

Taken from English Writing Masters by Ambrose Heal

Thomas Tomkins (1743-1816).

Isaac D'Israeli suspected that "maniacal vanity" was peculiar to the writing-masters of England. If this were true, none of them had better excuse for this failing than Thomas Tomkins. To no other penman was it given to be complimented by four princes simultaneously or to be treated as a "brother brush" by two R.A.'s. Small wonder then that he secretly aspired to membership of the Academy and felt aggrieved that even the lesser honour of an invitation to the Academy dinner was denied him. Exactly why he should have been held in so much esteem in his own day--and much later--is not very clear. Half a century earlier his work would hardly have held its own in Bickham's collection of current calligraphy, assembled in his *Universal Penman*; and viewed to-day it does not strike us as being in any way remarkable. Be that as it may, barely twenty years have passed since the writer of the article in the D.N.B. asserted that "for boldness of design, inexhaustible variety, and elegant freedom, he was justly considered to have attained the highest eminence in his art".

Of Tomkins' upbringing and early days nothing seems to be known. For many years he kept a school in Foster Lane. A trade-card issued from there reads "Messrs. Willis and Tomkins in Foster Lane, Cheapside, London. Board and Qualify Young Gentlemen for Trades, Marchants Counting Houses and The Public Offices Etc". Later he carried on a writing academy with John Reddall as his partner. Somewhere about 1810 he was acting as Writing-Master at St Paul's School where Samuel Bentley, the printer, was one of his pupils, and it has been said that he instituted there a beautiful form of script which was a tradition in the school for generations. Dr Lupton, the headmaster, styled him "an unrivalled teacher in the Art" of calligraphy.* For forty years (1776-1816) he was employed by the city of London to inscribe and embellish the addresses and honorary freedoms presented by the Corporation. It was in 1816, when the Dukes of Kent, Sussex, and Gloucester, with Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, attended at the Guildhall to receive the freedom of the City, that they bestowed upon Tomkins their royal commendations. Framed duplicates of the honorary freedoms, written out by him and presented to celebrated generals and admirals for their victories, are preserved in the Guildhall; and many duplicates of addresses presented by the Royal Academy to their Majesties on public occasions were placed in the library as specimens of his penmanship. A transcript of the charter granted by Charles 11 to the Irish Society, containing 150 folio pages, was one of the most notable productions of his pen. More generally accessible specimens of his work are title-pages to Macklin's Bible (the original he bequeathed to the British Museum), Thomson's *Seasons*, *The Social Day* by P. Coxe, *The Microcosm of London* and the Houghton Collection of Prints. A transcript of Lord Nelson's letter announcing his victory at the battle of the Nile was made by Tomkins, and engravings of it were published.

In addition to his calligraphic reputation Tomkins had his social successes. From his portraits one sees that he was aristocratic in appearance, handsome and debonair. He was an intimate of Johnson, Reynolds, Wilkes and other celebrities of his day, whom-it is said-he would astonish by the facility with which he could describe a perfect circle with a stroke of the pen.

His portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which hangs in the Guildhall, has a particular interest as being the last from this artist's brush. It was executed in 1789. An admirable mezzotint was made from it by Charles Turner and "published by the proprietor [Tomkins], Foster Lane London May 6. 1805" - Sir Joshua refused to let Tomkins, as a brother artist, pay him more than L50 and when it was finished he said, "And now I will give you a specimen of my writing " and wrote with his brush on the back of the canvas "J. Reynolds pinxit 1789", a compliment that the artist paid to few of his sitters, for he rarely put his name to his works. Unfortunately the signature is lost to us now as the canvas has been re-lined. Another portrait of Tomkins was engraved by Schiavonetti after a painting by George Engleheart. A beautiful enamel was done from this by Henry Bone, R.A. Tomkins' bust was sculpted by Sir Francis Chantrey, R.A., who likewise refused to charge him his full fee-which at that time was 150 guineas-because it was "for a fellow artist". Such recognitions by famous artists must have gone some way to assuage the writing-master's chagrin in not being admitted to academic honours or even to the Academy dinner. D'Israeli in his *Curiosities of Literature* does not fail to make full play with Tomkins' disappointment in his amusing essay "The History of Writing Masters": "But an eminent artist and wit once looking on this fine bust of Tomkins declared that

'this man had died for want of a dinner'-a fate however not so lamentable as it appeared. Our penman had long felt that he was degraded in the scale of genius by not being received at the Academy, at least among the class of engravers: the next approach to academic honour he conceived would be that of appearing as a guest at their annual dinner. These invitations are as limited as they are select, and all the Academy persisted in considering Tomkins as a writing master! Many a year passed, every intrigue was practised, every remonstrance was urged, every stratagem of courtesy tried; but never ceasing to deplore the failure of his hopes, it preyed on his spirits, and the luckless calligrapher went down to his grave without dining at the Academy! "

Towards the end of his life Tomkins is said to have resided at Chelsea, but it seems certain that he died at his house in Sermon Lane, Doctors Commons, in September 1816, aged seventy-three. He bequeathed his portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds to the City of London.

Tomkins' most important calligraphic work was published in 1777 with the title "The Beauties of Writing exemplified in a Variety of Plain and Ornamental Penmanship. Designed to excite Emulation in the valuable Art, engraved by Joseph Ellis". It is remarkable for the list of subscribers which includes a large number of names distinguished in the arts, among them Sir William Chambers, George Dance, David Garrick, Sir Joshua Reynolds, George Romney, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Benjamin West and William Woollett. Other editions appeared in 1808/9 and 1844. This copy-book was followed in 1779 by Alphabets written for the Improvement of Youth in Round, Text and Small Hands. His other works were: "Rays of Genius, Collected to Enlighten the Rising Generation", poems published in 2 volumes (1806) to which his portrait engraved by Lewis Schiavonetti was prefixed; Poems on various Subjects, of which the 12th edition was published in 1807; The Beauties of English Poetry (1807)

When James Parkinson finally disposed of the contents of the Leverian Museum by auction in 1806, specimens of Tomkins' penmanship formed lots Nos. 862 and 3492

In the Sunday Times, 15 April 1928, Mr E. V. Lucas devoted his weekly causerie to Thomas Tomkins.