

## AN ACCOUNT OF THE MATHER-BYLES PORTRAITS

BY JOHN H. EDMONDS

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THE gift of Mrs. Frederick Lewis Gay consists of five portraits purchased by our late associate, Frederick Lewis Gay, from the estate of Hon. Mather Byles Des Brisay of Bridgewater, N. S.; at Libbie's, April 4, 1908. For years, in conjunction with Mr. Goodspeed, he had been watching these very portraits, and he was surprised indeed when, on returning from Libbie's in a search for other Byles material some months before the sale, I informed him that I had seen the portraits so long sought.

Because Boston dealers and collectors knew so little of this group of paintings and they were in bad condition from exposure to fire and smoke, Mr. Goodspeed secured them for Mr. Gay, with very little competition, inside of ten minutes, the only serious bidding being for Copley's Mather Byles. The condition of the portraits as shown in Libbie's sale catalogue and their condition today is an interesting study of restoration properly done. Shortly after they came into Mr. Gay's possession they were turned over to Messrs. Allerton and Thompson of the Museum of Fine Arts, and the result is plainly evident.

The portraits are as follows: Rev. Cotton Mather (1727) and Rev. Mather Byles (1739), by Peter Pelham; Rev. Mather Byles (1767); by John Singleton Copley; Rev. Mather Byles, Jr., (1784), by Mather Brown; and a self-portrait of Mather Brown (1812).

Rev. Cotton Mather, 1663-1728, son of Increase Mather, one of the most famous of the early American theologians and Fellow of the Royal Society, wrote at

least 465 books and tracts that not only were published but read. The portrait is an unfinished replica of the original Pelham, already in possession of the Society, from which he engraved in 1727 the well-known mezzotint, the first in English-speaking America.

Rev. Mather Byles, 1707-1788, nephew of Cotton Mather, and named for his illustrious grandfather, was pastor of the Hollis Street Church from 1733 until 1776, was famous as a wit and a Tory, and died in 1788. The portrait by Peter Pelham, 1739, shows him in his Master's robe of crimson and is the original of the mezzotint by Pelham.

Rev. Mather Byles, 1707-1788, by John Singleton Copley, 1767, was until 1908 unknown. Every one was familiar with reproductions of the Copley with the cornelian ring, but no one had heard of this portrait, painted in Copley's best American period, which was sent to Halifax in 1784.

Rev. Mather Byles, Jr., 1735-1814, by Mather Brown, his nephew, 1784. Mather Byles, Jr., was pastor of the Congregational Church at New London until he went over to the Anglican Church; rector of Christ Church in Boston until he resigned late in the afternoon of April 18, 1775; chaplain of the garrison at Halifax, N. S., where he went at the evacuation; and rector of Trinity Church, St. John, N. B., where he died in 1814. The portrait was painted at London in 1784 by his nephew, Mather Brown, an early pupil of Gilbert Stuart, and the head shows the Burgundy red of Stuart and a decided resemblance to Washington across the eyes.

Mather Brown, 1761-1831, originally Mather Byles Brown, was son of Gawen Brown and his second wife, Elizabeth, whose portrait was painted by Copley. He received his first instructions in painting from his aunt and Gilbert Stuart. In 1780 he went to Europe with letters from his grandfather to Copley and Franklin. The latter sent him to Benjamin West and he became his favorite pupil and closest friend. As

a portrait painter he painted about everybody of note in England, and his historical paintings compare very favorably with those of Benjamin West. This self-portrait, painted in 1812, did not reach his aunts, Catherine and Mary Byles, in Boston until 1822, and no wonder they remarked on his youthful appearance. He died in affluence in 1831 and left his aunts a comfortable estate.

Rev. Mather Byles died intestate, July 5, 1788, and the settlement of his estate caused a breach in the family, then consisting of Mary and Catherine Byles of Boston, Rev. Mather Byles of St. John, N. B., and Mather Brown of London, which was not healed for many years. In a petition of Mary and Catherine Byles, presented in 1791, they declare that the death of their father intestate blends the personal estate of his two wives with his own, and that they had often heard him express his approbation that his two sets of children should separately inherit the estate brought him by their mothers, which he had ever insisted on in his written wills; and that at the time of their father's decease a number of their friends raised a sum of money to defray the expenses of his funeral, which was designed as a donation to them and not to the other heirs who were then absent and almost unknown to the donors; and further, that as some expense had attended their brother's liberal education and their sister's marriage, they begged some compensation for their care of their aged parent. In the division they go still further and declare Rev. Mather Byles to be an alien out of the Commonwealth and Mather Brown as absent beyond the sea.

The inventory of the estate, made by Dr. Samuel Parker, Rev. Samuel West and Richard Green, merchant, goes into great detail but makes no specific mention of portraits. Possibly they are included in the "eleven old pictures." Among the curious items noted in the inventory, which covers six closely written pages, are twelve pairs of spectacles, a drawer

with valuable prints, a diamond ring and eight gold rings with stones, a nephritic stone set in gold (an external remedy for kidney trouble, which ran in the Byles family), six wig boxes, a box with christening blankets, etc., (a cherished possession of our late associate, Henry Herbert Edes), a case of silver dessert knives and forks, a pepper box with five tops, a case with fifteen bottles, a leather lolling chair, a corner cupboard with perfume bottles, a hand organ with four barrels, a backgammon table, a checquer board, a magic lantern, a camera obscura, etc., Solomon's Temple, an opera glass, a drawer of fishing gear, a drawer of geographical maps, and twenty walking sticks.

The library, consisting of 232 volumes f°, 180 volumes 4°, and 2394 in 8°, 12° and 24°, was sold at auction in 1790 after his son, Rev. Mather Byles, had taken for himself a considerable number of books.

Mary Byles died in Boston, October 1, 1832, and in her will left the residue of her estate to her sister, Catherine Byles, and her affectionate love to Susannah Byles, widow of her late brother, Rev. Mather Byles; her nephew, Mather Brown; and her nieces, Rebecca Almon, Mary Byles, Anna Desbrisay, Sarah Desbrisay, their children and grandchildren.

Catherine Byles died in Boston, July 19, 1837, and in her will, proved August 28, 1837, left \$20 to Susannah Byles, widow of her brother, Dr. Byles, the residue, real and personal, to be sold and the proceeds divided in sixths as follows: Rebecca Almon of Halifax; Louisa Ellen Desbrisay and Georgina Caroline Desbrisay of Devonshire, England, orphan daughter of my niece, Anna Desbrisay; Louisa Hare of Portsea, England; Sarah Desbrisay of Dartmouth, N. S.; Sarah Louisa Byles of Burlington, N. J., for the support and education of her four children by my nephew, Belcher Byles; and Mather Byles of Teingmouth, England, son of my late nephew, Mather Byles.

From the personal estate, however, was reserved a

carved arm-chair with a crown (brought from England by her grandfather, Lieutenant Governor Tailer, according to Miss Leslie), a telescope in a box, a camera, all the pictures in the house, a round table with leaves, a looking glass with brass sconces, a bell-metal skillet, all the books, trunks containing family linen, clothing, plate, jewels, manuscripts, etc., a low chair, a pine table with drawer containing curiosities, a small painted table, a large concave speculum with appendage, stand and skeleton, etc., and a carved bellows, brought to America by Rev. John Cotton (200 years old). These were to be delivered to Mr. Mather Byles Almon of Halifax, N. S., to be distributed in a fair manner among the heirs, except that the carved bellows were to be given to Rev. Mather Byles Desbrisay, a disposition agreed upon by the testator and her sister, lately deceased. Thomas Haskins, distiller, the executor, gave bond of \$18,000 and his sureties were George F. Haskins, clerk, (later a Roman Catholic priest) and Ralph Haskins, merchant.

The estate inventoried at \$17,512.24 (a fair amount for a lady who had lived on the bounty of her neighbors and friends since the beginning of the Revolution) and included in the "Furniture of the Parlour:" portrait of Mather Byles (the Copley with the cornelian ring) and Mather Byles Brown (the Mather Brown self-portrait), \$31; Moses in the Rushes, \$30, (by Mather Brown, now belonging to the heirs of Mr. Justice Langley of Halifax, N. S., who set a great value upon it); Ballshazar, \$10, (probably by Mather Brown); other paintings and pictures, \$20; a camera obscura, \$30; a telescope, \$30; a lot of books and sundries, \$30. The executor's account, duly allowed December 18, 1838, reports that the value of the furniture delivered Mather Byles Almon was \$258.05 and that Francis Jackson (the abolitionist) was paid \$2 as a witness to the will.

Mather Byles Almon evidently divided these treasures impartially. Rev. Mather Byles Desbrisay re-

ceived these portraits as well as John Cotton's bellows, the family Bible, etc. The Copley portrait of Mather Byles (that with the cornelian ring) and the portraits of Mary and Catherine Byles by Henry Pelham (Copley's Boy with the Squirrel) are still in possession of their descendants.

Incidentally, journal letters were a Byles family practice, a diary from day to day, with the letters numbered and dated in sequence. The New England Historic Genealogical Society has the letter book of Mather Byles, which contains those of his daughters, Mary and Catherine, from 1778 to 1784, rather curiously presented by Mr. Gay's uncle, Rev. Caleb Davis Bradlee.

Harvard and the Historical Society have typewritten copies made from letters in possession of Col. William Bruce Almon of Halifax and Mrs. William Adlington of England, for Mr. Gay, covering 1793 to 1818 and consisting of some 200,000 words. If the missing letters from 1784 to 1793 can be located, a series of journal letters from 1778 to 1818, covering a most important period of New England history, mostly written by a woman whose education was far better than that then received at Harvard, according to Harrison Gray, will be completed.

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