

NICHOLAS HILLIARD AND HIS DEVON SITTERS

Nicholas Hilliard, well known as a painter, was also a goldsmith and jeweller of considerable importance, whose life and work have only been extensively studied within the past few years after a period of comparative neglect which followed his death in 1619. Yet he has always had admirers and there are scores of examples of his work in collections up and down the United Kingdom. His public career was highly successful for, widely popular as a court painter, he held the post of goldsmith, carver and limner to Queen Elizabeth whose likeness he painted on several occasions. Portraiture in England during the reign of Elizabeth Tudor was almost entirely the prerogative of the gentry and noble class, with a few merchants — often of gentle descent or allied by marriage to gentry families — also delineated. The full-scale portrait was concerned overwhelmingly with status: the paintings are filled with armour, batons, heraldic coats and devices, titles and extravagant dress. Roy Strong points out that informality in portraiture “hardly exists apart from the miniature which, because of its place in the etiquette of courtly love, comes nearer to recording intimacy of character than any other portrait form”.¹

The standard monograph on Hilliard is now that of Erna Auerbach² but Sir John Pope Hennessy’s lecture published soon after the fourth centenary of Hilliard’s birth is both perceptive and illuminating.³ He applauds the remark that “the largest magnifying glass only called out new beauties” from these *Elizabethan* miniatures⁴ and quotes part of a letter arising from Hilliard’s visit to Paris in 1577 that “this English painter is considered one of the most excellent in memory at least on a small sca-

le”.⁵ Hilliard came deeply under French court influence during the 1570’s but in fact he brought a new, quite separate and distinct English style to the miniature, of which Pope Hennessy explains the origins and motives. The miniatures were intended to be worn as objects of personal adornment: in effect part of a decorative scheme. More profoundly he argues “that the Elizabethan miniature was in an almost proprietary sense Elizabethan”, since it was linked with the peculiar nature of the theory and practice of a monarch “for whom style, like time, stood still”.⁶

For a good appreciation of Hilliard as a western and specifically Devon painter, one may turn to A.L. Rowse, who describes him as extravagant and improvident, with the aristocratic tastes of an aes-

5. *Ibid.* 15.

6. *Ibid.* 29.



FIGURE 1. N. Hilliard, *An Unknown Man* (called “Earl of Devon”). Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum.

1. *Tudor & Jacobean Portraits* (London, 1969), ix.

2. E. Auerbach, *Nicholas Hilliard* (London, 1961). This is the fullest account of his life and work.

3. *A lecture on Nicholas Hilliard* (London, 1949).

4. *Ibid.*, 11.

thete, who in his *Art of Limning* set down his thoughts on his art, emphasizing that the painting of miniatures requires diligence, much labour and, in short, dedication.⁷

Nicholas Hilliard was born in Exeter in 1547, the son of a local goldsmith and grandson, by his mother, of another city goldsmith, John Wall. Richard Hilliard, the painter's father, had been apprenticed to the grandfather and, in good story-book fashion, married his daughter.⁸ Nicholas, who was to do the same, migrated to London, where he served an apprenticeship to a prominent citizen named Robert Brandon, Chamberlain of that city and goldsmith to Queen Elizabeth. Hilliard's high reputation in his own day is attested by the poet John Donne, in 'The Storm', which was an account of the voyage to Cadiz that set out from Plymouth in the year 1596.

... a hand or eye

By Hilliard drawn is worth a history

By a worse painter made.⁹

And Donne's miniature was later painted by Hilliard's pupil, Isaac Oliver, another son of a goldsmith.¹⁰ During the sixties, while he was still mastering his skills, Hilliard was also winning a reputation as a painter of delicate miniatures on enamel. The details of this intricate art have been studied at length and many sitters of Hilliard's portraits have been identified, although some of them have remained unknown or obscure.¹¹

Hilliard's miniatures of his father and of his wife have survived. The portraits were presumably painted at Exeter where his father was a leading city figure and a substantial citizen. The artist's brother Jerome returned to Exeter after completing his apprenticeship in London and took up the freedom of the city in 1578 or 79.¹² Although he is himself not known to have returned to his native city, it seems likely that Hilliard painted, perhaps under contract entered into by his employer, one notable Devonian (although such a portrait is not known to have survived) for among the records of the Courtenays of Powderham Castle is a bond given in 1571 by Robert Brandon,¹³ Hilliard's father-in-law.

There are, however, unascribed portraits from that time. The supposition that the Courtenays employed Hilliard is strengthened by the known fact that in 1572 Hilliard was engaged, by the Manners family, to paint a portrait of the Countess of Rutland. It seems likely therefore that when Elizabeth Manners, sister-in-law of the Countess, was married in January 1572/3 to Sir William Courtenay of Powderham (1553-1630)¹⁴ Hilliard was again engaged to portray the happy couple. No such wedding portraits are known to exist, but, nevertheless, one of the splendid miniatures painted by Hilliard about this time was traditionally called Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon (Fig. 1). This was in fact the last Earl of Devon, who died in 1556, in his early twenties. Thereafter, it was the head of the Courtenay family (who did not



FIGURE 2. N. Hilliard, *An Unknown Man*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

hold the earldom) who was the heir to Powderham. This was William Courtenay, who came of age about the time of his marriage and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth a few years later. Although well enough known at the time, owing to his success as a courtier, his eminence in the county and his long life, later generations tended to forget Sir William. On the other hand, the history of the Courtenay Earls of Devon remained well-known and of wide interest, and therefore the name of their last representative may well have been mistakenly used for the portrait, although the date of

7. A.L. Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance* (London, 1971), 172-5. *A treatise concerning the arte of limning*, printed in Philip Norman (ed.), *The first annual volume of the Walpole Society* (Oxford, 1912), 1-50.

8. John Wall's daughter was Lawrence. For Richard Helyer's apprenticeship to Wall in 1546, see *Exeter Freeman*, ed. Rowe & Jackson (1973), 76.

9. *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. A.L. Clement (New York, 1966), 62.

10. A.L. Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance*, 162, 175.

11. Auerbach, *op. cit.*

12. *Exeter Freeman*, ed. Rowe & Jackson (1973), 95.

13. *Notes and Gleanings* (Exeter, 1888-92), II, 181.

14. For details of Courtenay, see the article by John Roberts in *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* (1956).

his early death rules out the possibility of the ascription being correct.

Some of Hilliard's miniatures of men from the county are far better known. One such was of Sir Francis Drake, three were of the painter himself. The most notable, perhaps, for its subject and its own superb quality, was that of Sir Walter Raleigh, painted when the courtier was still rising in the Queen's favour and had recently been knighted (Fig. 2). Charles Blount, later Earl of Devonshire, was painted in 1587, and Sir Thomas Bodley in 1598, the year he began to form his library at Oxford, but other, unattributed, portraits may be of Devon models and in some cases further research could enable us to determine who these were. The group painted in 1572 seems particularly interesting in this respect, for it includes the portrait formerly called the Earl of Devon.¹⁵ The splendid portrait of a man aged 24 in 1572 (Fig. 3) for example (who could hardly be Sir William Courtenay, since he was then only about 19 years of age) has supposedly a companion portrait of a lady aged 18 in that year.¹⁶ From that time onwards, however, at least a dozen portraits of sitters exist to whom no names can be attributed.

Certainly, however, we may identify the portrait of Leonard Darr (Fig. 4). The model for this splendid miniature has been known because his name appears around the figure, where he is described as 'of Tavistock', a town in the extreme west of Devon, although this statement has either misled or rendered more difficult his full identification, since the only man of this name was for many years resident at Totnes, a South Devon port and it is from there that come details of his life and career. The chief authority for Hilliard's life and art describes the work:

"One of the most beautiful portraits is that Tavistock merchant, who was 37 in 1591. It is bigger in size than usual, and most exquisitely modelled in bright-red hatching lines, almost monumental in conception, with a tall black hat and the clear unfolding of the ruff against the blue background with the calligraphic lettering in gold that, because of its brilliance, stands right out and supports the whole composition."¹⁷

Darr was born about 1554. It seems very likely that his father was the merchant named John Dar-



FIGURE 3. N. Hilliard, *Sir Walter Raleigh*. London, National Portrait Gallery.

re.¹⁸ who paid the large fine of £5 to be admitted to the freedom of Exeter in 1560 or 61.¹⁹ He could then no doubt be in touch with the Hilliard family, perhaps friendly with them. The prominence of the Darrs is difficult to assess but there was a Martin Dare or Darr of Southampton, mentioned as a merchant in 1556²⁰ and there is the interesting possibility that he was kin to Virginia Dare the first English child born in North America.²¹ Leonard Darr was thus a contemporary of Sir Walter Raleigh and he became a prominent merchant in Totnes. His marriage to a daughter of Sir George Bonde, a leading city of London merchant,²² indicates his successful climb to an assured social position. Children were born to the couple from 1589 to 1603.²³ His social standing is further indicated by the important suit which he brought in the Star Chamber on behalf of a minor, Percival Hart, from whom he held a lease. Darr engaged a leading lawyer, Serjeant Yelverton, and the Devon serjeant

19. *Exeter Freeman*, 84.

20. D. Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies* (Cambridge, 1965), 160, 203, 258-63. Plaintiff in an Elizabethan Chancery case relating to the Scilly Isles *Lists & Indexes* (P.R.O.), vii, 120.

21. D.B. Quinn *The Roanoke Voyages*, I, 41, 510, 531, 539n has many of the known facts about Virginia Dare's family which was armigerous.

22. T.S. Willan, *The Muscovy Merchants of 1555* (Manchester, 1953), 81.

23. *The Western Antiquary* (Plymouth, 1893), x3.

15. And an Unknown Lady aged 52 in that year. Auerbach, *op. cit.*, 62.

16. Auerbach, *op. cit.*, 60, 107.

17. Auerbach, *op. cit.*

18. Of Totnes — appointed attorney in a Devon deed of sale in 1552. Tingey Ms. Catalogue of Enrolled Deeds no 367. Devon Record Office.

John Hele for the case, accusing Thomas Amere-dith, (son of a prominent Exeter lawyer) and others, of conspiracy to frustrate the lease. Three of the four defence lawyers were leading Devon barristers.²⁴

Together with Richard Kelly, another Totnes merchant, who had dealings with Robert Cecil, one of the Queen's leading ministers, Darr built 'The Crescent' of Dartmouth, a 250 ton ship, for which they received 250 crowns bounty from the Exchequer.²⁵ The ship served both in 1588 in the Armada campaign and again in 1589 against the Spaniards; a service apparently without reimbursement. Darr declared that he held a quarter share and that the voyages shared with Kelly had cost a total of £5,000.²⁶ Darr was an active member of the town community at a time when Totnes was the third most important of Devon towns, ranking after Exeter and Plymouth, and this brought him a good deal of work and some controversy, for Totnes was a lively town. His letters in 1601 to the borough from London where he was serving as one of its members of Parliament, reveal him to be a capable, methodical and conscientious representative whose own interests at that time coincided

with the town's.²⁷ In 1602, since he had moved from Totnes to South Pool, a coastal village some twenty miles to the south-west, he wished another to be elected to his place among the governing body of Totnes; and also asked for certain moneys due to him; adding:

"albeit I be not of your Society yet in my Love unto you all, and to the good estate of the whole town, I will imagine that I am always one, and will be ready to do for it all the good I may."²⁸

Ten years later Darr was certified as able to lend £20 to the King.²⁹ In his will he left money for the poor of South Pool, his new home, in the form of loaves to be laid quarterly on his tomb-stone, but if the churchwardens defaulted in their duty, the money was instead to go to the Mayor of Totnes for the benefit of the poor there.³⁰ The depth of Leonard Darr's artistic taste may be judged, perhaps, by the fact that he was given a fine alabaster monument, erected for himself and his wife in the remote church at South Pool. This is described as a "standing wall monument with two good kneeling alabaster figures and a simple surround with black columns and an entablature".³¹

This obscure local merchant, whose miniature is equal or superior in quality to those painted for many of Queen Elizabeth's greatest courtiers no doubt had the taste to seek out such quality and was fortunate enough to be able to afford his fellow-countryman's painting. The quiet perfection and stillness which Hilliard sought was not maintained by the work of artists in the succeeding reign but it was achieved triumphantly and manifested in the miniatures of Leonard Darr and numerous other portraits of his contemporaries from Devon.

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24. PRO Sta Cha 5/H/27/16.

25. PRO Index 6800f. 2116.

26. PRO E 134/8 Jas I/Hill. 23.

27. Details and references may be found in the MA Thesis of John Roberts 'The Parliamentary Representation of Devon and Dorset 1559-1601'. University of London (1958).

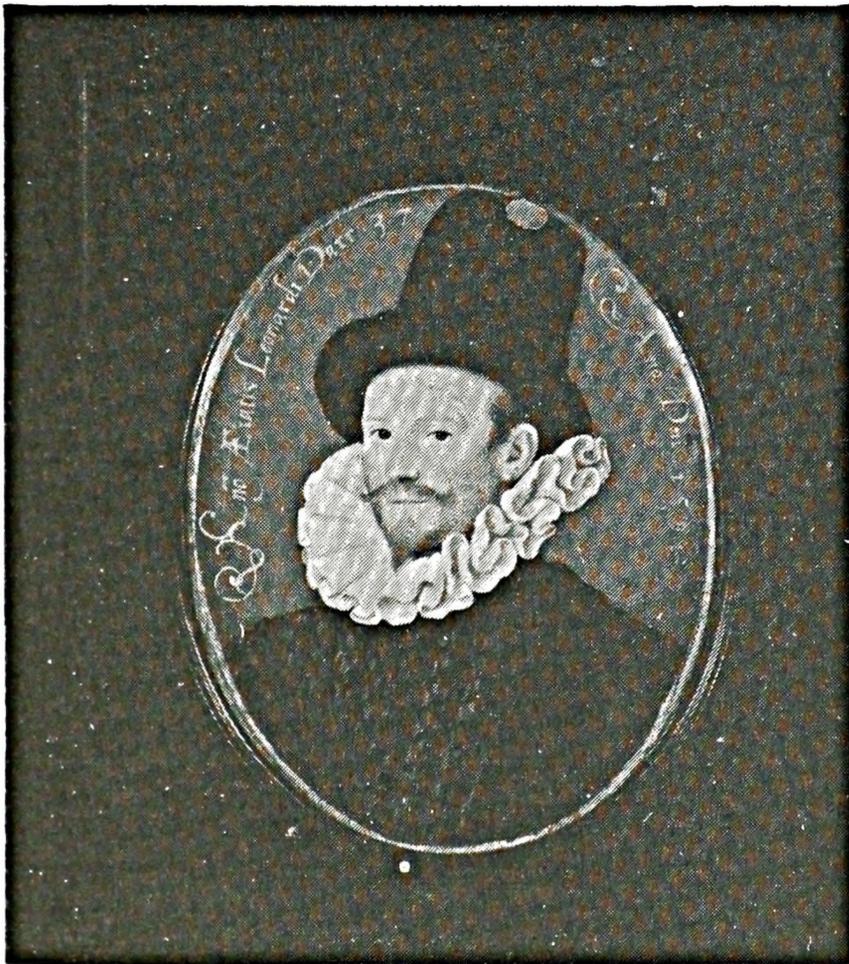


FIGURE 4. N. Hilliard. *Leonard Darr*. Halstead, Duke of Portland.

28. Totnes Recs. Ltr. dated 17 July 1602. Devon Record Office.

29. *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* (Exeter, 1909-), xxvi, 124.

30. *The Western Antiquary*.

31. Pevsner, *South Devon* (1952), 267.