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Books Received, September 2015

by M.A.D. Staff

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Soldier, Engraver, Forger: Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe in America's New Republic by Deborah M. Child (New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2015, 124 pp., softbound, \$19.95 plus S/H from New England Historic Genealogical Society, [www.americanancestors.org] or [888] 296-3447).

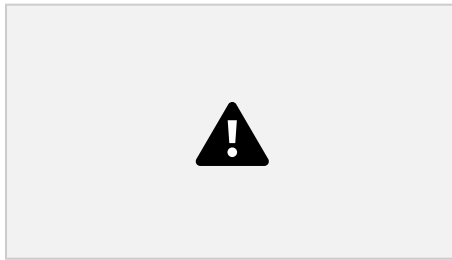
At the January 29, 1994, auction of the Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little collection, lot 350 was an 11¼" x 8¾" watercolor, pencil, and pen and ink on paper family register of the Butler Pinney family. Decorated with allegorical figures of Hope, Faith, Peace, and Charity and inscribed at the lower right "Mrs. Eunice Pinney," it was in its original carved giltwood and gesso frame. Attached to the cardboard backing was a jelly label on which Nina Fletcher Little had typed "Pinney Family record, Simsbury, Connecticut drawn by Eunice Pinney well-known folk artist (1770-1849). Design derived from the engraved family records of Richard Brunton." The family register sold for \$10,350 to Susan and Mark Laracy, a Connecticut couple.

The register was sold again at the sale of the Laracys' collection at Sotheby's on January 20, 2007, lot 65, for \$15,600. Both sale catalogs noted that the register was once owned by well-known dealer and collector George McKearin, who with his daughter Helen wrote pioneering books on American glass.

Eunice Pinney was embraced early as a folk artist by Alice Winchester and Jean Lipman, and in 1997 she was included in *The Flowering of American Folk Art*, the landmark exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the accompanying catalog, but who was Richard Brunton (1749-1832), the engraver of family registers? In this short, engaging, and well-illustrated biography, Deborah M. Child, a New Hampshire scholar, lecturer, and writer, tells us who he was and gives us a glimpse of the hard life of an itinerant artist in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Robert L. Thayer (1949-2008) found Brunton's engraved bookplates and family registers and knew that Brunton was a deserter from the British Army during the American Revolution and a

counterfeiter. William Lamson Warren wrote about Brunton as an itinerant craftsman in *Art in America* back in 1951 and 1953. The fact that Brunton was a counterfeiter of coins and banknotes made him even more appealing to Thayer and Child. Thayer found several types of family registers by Brunton, as well as engraved medallions and freehand watercolors, but did not live long enough to publish his research. Deborah Child picked up where Thayer left off. She found oil on canvas folk portraits attributed to Brunton, a broadside for the Boston, Plymouth & Sandwich Mail Stage, a mourning picture, a marriage register, more engraved medallions, and family registers, and in judicial archives she found engraved counterfeit paper money, all of which are illustrated.



Brunton, an engraver, diesinker, and artist of considerable ability, served as a grenadier in the British Army and fought with the Redcoats in some of the bloodiest battles of the American Revolution. In June 1779 he deserted. He married later in 1779 and then worked as an engraver in Boston and Providence. He and his wife moved in 1783 to Groton, Massachusetts, where “their reception was less than welcoming.” Their infant son died in March 1783, and there are no further records mentioning Brunton’s wife.

Brunton went next to Connecticut. He engraved family registers for those he had fought against and created poignant tokens for them that express reverence for love and learning, although most of his creative energy was spent making counterfeit money. He was arrested in 1795 and charged with counterfeiting. He returned to Massachusetts some time after his release in 1803 from New-Gate, Connecticut’s state prison in Granby. Arrested again in Boston in 1807, he spent four years in Massachusetts State Prison. After his release he lived as a pauper in Groton, until he was transferred in 1822 to the almshouse, where he continued to paint watercolors until he died there a decade later at age 83.

The circa 1799 engraved view of New-Gate Prison is Brunton’s most elaborate and largest engraving extant, measuring 20½" x 20¼". It illustrates life inside the wooden palisade fence. The prison yard was not an idle place, and prisoners were under the watchful eye of armed guards. The print is known in only two other original impressions. In 1870 another six to eight impressions were taken before the plate was moved to Boston and destroyed. The image Child illustrates is in the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford. It is not signed, but Brunton’s signature bird is in a tree.

It seems appropriate that a genealogical society would publish a book about an engraver of family records. It is remarkable that Deborah Child was able to write a fascinating biography of an itinerant craftsman who left no personal papers, signed his full name on engravings only four times (the remainder are initialed RB or have the cipher RB, and most are not marked at all), and spent most of his life on the run, eluding authorities.

The engraved work and watercolors Brunton left us and the three oil on canvas folk portraits attributed to him, one at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, and a pair at the Connecticut Historical Society, have enduring charm.

Nina Fletcher Little would have loved this book.

L.S-C.