

Francis Sykes and his family¹

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Francis Sykes after Liotard, Princess Elisabeth Caroline (Royal Collection)

WHEN I WAS A PUBLISHER many years ago, I was privileged to have on my list (and to have the benefit of his advice) Dr John Sykes, physicist and lexicographer, and one of the most brilliant minds I have come across. I have no idea if he was connected with the family of the enamelist Francis Sykes, but his great celebrity as the most consistent winner of *The Times* crossword championship pointed to a skill that would certainly have helped unravel the story I set out below, and which I stumbled across while hoping (in vain) to establish the identity of an unrelated pastellist.

The information in various reference books contains a number of confusions, and the story can only be told by consulting a very wide range of sources, some of which contain material errors and omissions which ought to be corrected – not least because on the authority of the famous antiquary Ralph Thoresby, who was related to the family, a descendant was denied the arms to which he was entitled. Civil war tensions combine with undocumented life events for the crypto-Catholic branch of the family. Unlike crosswords, art historical research should end up with a story which is more interesting than the puzzles that obscured it (and worthwhile even when incomplete), so I shall present the outline of a story in a linear narrative. I don't think it has been pieced together before. It may I hope inspire others to add some missing components.

You can find an extended pedigree with the principal biographical data on my website at [this link](#).

¹ This essay first appeared as a post on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 22 November 2015. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, "Francis Sykes and his family", *Pastels & pastellists*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Sykes.pdf>.

revealed in the catalogue which can be seen in full on the excellent website artworld.york.ac.uk at [this link](#).

The disposal of the pictures was in conformity with his will (Gulielmi Sykes of the parish of St Giles in the Fields, painter) which was proved 11 February 1724/5 (National Archives, Prerogative Court of Canterbury). In it his wife, his sons William and James and his grandson Luke are mentioned. William took over the business, but himself died three years later. This time the will (proved 23 May 1728) contains a number of clues that have been overlooked. Notably he again provides for his pictures to be sold, but the proceeds are to be used for the benefit of his two sons, Francis and Luke: each is to be “apprenticed to an able Master in Painting”, but he specifies that that master should, in the case of Luke, be “Mr Wootton”, and in the case of Francis, “Sir James Thornhill”. Both sons were therefore probably below the age of 14 when the will was made (11 March 1727):

...worth of the money arising out of my said son Francis's part and
 proportion of the said one third part as they shall think proper to
 put my said son Francis apprentice to some Master in painting or
 which service may be. James Thornhill for the term of seven
 years and the money which shall remain after such application to be
 put out by my said executor to the best advantage and the interest
 to be applied for Cloaths and other necessaries till my son shall or
 attain to his age of one and twenty years or until the expiration
 of his said apprenticeship at the discretion of my said executor
 and upon my said son Francis attaining to his age of twenty one
 years or at the expiration of his said apprenticeship or
 discretion of my said executor then do hereby order and direct my
 executor to pay to my said son Francis all such sums as shall remain
 unpaid of the said one third part to him before given and bequeathed
 to him the said Francis and if either of my said sons or Francis by
 give and bequeath the remaining one third part of my said son's
 part of my Estate bequeathed to my wife and Luke...

The auction took place at Cooper's, Covent-Garden, 23 January 1728/9 and following days. This was announced in the *Daily Post*, 14 January 1728/9, and again the catalogue can be consulted at [this link](#).

This followed what must have been an unseemly row between members of his family, resulting in this notice in the *Daily Journal*, 8 November 1728 (repeated a week later):

Whereas Mr. JAMES SYKES, of Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, did, upon the Decease of his Brother, the late famous Mr. WILLIAM SYKES, Painter, advertise himself his Successor, to the Prejudice of his Eldest Son: This is therefore to inform the Publick, that his Nephew, Mr. LUKE SYKES, does take in the Business as his deceased Father did, and at the same Dwelling House.

Little more is known of James. The *Daily Journal* for 30 August 1731 reported that he was “attacked by three Street-Robbers, at the Corner of Duke-street, near Vere-street, but he making a brisk Defence, and others coming to his Assistance, they thought fit to make off.” He died in 1737, according to a piece in *Notes & Queries*, 1882: but this may be an error (see below), as the will proved on 13 April contains no information definitively identifying his relationships.

Of Luke Sykes nothing more is known. But our story resumes with his brother Francis Valentine Sykes (1715–1771), a miniaturist of considerable distinction whose biography has hitherto been completely unknown.

His date of birth and full baptismal names are provided by a James Sykes (writing in *Notes & Queries* 1861–1882, as QFVF, initials based on the family motto), who is unaware that his ancestor was an artist.

It isn't certain if Francis Sykes was taken on by Thornhill, as his father intended. Rather the first sighting we have is from two engravings made after Thornhill's son-in-law William Hogarth: an undated portrait of the actor John Hipsley as *Sir Francis Gripe*, and this engraving after one of Hogarth's *Four Times of Day*:



Sykes's plate, known as “The Half-Starved boy” (reproduced from the Metropolitan Museum of Art impression), is inscribed “WH pinx. F. Sykes sculp. 1730”, leading to a dispute about the

year: 1738 or 1739, being suggested, e.g. by Hogarth's biographer John Nichols (who was also unsure if Sykes was a pupil of Hogarth or Thornhill). However the best testimony about Sykes's training (and the main clues to the puzzle of his identity) are given by the artist himself, as reported in the *Diary of Syllas Neville 1767–1788* (Oxford, 1950, p. 84 *& passim*), who knew Sykes at the end of his life. Apparently "Hogarth for water-colours [sic] and Zink for enamel were Mr. Sykes's masters" (he also taught Samuel Cotes, and esteemed "the elder Cootes the best artist in Crayons").

We don't know at what date he studied with Zincke, but it seems that quite early (before 1740) he was married, to a Theresa Rigmaden or Rigmaiden (1713–1791), the daughter and heiress of Francis Rigmaden of Twickenham. Her ancestry plays a crucial role in unravelling the story: one of the remarks that appears in various sources is that Sykes was a descendant of the man who hid Charles II in an oak tree at Boscobel after the battle of Worcester. In fact the descendant was Theresa, not Sykes; but even here the sources were garbled, as a flurry of insertions in *Notes & Queries* in the late nineteenth century revealed. Some propagated the idea that Theresa was a Pendrell, the name of several of those loyalists who concealed the king; but in fact her ancestor was Francis Yates, another of those involved. All of this matters because the grateful monarch rewarded these men with perpetual annuities of £100, to pass to their lineal descendants; with the result that there are extensive files proving their genealogies in the National Archives (summaries are printed in several books about the Boscobel incident). They are the basis for much of the information in this post.

We know that Sykes had settled in The Hague by 1743, when, on 27 August, he registered his will there. A son, also Francis, was born c.1740, and was last recorded in India c.1764, where he is thought to have died (although a Francis Sykes married a Catherine Ridley in Calcutta in 1766, possibly no relation). But the most important member of the next generation, Francis's second son Henry Sykes (see below), was born in The Hague in 1743/44; a daughter Theresa was born in 1749. It is clear that the family's connections with The Netherlands had not ended with William's death: Francis's aunt Ann Sykes is reported to have founded a convent in Bruges, where she was still living in 1740.

By 1752 Sykes was in Paris, for reasons that will emerge. Here he was recorded as purchasing a large group of miniatures by Petitot at the sale (from 27 November to 22 December) of the banker Cottin, apparently for resale back in London. He appeared a few years later in *Les Affiches de Paris* in 1754 as "peintre miniaturiste du duc d'Orléans". But he led a hand-to-mouth existence, living in a furnished room in the rue du Petit-Lion, unable to pay his rent or his suppliers, and spending his advances before delivering his work. Thus in 1752, the goldsmiths Garand and veuve Ravechot consigned to him a gold box to be enamelled for the maréchal de Richelieu, and advanced him 1747 livres. Three years later Sykes had spent the money without commencing the work, and refused to return the box. The maréchal set the lieutenant de police on to him, and had Sykes imprisoned in the Bastille until he agreed to finish the work. (Henri Lapauze, in the journal *La Renaissance*, 1924 tells the story, but confuses the artist with one George Sykes, an artist later known for his expertise in drawing portraits on board with a red hot poker; the confusion persists in the reference books.)

Essentially the same story was told very differently by the artist himself, to the actress George Anne Bellamy (c.1731–1788). The background to the story was reported *London Evening Post*, 4 September 1755: a certain Peter Sykes, formerly an eminent merchant, who died in Toulouse on 19 August 1755, had left his fortune equally to Bellamy and a "James Sykes, a resident of Utrecht" (who one speculates might be the uncle of Francis reported as dead in 1733). According to her own account (in her *Apology*...), Bellamy, who was habitually short of funds, was surprised to be told by a friend that her "fortune was made", before reading a newspaper

report to her concerning the death, “a short time before” of “Thomas Sykes, Esq” [sic] who “had died in the South of France, and had left his fortune in the English funds, and his property at the Hague, both of which was supposed to be very considerable, to Miss Bellamy, belonging to one of the theatres.” Bellamy’s unsuccessful attempts to recover this legacy are related in her autobiography; the funds were ultimately confiscated by the Dutch authorities. Some time later, finding herself in Antwerp, she pursued the matter with Mr Sykes’s brother [sic]: this must have been Francis. There she

learnt that Mr *Sykes*, (who, besides his profession as a painter, kept a jeweller’s and bijou shop) having had an invitation from the Duke de Berry, in order to make some alterations in his Grace’s gallery, was gone to Paris. Some other great personage taking offence at Mr Sykes’s giving the Duke the preference to himself, had procured a *Lettre de cachet* against him. And as he was one day at the coffee-house, an exempt took him aside, and desired he would take an airing with him, in a coach which stood at the door, as far as the Bastile. It would have been in vain for him to resist, and equally as vain to enquire the reason. He had only time to request of a gentleman of his acquaintance, who was in the room, to let his wife know of the disaster. This his friend did; and it had such an effect upon her that she lost her senses in consequence of it. Such being their unfortunate situation, it was much feared neither Mr nor Mrs *Sykes* would ever return to their family more.

Soon after, Sykes reappeared in London, where three notices appearing in the *Gazette* between 30 March and 10 April 1756 (as the bankruptcy law required) explain the reasons for his stay abroad:

The following Person being a Fugitive for Debt, and beyond the Seas on or before the first Day of January 1755, and having surrendered himself to the Keeper of the King’s Bench Prison in the County of Surry, hereby gives Notice, that he intends to take the Benefit of the late Act of Parliament made in the Twenty Eighth Year of the Reign of his present Majesty King George the Second, intituled, An Act for Relief of Insolvent Debtors, at the next General or Quarter Sessions of the Peace to be held in and for the County of Surry, or at the Adjournment of that, or of the last General or Quarter Sessions, which shall happen next after Thirty Days from the FIRST Publication of the undermentioned Name, viz.

Third Notice.

**Francis Valentine Sykes, formerly of Villars Street .
York Buildings in the Strand, in the County of
Middlesex, late of the Hague in Holland, and last of
Paris in France, Gentleman.**

Back in London he resumed his practice as an enamelist, creating a small number of miniatures which are mostly only attributed to him. One signed example is this very fine 1759 enamel, in 1917 (when this terrible photo was taken) in the collection of Ernst Ludwig Großherzog von Hessen und bei Rhein (to whose mother, Princess Alice, it was bequeathed by Princess Sophie Matilda of Gloucester (1773–1844), her godmother):



Francis Sykes after Liotard, Princess Elizabeth Caroline, sd 1759

A second version, not signed or dated, is surely also by Sykes, and is still in the Royal Collection; reproduced at the start of this post. Although not remarked in the Royal Collection online database, the image derives from Liotard's well-known pastel of the princess – but with a change of dress, so that it matches the pastel copy of the Liotard also in the Royal Collection:



The date of the Hesse enamel, 1759, is some six years after the Liotard; it may be that the copies were made on the princess's death in that year. It is probable that the other enamel was made at the same time, and surely by Sykes. The authorship of the pastel copy is not known: but the substitution of the blue dress for the highly complicated shot silk in the Liotard may well have had the enamels in mind (the blue is the same as that found in so many enamels by Sykes's teacher Zincke), and it is quite possible that Sykes himself made it. There is however no other evidence that he used pastel.

Of Sykes's other enamels one can cite one of the Earl of Bute, sd 1760 (another of the same sitter, after Ramsay, is in the V&A, attributed), as well as a portrait of George III, sd 1764 (Christie's, 13 February 1962, Lot 28).

The *Morning Chronologer* for 4 May 1764 [in the *London Magazine*, June 1764, p. 325, followed by other papers, but the dates given erroneously in various references as 1769] contained the following announcement:

MONDAY, 4.
Being his majesty's birth-day, the queen presented the king with the portraits of their royal highnesses the prince of Wales, and the bishop of Osnabrug, painted in a ring from the life, in enamel, by that ingenious artist, Mr. Sykes, and curiously set with brilliants; with which his majesty was highly pleased, and they met with universal approbation.

"F. Sykes" was among the 211 artists who subscribed the Roll Declaration of the Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain in 1765.

For the remainder of Francis Sykes's career, the best coverage is the rather sorry picture painted by Sylas Neville, who clearly found the man very engaging, and reports their numerous conversations in some detail, and, one suspects, some inaccuracy. Thus when Neville "introduced a conversation about Charles Wortley Montague", the figure Sykes describes is not Edward WM (as the editor of the diary assumes), but Liotard (the story is of course of the beard, and the legend of his admission into the seraglio where "he painted all the ladies in crayons"). The artist recommended Montpellier, where he may have lived at some stage. Sykes guided the young miniaturist Edward Miles, who drew Neville's portrait. Sykes's enamel of Neville, "one of the best he had done", shows the diarist in Vandyke dress, the colour dark grey, sleeves and breast slashed with crimson; in the foreground, an ancient urn inscribed DMGG for *Diis Manibus Gracchorum*. (The description suggests that the enamel of a lady in Vandyke dress sent to the Society of Artist in 1761, no. 116, was surely by the same Sykes.) Neville ended up reluctantly accepting Sykes's bill for £60, whereupon, with the bill unpaid, Sykes died, in Yarmouth: between 30 July 1771, when Neville last saw him, and 3 August, when he was already dead ("of an uncommon disorder") and buried. Only after this does Neville learn the extent of Sykes's hardship and distress;² a friend explained that Sykes "was once in a very good way in Holland and did what he pleased about pictures, but that he could not rest there, but would go to see Paris."

Neville, who was surprised to be told that Sykes was a Roman Catholic, also mentions two daughters, one "pretty well married", the other in a nunnery abroad. He makes no mention of the sons. As noted above, Henry Sykes was born in The Hague in 1743/44. He was still in London when, c.1766, he married Grace Birch (1744–1812), the daughter of Francis Birch of Uppingham (and it was in Uppingham that Henry's mother Theresa died in 1791). Although Henry retained a presence in England (at The Crescent, New Bridge Street, Twickenham), he settled in France, where he conducted an important and broadly based business. This included

² I am grateful to Richard Stephens for drawing my attention (in November 2016, after this essay was originally issued), to the minutes of the Royal Academy council meeting on 25 October 1771 when they "Read an Application from Mrs Theresia Sykes. widow of Sykes Painter setting forth her great Distress. Resolved that the sum of five guineas be given her." (vol 1, f.112).

spinning and textile manufacture, at Saint-Rémy-sur-Avre, but branched out into the retailing of luxury goods from premises in the Palais-Royal. Here, while recorded as a mercier (baronne d'Oberkirch took her daughter there to buy fabric) and selling prints, he developed a speciality in importing scientific instruments from Britain, earning him the title “opticien privilégié du roi”. Thiery 1788 noted his “magasin de physique, estampes angloises & autres curiosités, chez M. Sykes, *place du Palais Royal*.” His suppliers included the renowned firm of Peter Dolland (the maker of telescopes used both by John Russell and Maurice-Quentin de La Tour), and he supplied spectacles to Benjamin Franklin (allegedly the first set of bifocals). Before he became known in a different context, Jean-Paul Marat conducted scientific experiments using apparatus which he would only allow Sykes to construct. (In France the spelling causes some difficulty, and variants such as Sikes or Sickes occur.) But it was as a symbol of frivolous spending that Sykes appeared in the satirical verses of the chevalier de Cubières (*Opuscules poétiques*, 1784):

Portrait du grand monde
**Voulez-vous sçavoir, mes amis,
 Lorsqu'on est homme du grand monde,
 Quelle vie on mene à Paris,
 Séjour, de tous le plus immonde?
 Le matin, en habit anglois,
 Pressé de faire quelqu'emplète,
 On va chez Sikes, chez Granchès,
 Où, fans déboursfer, on achete.**

Most sources have Henry's only child as Grace Valentine (1768–1817), whose marriage (which took place in London, St Anne's, Blackfriars, in 1788) to another expatriot, William Waddington, produced a line of French parlementaires, including her grandson, William Henry Waddington, Prime Minister of France in 1879. Grace and her son (although which one is a little confusing, as the reported date of the picture is before her marriage and cannot be correct) figure in a portrait by John Russell (presumably a pastel, although the only reproduction is of too poor a quality to be sure) last seen³ in 1933:



³ Lent by the comtesse d'Arjuzon to the Paris 1933c exhibition; see [J.64.2878](#) for full details.

The story remains incomplete, with a number of loose ends. Of these the most puzzling is the relationship (if any) with George Sykes, Jr mentioned above: he exhibited portraits (not all with the red hot poker) and a conversation piece at the Society of Artists 1770–73. In 1773 he wrote to George Stubbs to request election to the Society, and he appears then to have settled in York. There is a curious reference in William Paulet Carey's *Letter to I*** A***, a connoisseur in London*, Manchester, 1809, II, p. 25, in which he attributes an anecdote about Richard Wilson (that he used a large decayed cheese to model for rocks and landscapes) to “Mr Sykes, an Artist of merit, who now lives, beloved and respected, in York; and who, forty years ago, painted pleasing portraits, in miniature and oil; and small conversations, composed with much elegance of fancy.” There is no obvious connection with Francis Sykes and his family.

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