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DR. JOSEPH FENN SLEIGH to JAMES BARRY - 31 December 1763, Cork

Source: Fryer, *Works of Barry*, i. 11-12.

Dr. Joseph Fenn Sleigh (1733-70), Quaker and art connoisseur, practised as a physician in Cork. He had attended the Quaker school at Ballitore soon after Edmund Burke was a pupil there and later studied medicine in Edinburgh where he knew Oliver Goldsmith (1730-74). He was on the staff of the North Infirmary Hospital, Cork from 1759 until his death. Goldsmith wrote an elegy on him (Tim Cadogan and Jeremiah Falvey, *A Biographical Dictionary of Cork* (Dublin, 2006), p. 311). He was a life-long acquaintance of Burke.

Barry, now aged 22, was in Dublin attending classes in figure drawing at the Dublin Society's Art School (*The Dublin Society Drawing Schools, Students and Award Winners 1746-1876*, compiled by Gitta Willemson (Royal Dublin Society, 2000), pp. 4, 248).

Cork, December 31, 1763

Dear Sir,

It gives me considerable pleasure to find that you have met with that countenance in Dublin, which you in vain merited in your native place.<sup>1</sup>

I see by your letter that Mr. Burke<sup>2</sup> has approved of your performance, and I can therefore assure you, that you have met with an exceeding good friend, and one, who has it much in his power to promote your interest.<sup>3</sup> You ought to consider his approbation, as no small encouragement, as he is a man of undoubted good taste. Your intention of going to Rome pleases me much, as that is the place above all others, where you can improve yourself the most; for there you will find among the works of the antients,<sup>4</sup> the most perfect forms in the most graceful attitudes, and with the justest impressions: these cannot be obtained, particularly the two last, in drawing from the life alone. You will likewise have an opportunity of seeing there the works of the great painters, and gaining improvement in composition, chiaro-scuro<sup>5</sup> and colouring. Pardon a mere lover of the art talking thus to an artist. When you do set out, which I suppose will be this winter, I should imagine that Cork would be a place where a passage may more readily be obtained in, than Dublin.<sup>6</sup>

As you will have some time on your hands these long evenings, when you cannot paint, I should be much obliged to you for a few lines now and then, that I may know what works you may have in hand.<sup>7</sup>

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1. native place] The Dublin Society had awarded Barry a premium of 10 guineas in October 1763 for 'A Composition piece of Painting' (John Watson, *The Gentleman and Citizen's Almanack, 1764* (Dublin, 1764), p. 75). This may have been for his painting, the *Baptism of the King of Cashel by St. Patrick*, exhibited at the Dublin Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufactures and Commerce, which was subsequently purchased for the Irish House of Commons ('Mr. Barry', *Public Characters of 1800-1801*, iii (1801), 248).

2. Mr. Burke] Edmund Burke (1729-97), Irish statesman, writer, and philosopher; born in Dublin and educated by Quakers at Ballitore school; he graduated from Trinity College, Dublin before moving to London to study law at the Middle Temple. Barry greatly admired his *Philosophical Inquiry* (1757) which he transcribed; further on this see R.R.Wark, 'A Note on James Barry and Edmund Burke', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, xvii (1954), 382-4.

3. your interest] Edmund Burke was in Dublin for the winter of 1763-64 as secretary to William Gerard Hamilton (1729-96), Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Northumberland (1715-86). Edmund Burke's reputation as a critic had been established by his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1756). He had been the editor of Dodsley's *Annual Register* since 1758.

4. antients] An accepted spelling of 'ancients' in the eighteenth century.

5. chiaro-scuro] 'The treatment or disposition of the light and shade, or brighter and darker masses, in a picture' (*OED*).

6. than Dublin] Contrary to these plans, Barry was soon to leave for London; he did not start his journey to Rome until October 1765.

7. in hand] Barry attended the Dublin Society's Art school during the day. When the first master of the school Robert West (d.1770) retired for reasons of mental illness, he was succeeded in May 1763 by Jacob Ennis (1728-70), who had trained in Italy. On the drawing schools in Dublin see John Turpin, *A School of Art in Dublin since the Eighteenth Century*, Dublin, 1995 and William Laffan and Brendan Rooney, *Thomas Roberts, Landscape and Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Tralee, 2009), pp. 38-40.

Since I have had the pleasure of knowing you, I have often lamented that you did not pursue your classical studies farther, as you are now deprived of many noble subjects for painting you would otherwise have had. You may remember, that to Homer's description contained in two or three lines, Phidias acknowledged himself indebted for the so much celebrated statue of the *Olympian Jupiter*.<sup>8</sup>

It must indeed be confessed, that there is a large field for the exercise of your art in the descriptions of our three great English Poets, Spenser, Shakespear (sic) [Shakespeare] , and Milton, not to mention the number of excellent subjects in the *Scriptures*.<sup>9</sup>

Beg Mr. Burke, to send in my name to counsellor Ridge, for my Spence's *Polymetis*, and I doubt not but you will find some entertainment there, though the drawings may not be so good as you could wish.<sup>10</sup>

With the sincerest wishes for your advancement in your profession, and your welfare in general,

I remain,  
Your assured friend, and humble servant,  
Joseph Fenn Sleigh.

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8. the Olympian Jupiter] The statue of Jupiter at Olympia Jupiter, some 12 m. tall, was sculpted by Phidias (fl.500B.C.) and decorated by his nephew, the painter Panaenus. Strabo gives this account of the statue: 'It is related of Phidias that, when Panaenus asked him after what model he was going to make the likeness of Zeus, he replied that he was going to make it after the likeness set forth by Homer in these words: "Cronion spake, and nodded assent with his dark brows, and then the ambrosial locks flowed streaming from the lord's immortal head, and he caused great Olympus to quake"' (*The Geography of Strabo*, 8.3.30, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, Loeb Library series, 8 vols. (London, 1961), iv. 89); the Homer passage is from *Iliad*, i. 528-30.

On the base of Phidias's statue was a relief of the birth of Venus, the subject Barry developed in his picture *Venus Rising from the Sea* Venus rising from the sea, exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1772.

9. the Scriptures] Among Barry's early accomplishments was his *The Temptation of Adam* (1767-70) Adam and Eve from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bk. x and *King Lear weeping over the Body of Cordelia* (c. 1774) King Lear; he did several drawings and etchings based on the Bible, notably *Job reproved by his Friends* (1777).

10. you could wish] John Ridge (c1728-76), a personal friend of Edmund Burke in Dublin who later became his lawyer in Ireland. Joseph Spence (1699-1768), *Polymetis: or, an enquiry concerning the agreement between the works of the Roman Poets and the remains of the Ancient Artists*, London, 1747, was reissued in 1764 by James Dodsley as *A Guide to classical learning: or, Polymetis abridged...* by N. Tindal. The book contained several illustrations. A copy is listed in the inventory of Barry's books.