THE LIMNER COMPANY



JEREMIAH MEYER R.A. (1735 - 1789)

Portrait of Sir Francis Carr Clerke, 7th Baronet (1748-1777), wearing scarlet coat with blue facings and gold epaulettes, a powdered wig worn en queue

Circa: before 1776

Before 1776

Watercolour on ivory (licence SBG228VX)

Gilt metal frame

Oval, 52 mm (2 in) high.

Born in Mayfair, Francis Clerke's education and career would take him across Europe and America, and were cut tragically short when he was just 29. Clerke had been admitted to London's Inner Temple in 1766, and three years later moved to Goettingen to study *belles-lettres* at the university there. His studies here would have focused on the art of producing beautiful and fine writing, without a purpose of informing or teaching, but instead to be an end in itself.

The influence of Clerke's studies in Goettingen on his writing is clear in his letters, some of which were published in *New York History* in October 1998[1]. These letters, addressed to his friend Lord Polwarth, date from 1775 to 1777. By this point, he had purchased an ensign in the Third Regiment of the Foot Guards[2]. In the spring of 1776, Clerke's progression in the regiment had led to him becoming aide-de-camp to General John Burgoyne, with whom Clerke travelled to America. His letters to Polwarth record not only his time in America, but also his engagements and life in London, both before he departed with Burgoyne and during his trip back to the city in December 1766. There is no mention of a miniature being painted in these letters, though it can be assumed that this was painted in 1766 before he left for America, as he appears to be wearing the same uniform that Burgoyne wears in a portrait by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), also from 1766.

Clerke's personality and hobbies are clear in the letters- he maintains a positive and optimistic attitude

even when in the middle of battle, and in a letter dated 5 July 1777, he even mentions taking a sketch of his surroundings, which he calls ‘one of my first Attempts too after nature.[3]’ Only a few months later, Clerke was near Saratoga, as part of Burgoyne’s plan to invade New England from Canada, and isolate the area from the rest of the United States. The battle of Saratoga, which unfolded between September and October, resulted in British defeat and became a turning point in the American War of Independence. Clerke was fatally wounded during the battle, following which he was captured by American Soldiers. He died, still under their control, though reportedly well cared for, on 15 October.

The final letter written by Clerke to Polwarth was dated 10 September 1777, Clerke speaks of the upcoming campaign but is still optimistic about its outcome, one of his final remarks being ‘You shall hear from me again when I have an Opportunity.[4]’ It is only Polwarth and his friends that he sends compliments to, as there are no records of letters to his family. Given that he died unmarried, it is also unlikely that he had a sweetheart to send letters to.

There is another known portrait of Clerke[5], which was in the possession of his descendant in 1998, and bears some resemblance to the likeness taken by Meyer here. In the mid-1770s, German-born Jeremiah Meyer was approaching the end of his career. By this point, he had been appointed Miniature painter to Queen Charlotte and Enamel Painter to King George III, and had become a Royal Academician. As well as painting in watercolour on ivory, he often painted in enamels.

[1] R. F. Kingsley, *‘Letters to Lord Polwarth From Sir Francis-Carr Clerke’*, *New York History*, October, 1998, Vol, 79, no. 4, pp. 393-424.

[2] According to Kingsley, this was on January 3, 1770, ibid., p.396

[3] Ibid., p.419.

[4] Transcribed ibid., p.424.

[5] Kingsley, 1998, p.398.