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# FAME FOR A FORGER

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Celebrations to mark the Australian Bicentenary were many and varied. In England one of the major events was an exhibition at the British Museum. It was of particular interest to note to collectors because it will give considerable prominence to the paintings of Thomas Watling who was accused on two separate occasions of forging Bank of Scotland notes.

Watling was born in Dumfries in Scotland where the Bank of Scotland had opened one of its first branches in 1774. He became a 'limer' or painter, running Watling's Academy to teach drawing (at a guinea a month!). On 27 November 1788 he was charged with forging guinea notes of the Bank of Scotland (Douglas 38)!

An article in the local antiquarian journal of 1935/6<sup>2</sup> included a life of Watling and an appendix quotes many of the trial documents at length.

In his various depositions Watling protests that the notes "were done with virnilon (sic) both on the body and the names" and that he "did not apply any stamp or seal" concluding that the six copies he made "never would pass or be circulated in the country".

However, the fact remains that using a single genuine note as a model, he admitted giving two of the notes the plate letter C, three a G and one a D. Nor would he give an answer when asked if copies done in vermilion "can be wiped off or altered with black lead, china

ink or any other materials so as to have the appearance of a real Bank Note?"

Perhaps wisely, Watling chose not to go to trial on the capital charge of forgery but instead petitioned the Court for transportation.

The Court granted his wish and Australia thereby gained its first artist of real merit.

In view of his undoubted and now celebrated talents the sequel is truly amazing.

Watling returned to Dumfries and in 1804 was again charged with forging notes of the Bank of Scotland, this time the £5 denomination (Douglas 37)!

He was tried in Edinburgh in January 1806, on the charges of forging and uttering 7 of the Bank's £5 notes, all numbered 32/6275. On this occasion however, the prosecution chose not to proceed as they judged they "could not bring home the issuing of the forged notes libelled" and there appears to have been little evidence that Watling actually forged the notes himself. It seems unlikely to this writer that a man who had the wit to change the plate letters in a small series of copies would later run off or attempt to pass notes bearing the same serial number. The jury found the charge "not proven", a peculiar Scottish verdict which allows a defendant to walk free but not without a stain on his character.

Little or nothing is known of his subsequent life but he lives on in his paintings, and they have now brought him a late flowering of fame – and awakened interest in his other activities.

## REFERENCES

1. Scottish Banknotes by James Douglas, London 1975 p.29
2. Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society, Transactions and Journal of Proceedings 1935-36, Third Series, Volume xx, p 70 et.seq.