. It was also engraved. Denning is also credited with painting a portrait of the future Prince Albert which is now in Gotha. Finally, in 1846 Queen Victoria commissioned a copy of Franz Xaver Winterlatter's portrait of the Royal Family from Denning for a fee of over £200 and lithographs were made in Paris of the portrait, one of which was given to Louis Phillipe, perhaps as a 'thank you' to the French king for giving permission for Winterhalter, who was France's court painter, to carry out the commission from Queen Victoria.

Denning must have had an engaging personality because he made friends easily and widely among those living in Dulwich. One amusing observation is given in the diary of Joseph Romilly, a Cambridge academic and bachelor who lived at The Willows, on Dulwich Common. In December 1834 he unwisely attended the tea and supper party of his nephew, George Romilly. At first all went well, "they danced 2 Quadrilles & a country dance - some very pretty fireworks of George Allen's were let off extremely well by him - they lasted about an hour and a half. George Romilly appeared to great advantage, he danced very gracefully, did the honour of the table well and was altogether a complete gentleman - some of the children behaved like rude blackguards, these were the Pages, Denning and Warner. The young ladies were very correct".

Numerous Dulwich residents had their own, or their children's portraits painted by Denning. They included the political radical and classical historian George Grote and his wife, who lived at Woodhall, the Rev John Vane, chaplain and 1st Fellow of the College and Ozias Linley the 4th Fellow who bequeathed his family portraits by Gainsborough to the Gallery. Indeed, it might have been the latter's friendship with Denning which commanded this gift.

Over the years Denning made numerous copies of pictures from the collection at Dulwich. A Murillo and a Rubens copy hang in the Cottonian Collection of Plymouth Art Gallery, and their donor, William Cotton and also his wife's portraits were also painted by Denning.

In 1844 John Ruskin, who was a regular visitor to Dulwich College Picture Gallery received permission to make water colour copies of some of the collection. Both Ruskin and his father were part of the circle of friends and artists, which included Denning, who was also a family friend, who gathered at Carlton House on Herne Hill (now the site of Danecroft Road), the home of Elhanan Bicknell. The Ruskins had lived at 28 Herne Hill, on the opposite side of the road to the Bicknells, since 1815 when John Ruskin was aged 4, and four years before Bicknell moved in opposite. John Ruskin senior and Bicknell had something in common other than a love of art, in that they had, through their own efforts, both risen from fairly modest origins to positions of considerable position and wealth, the former as an agent of the wine company, Domecq, the latter through the importing of whale oil for lighting purposes.

Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861), named after the American preacher Elhanan Winchester, was the younger of William Bicknell's two sons. William had dutifully

carried on the family business of serge manufacture in Blackman Street, Southwark until the death of his devout mother, a friend of John Wesley, and then commenced a second career as a schoolmaster, opening a school firstly in Ponders End and afterwards in Tooting. It was at this school that his son, Elhanan, acted as a junior teacher until he was 19. Elhanan Bicknell then tried his hand at being a gentleman farmer with a friend who lived near Shrewsbury. Elhanan abandoned this venture and in 1809 entered into a partnership with a cousin, John Bicknell Langton at the invitation of his uncle who was considering retiring from his business which comprised whale oil importing and ship-owning. Langton had earlier discovered a process of refining sperm whale oil which would produce candles and smoke-free oil lighting. The new partnership prospered and the firm expanded, owning 30 ships and monopolizing the Pacific sperm whale oil fishery.

By 1840, Bicknell had anticipated that his whaling empire would suffer as a result of free trade opening up the market to competition, but he continued to direct the business for another twenty years. He married and was widowed four times. His first marriage was in 1810 to Hannah Wooton Langton, his cousin and the sister of his business partner. They had a son, Elhanan (1813-1860) and two other children, one who died along with his mother in childbirth in 1815. His second marriage was to Mary Jones in 1817 which produced two children. In 1829 he married Lucinda Browne, the sister of Dickens' illustrator, "Phiz" - Hablot Browne. The marriage lasted 21 years until her death in 1850 and produced a further eight children. In 1851 he married his fourth wife, Louisa Holland, a widow.

He was a close friend of the artist David Roberts (who does feature in the Mike Leigh film), and one of his sons married Christine, Roberts' daughter. It was Roberts who introduced Elhanan Bicknell to the art world. It was a world he completely embraced and established a sort of club where social gatherings were held at Carlton House.

In 1838 Bicknell began to collect British modern art, the collection adorning the principal rooms of the house. Edgar Browne, whose aunt was Bicknell's wife Lucinda, describes the drawing room of Carlton House, "The pictures in this room were all water colours, and were not hung in the usual manner, but inset, the gilded mouldings acting as frames". (A similar method was employed at Petworth to showcase some of Turner's London scenes) ..."Turner's 'Rivers of France', if I remember rightly, served as decoration of the doors".

Bicknell had a flair for correctly judging the value of modern sculpture and painting, rather like an earlier version of Charles Saatchi. His wealth and enthusiasm for contemporary art drew numerous artists, sculptors and connoisseurs of modern art around him. He collected art and also commissioned works from his circle. When Turner's fame was at a low point and before he was championed by the young John Ruskin, Bicknell had bought a number of paintings which Turner had exhibited at the Royal Academy and which were unsold.

Although Turner was a frequent visitor, there was on one occasion some tension between him and Bicknell. Turner had written to Bicknell, somewhat tongue in cheek, - My Dear Sir, I will thank you to call in Queen Anne Street at your earliest convenience, for I have a whale or two on the canvas. Turner's 'Whalers' now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is one of four, and seems to have been

painted and offered to Bicknell because of the latter's involvement in whaling. Bicknell declined the picture, even complaining that when he rubbed it some chalk came off on his finger! It debuted to mixed reviews at the RA exhibition of 1845.

Another mixed review greeted 'The Snowstorm'. "Turner", wrote Ruskin, "was passing the evening at my father's house, on the day that this criticism came out; and after dinner, sitting in his armchair by the fire, I heard him muttering low to himself, at intervals, "Soapsuds and whitewash" again, and again, and again. At last I went to him asking why he minded what they said. Then he burst out, "Soapsuds and whitewash! What would they have? I wonder what they think the sea's like? I wish they'd been in it." He was referring to the discomfort and danger he had endured in preparation for the painting,. At the age of 67 he had, according to Ruskin, put to sea in a hurricane and ordered the sailors to lash him to the mast, from where he studied the scene for four hours. The Ruskins also possessed Turner's controversial painting, the Slave Ship.

Bicknell had 10 oils and 18 water colours by Turner in his collection. He purchased *Giudecca, La Dionna della Salute and San Giorgio* from the RA Exhibition 1841 for 250 guineas. This oil painting of Venice now holds the record for the most expensive British painting sold when it went under the hammer earlier this year to the owner of the Bellagio Hotel, Las Vegas for \$35.8m. His purchase of the water colour, *The Blue Rigi: Lake Lucerne, Sunrise*, in 1842 for 80 guineas was arranged by the art dealer Thomas Griffiths of Norwood who also arranged the sale of the companion picture, *The Red Rigi*, to John Ruskin senior. It was Griffiths who introduced John Ruskin to Turner. Ruskin said of these pictures, "Turner had never made any drawings like these before and never made any like them again. He is not showing his hand in these, but his heart." The *Blue Rigi* was sold in 2006 for £5.8m, a record for a water colour. Dulwich resident and honorary chairman of Christies, Noel Annesley. took the gavel himself at the sale. A ban was placed on its export and it was saved for the nation through the Art Fund.

According to Clarence, one of Bicknell's sons, Turner, frequently dined at his father's house, and objected to having his portrait taken. At one such dinner around Christmas 1845, "Count D'Orsay and Sir Edwin Landseer, devised a little plot to defeat the result of this antipathy. Whilst Turner unsuspectingly chatted with a guest over a cup of tea in the drawing-room, D'Orsay placed himself as a screen beside him to hide, when necessary, Landseer, sketching him at full length in pencil on the back of an envelope. Landseer gave what he had done to D'Orsay, who after re-drawing it at home and enlarged the figure to eight inches in height, sold it to J Hogarth, printseller in the Haymarket, for twenty guineas". Sixteen copies of this print were included in the Bicknell sale at Christie's in 1863 after Bicknell's death.

One of Stephen Poyntz Denning's most interesting sitters was also a member of the Bicknell family. Sabrina Bicknell's portrait was painted in 1833 when she was 73 years old, and was engraved a number of times. The reason for this interest was that Sabrina was the subject of an experiment carried out by Thomas Day (1748-1789) who was influenced by the writings of Rousseau, which was to acquire and educate a young girl to become the perfect wife. In 1769, at the age of twenty-one and in possession of an inheritance he went with an old school friend, Thomas Bicknell, to the Foundling Hospital in Shrewsbury where he picked out a girl and named her

Sabrina Sidney (after the River Severn and his hero, the Whig martyr Algenon Sidney). They then went to Coram's Fields in London where a second girl, Lucretia was selected. The girls were aged 11 and 12.

All Day was required by the hospitals to do was to promise he would apprentice one girl to a trade, and give her £400 on her marriage, the other he intended to marry, and if he did not he would place her in a good family and give her £500. He also "solemnly swore not to violate her innocence". He took the girls to France, teaching them to read and lectured them "to hate dress and luxury, and fine people and fashion and titles". He tired of France, the girls squabbled and a French officer spoke to the girls too freely and had to be challenged to a duel. After eight months Day was exhausted by his experiment and returned to England. Lucretia was apprenticed to a milliner but Sabrina he kept, lodging her with Bicknell's mother. He then embarked on a further experiment, if Sabrina was to be a model wife she had to teach her own children fortitude and endurance. Day's eccentric methods of imparting such qualities were a disaster - when he dropped hot sealing wax on her arms she screamed, when he fired pistols at her petticoats she leapt aside and shrieked. She never came round to the regime and was packed off to a boarding school. (For further information on Thomas Day and his experiment see - Wendy Moore *How to Create the Perfect Wife* 2013.)

When Sabrina left school, Day gave her an allowance and at the age of 26 she married Thomas Bicknell who by this time had become a successful barrister. Day gave her the promised dowry of £500. She was widowed within a decade and with two small sons to raise she was apprenticed to a dressmaker who went bankrupt. She then became housekeeper in the family of Fanny Burney's brother, Dr Charles Burney, nursing Burney through an illness and becoming his assistant at his academy at Greenwich. She continued to assist at the academy when Burney's son succeeded as principal on his father's death. Her two sons prospered, benefitting from Burney's education, one becoming a founder of the Westminster Bank, the other becoming senior Registrar in the Court of Chancery.

Elhanan Bicknell died in 1861. His plan to retain his collection for the benefit of the public apparently frustrated by so many claimant children. He is buried in West Norwood Cemetery with his third wife Lucinda and beside his friend David Roberts. His collection of 112 paintings was sold at Christies in 1863 and realized £80,000, the Marquess of Hartford purchasing half the collection.

Stephen Poyntz Denning died in 1864. His son, the Rev Stephen Poyntz Denning was headmaster of St Andrew's College, Reading and had assisted his father in the preparation of *An Historical and Descriptive Catalogue of the pictures in Dulwich Picture Gallery*. The catalogue was only in manuscript and was removed by Denning's widow but acquired later by the Gallery.

Mr. Turner is a forthcoming 2014 British biographical drama film, written and directed by Mike Leigh, and starring Timothy Spall, Dorothy Atkinson, Paul Jesson, Marion Bailey and Ruth Sheen. The film concerns the life and career of British artist J. M. W. Turner (played by Spall). It premiered in competition for the Palme d'Or at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, where Spall won the award for Best Actor

Effie Gray is a 2012 British biographical drama film directed by Richard Laxton and scheduled for release in 2014. Its subject is the love triangle involving Victorian art critic John Ruskin (played by Greg Wise), his wife, Euphemia "Effie" Gray (Dakota Fanning), and Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais (Tom Sturridge). The script was written by Emma Thompson, who also appears in the film as Lady Eastlake.

Last Updated on Wednesday, 17 December 2014 16:20
The Dulwich Society