

BOOK REVIEW

The Surgeons and the Bristol School of Artists *by Michael Whitfield*

Paperback, 22 pages
AHLA Books No. 28
September 2019

At the beginning of the 19th century, a group of professional and amateur artists formed what in retrospect has been called the “Bristol School” on the basis of an identifiable style largely related to romantic views of the Avon Gorge and local beauty spots and genre subjects. They painted and sketched together and enjoyed other shared cultural activities.

Of the amateurs, three were doctors: John King (1766-1848), Francis Gold (1779-1832) and John Harrison (1804-1892). Gold was the one with ambitions to make painting his career but did not succeed and died as assistant surgeon with the East India Company. He is said to have influenced the important landscape artist Francis Danby, an Irishman who spent some years in Bristol.

The Wolverhampton-born Edward Bird RA, who came to Bristol in 1794, is credited with inspiring the creation of the “School”. Bird gained fame when the Prince Regent bought his 1810 painting “*Village Choristers Rehearsing an Anthem for Sunday*” currently in the exhibition of George IV’s collection at the Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace.

John King was Bird’s personal doctor and worked with Thomas Beddoes in his Pneumatic Medical Institute. John Harrison, whose watercolour technique is described, sketched with the third famous, professional artist of the School, William James Muller.

The Bristol School story encompasses the Romantic poets Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, pioneer of American romantic landscape painting Washington Allston, Edward Jenner and even Napoleon. There are good quality reproductions of six Harrison watercolours, and two Gold oils with other paintings including portraits of King by Bird and Allston on the cover. The text includes a good deal of quoted correspondence and poetry which the reader would have found easier to identify had the change in font been rather more clear-cut.

Michael Whitfield’s latest contribution to the Avon Local History and Archaeology series of booklets is an interesting view of Bristol at the height of the Romantic movement and the changes in the cultural life of the country marked by the opening of literary, philosophical and scientific institutes so many of which we enjoy to this day.

Barry Hoffbrand
January 2020

Published online at www.bshm.org.uk.