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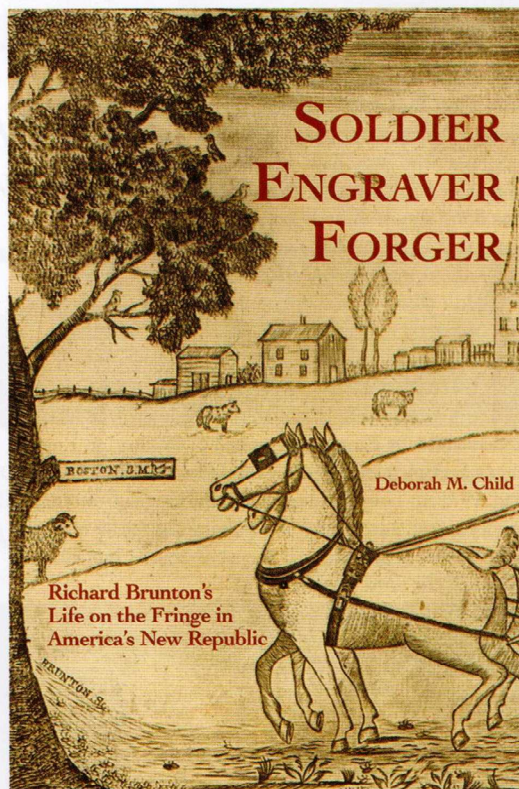
Book Reviews

Deborah M. Child. *Soldier, Engraver, Forger: Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe in America's New Republic.* Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2015, 123 pp., 53 ill. ISBN 978-0-88082-326-5, \$19.95 (soft cover).

For most people, Richard Brunton is hardly a household name. Despite my own rather extensive experience with American prints and drawings, I'm not sure that I had heard of him before I became Curator of Graphics at the Connecticut Historical Society in 1998. The Connecticut Historical Society has what is probably the best collection of the work of this elusive artist, including not only an impression of his most important print, *A Prospective [sic] View of Old Newgate, Connecticut's State Prison*, but also an impressive collection of his family registers, bookplates, and his oil portraits of the Newgate jailer, Major Reuben Humphreys, and his wife Anna. Brunton knew Newgate well. He was incarcerated there for counterfeiting from 1799 to 1802 or 1803.

Albert Carlos Bates, the librarian at the Connecticut Historical Society, wrote the first book about Brunton in 1906. In the early 1950s, William Lamson Warren, then assistant director of the Connecticut Historical Society, penned three articles on the artist containing new information about his life and work. Fifty years went by without much additional research or scholarship. Brunton remained an interesting footnote, a folk artist of primarily local interest with little to distinguish him from the many other itinerant practitioners who were active at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even his criminal record was not unique. Counterfeiting was a great temptation for engravers who possessed the necessary skills to replicate the coins and currency of the new nation.

Robert L. Thayer was one of the few collectors and connoisseurs who appreciated Brunton's idiosyncratic style. He amassed a fine collection of Brunton prints, and at the time of his death in 2008, he undoubtedly knew more about Richard Brunton than anybody else. I got to know Bob during his research visits to CHS and subsequently got to know Deborah Child, who picked up where Bob left off and went on to write the book that had long been Bob's dream. Child had access to all of the existing resources on Brunton, including Bates's and Warren's papers at CHS and Bob Thayer's extensive research notes. She made use of the extraordinary online sources now



available, which enabled her to verify important details about Brunton's life and to uncover valuable new information. She visited a wide array of institutions, including small local historical societies, in order to track down and study examples of Brunton's work. Despite its small size, *Soldier, Engraver, Forger: Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe in America's New Republic* is an exemplary work of scholarship. It is also an extremely readable and entertaining book. Richard Brunton's life is a fascinating story, and Deb Child tells it well.

Child situates Brunton's career firmly in the unfolding historical drama of his times. Her descriptions of what life was like for a British grenadier, a deserter, a struggling craftsman, a criminal, a prisoner, and finally a pauper, provide a vivid and intimate picture of American society in the turbulent years between the 1770s and the 1830s. She is

especially good at illuminating Brunton's relationships with contemporary artists such as Ralph Earl, whose group portrait of the Angus Nickelson family was painted the same year that Brunton engraved their family register; and Eunice Pinney, who copied at least two of Brunton's registers, and who may have known the artist while he was imprisoned in Newgate. Although Brunton's major work was done almost entirely outside the major cities, he was not out of touch with the artistic currents of his time, and not without influence on other artists.

Child's account of counterfeiting, which due to a total lack of federal regulation flourished in the early republic, is also of great interest. This is an area in which she has considerable expertise, having previously worked on Lyman Parks, another New England counterfeiter. It is easy to understand why Brunton, described in 1834 as "an English engraver of no great merit" by the early American art historian, William Dunlap, might prefer turning out counterfeit money to the uncertainty of obtaining legitimate commissions. Other artists pursued the same course, undoubtedly for much the same reasons.

Child plots Brunton's movements through the back roads and small towns of Connecticut and Massachusetts identifying many of the people whom he knew and the places where he lived and worked. She has dispelled the notion that he was strictly a "Connecticut engraver," although much of his best-known work was done there. She has uncovered newspaper advertisements showing that he worked in Boston and Providence, and tax records demonstrating that he lived in Pepperell, Massachusetts, in the 1780s. She also discovered that, after leaving Newgate Prison in 1803, he moved back to Massachusetts where he continued his counterfeiting activities. In 1807, he was apprehended, tried, and sentenced to life in the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown. One of Child's most exciting discoveries is the records of his trial and imprisonment, located in the Massachusetts State Archives. In Charlestown, as in Newgate Prison, Brunton was able to continue his work as an engraver. It was here

that he produced his engraving of a stagecoach, which appeared on several broadsides in the early nineteenth century and which is reproduced on the cover of Child's book. In 1811, pleading old age and infirmity, Brunton was released, and moved to Groton, Massachusetts. Although Child has identified some works from this period—chiefly watercolors, since Brunton was apparently unable to afford copper plates or engraving tools—by 1815 he had become a state pauper. His last known work is a watercolor marriage register dated 1825. He died in the Groton almshouse in 1832.

In *Soldier, Engraver, Forger: Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe in America's New Republic*, Child has demonstrated how a dedicated researcher can use traditional and online sources to reconstruct the career of an obscure artist from a remote period in American history. It is a compelling and well-documented account; one only wishes that it were twice as long and that it contained illustrations of all of Brunton's known works rather than a judicious selection. Child is working on an online catalog of Brunton's family registers, which will be available on americanancestors.org, the website of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. This should prove a valuable resource, not only for genealogists, who will appreciate easy access to the information contained in the registers, but also for art historians and print collectors, who will be able to compare a large number of examples of Brunton's style. Since many of this artist's works are unsigned, this should help to uncover additional attributions. Because Brunton worked primarily in scattered small towns, many of his works have wound up in local historical societies or remain in private hands. Child anticipates that many new discoveries remain to be made. She is also working on a traveling exhibition that will place Brunton in the context of other convict artists. This should encourage further interest and assure that this forgotten artist achieves the recognition that he so clearly deserves.

NANCY FINLAY,
Independent curator and art historian