XIV.—*On the Date and other Circumstances of the Death of the Painter Hans Holbein, as disclosed by the discovery of his Will.*^a By W. H. BLACK, Esq. F.S.A.

Read February 14, 1861.

HOWEVER interesting it may be to be acquainted with the time and circumstances of the *birth* of an eminent person, it is more instructive to ascertain when, where, and how he *died*. A man's career is then complete, his actions can be freely reviewed and recorded for the information of posterity, and nothing more can justly be added to the acts of his life on which to found his reputation. In more than one sense, therefore, is there truth in the words of Solomon, "A good name rather than good perfume, and a day of death rather than a day of birth." (Eccl. vii. 1.) The case of the great painter Holbein strikingly illustrates this saying. His powers and reputation as an artist far transcended, even in his royal master's judgment, the accidental distinctions of rank and fortune; and the true date of his death is far more important to his posthumous reputation and to posterity than the date of his birth.

All authors that I have seen agree to inform us that Hans Holbein was born at Basle in "1498," and that he died in London or Westminster in "1554." If the latter date be correct, he lived not only under Henry VIII., to whom Lord Chancellor More had introduced him, but also under Edward VI. and Queen Mary. Hence various pictures have been attributed to him, worthy or unworthy of his genius and pencil, the subjects of which were not in existence, or had not risen to eminence, in the first named reign; and the period of fifty-six years is ascribed to him as the term of his natural life. But on what original authority those dates rest I am unable, as yet, to ascertain.^b One circumstance is, how-

^a This communication should have been inserted at the commencement of this volume, but having been returned to the author it was mislaid and thought to be lost. Many of the particulars and the Will were therefore incorporated into the Memoir by Mr. Franks (ante, p. 1), which was printed before the MS. was recovered. It has however been deemed advisable to insert Mr. Black's communication here in its original form.

^b I have since traced those dates to Carel Van Mander's *Schilder Boeck*, or *Lives of Painters*, published at Amsterdam, 1618, 4to. ff. 142-145, which I first met with in Brussels.

ever, asserted, with equal unanimity, that "he died of the *plague*," in London. This assertion, if it can be relied upon, may help at least to strengthen or invalidate any assigned date of the great painter's death; and, if applied as a test of the truth of the date commonly assigned, it proves that the year "1554" cannot have been the year in which he died.

The historians of London say nothing of a plague or pestilence happening in the metropolis in 1554, and our national history shows that there was no such occurrence. It was in July of that year that Queen Mary was married to Philip of Spain, at Winchester; and it was in the following August that, after their marriage tour, they came by water from Richmond to Southwark, and passed in state through the city of London on their way to Westminster, where, in the November following, a Parliament was holden. Other events connected with the metropolis prove that it suffered no visitation of plague or pestilence in the year 1554.

The tradition, then, might lead us naturally us to search for a more probable occasion with which to connect the time of his death; and such an occasion can be shown as agrees exactly with the time at which the Will of a John Holbeine was dated and presented to the Ordinary in London, not, however, in 1563, which is known as a plague-year, but much earlier, namely in October and November, 1543, *eleven years before the alleged and commonly received time of the painter's death*. The Will is of itself curious, though insufficient to gratify the reasonable curiosity of the present age. It appears that the testator had little to leave, nothing to bequeath, and what he left could scarcely pay his debts and provide for his children. The Will doth not state whether he were sick or well when it was made; but, being brought before the Ordinary within the eighth week from its date, and, being informal in its construction, it may be supposed to have been dictated in a state of infirmity and approaching death.

In recording the events of that year, the London Chronicler, John Stowe, having mentioned the burning of Anthony Parson and two other martyrs at Windsor on the 28th of July, 1543, immediately informs us that "*a great death of pestilence was at London, and therefore Michaelmas term was adjourned to Saint Alban's.*" (Annals, 1592, 4to. p. 987.) At that time our chronicler was about eighteen years of age, and therefore he was able to state the fact upon his own knowledge. He might indeed, perhaps, have seen Holbein himself, though he has not preserved any notice of him, for he was his fellow parishioner. Stowe's bones and monument yet remain in the church of Saint Andrew's Undershaft, in Leadenhall Street, and the register still preserves his name as "John Stoe,"

buried on the 8th^a of April, 1605, aged 80. That register, the earliest now extant in the parish, begins in 1580, and therefore too late to contain Holbein's name.

Though the place of Holbein's residence is not mentioned in his Will, it is preserved in the Acts registered therewith, and that of necessity; for, as the Commissary's jurisdiction was confined to certain localities, and includes the parish of St. Andrew's Undershaft, so that parish was named in the proceedings taken upon the Will, to justify his authority as Ordinary of the place.

The testator describes himself as "John Holbeine, servant to the King's Majesty." He mentions his horse, which, with his goods, was to be sold to pay his debts; says not a word about his pictures or about his wife, but mentions his "two children" without naming them. These could not be the children whom he had long before left with his wife in Switzerland, and who were represented with her in a painting at Basle.^b Unless they were orphans, it may be conjectured that they were the fruit of some later (and perhaps irregular) connexion in this country, as they were put out "at nurse," upon a very small monthly allowance. Having mentioned his debts, he acknowledges two creditors by name: one was "Mr. Anthony, the King's servant, of Greenwich," perhaps the Anthony Anthony who belonged to the Ordnance Department and was a careful chronicler of public events.^c The other was Mr. John of Anwarpe (or Antwerp), a goldsmith, who was one of the witnesses. Although no executor is named in the Will, yet this last-mentioned person is described as such in the Act which follows the entry of the Will in the Register; and he is there said to have presented the Will to the Ordinary, *renouncing* all execution of it, and to have taken out letters of administration only, on the 29th of November, 1543. The Will being dated 7th October, 1543, it is clear that the testator must have died in the short interval of seven or eight weeks.

Beside John of Antwerp and two other foreigners (Anthony Snecher, an armourer, and a "merchant" named Olrycke Obynger), a fourth witness is named, likewise a foreigner, and (which is more interesting) a fellow artist. This was "Harry Maynert, paynter," of whom no trace occurs in Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, though perhaps he was related to the John Maynard, one of the two painters who had been employed under Torregiano to work upon the monument of Henry VII.

^a His monument says that he died on the 5th of that month.

^b Walpole's *Anecdotes*, in his works, vol. iii. p. 65.

^c See the Ashmolean MSS. at Oxford.

I now lay before the Society an exact copy of the Will and of the Acts thereupon recorded, which I found only a week ago in one of the Registers of the Commissary of London, preserved in the Record Room at St. Paul's Cathedral, called the Book "Beverly," folios 116 and 121. That volume includes the period A.D. 1539—1548, and there is neither calendar nor index of its contents; which may account for the obscurity in which the Will hath so long been hidden. No original Wills of that time are preserved in the Commissary's Registry.

WILL OF HANS HOLBEIN.

[E libro "Beverly," fol. cxvi.]

Holbeine.—In the name of God the father, sonne, and holy gohooste, I, Johñ Holbeine, servaunte to the Kynges Magestye, make this my Testamente and last will, to wyt, that all my goodes shalbe sold and also my horse, and I will that my debtes be payd, to wete, fyrst to M^r Anthony, the Kynges servaunte, of Grenwiche, y^e of [*sic*] summe of ten poundes thurtene shylynges and sewyne pence sterlinge. And more over I will that he shalbe contented for all other thynges betwene hym and me. Item, I do owe unto M^r John of Anwarpe, goldsmythe, sexe poundes sterling, wiche I will also shalbe payd unto hym with the fyrste. Item, I bequeythe for the kynpyng [*keeping*] of my two Chylder wich be at nurse, for every monethe sewyn shylynges and sex pence sterlynge. In wytnes, I have sealed and sealed [*sic*] this my testament the vijth day of Octaber, in the yere of o^r Lorde God M^vCxliij. Wytnes, Anthoney Snecher, armerer, M^r Johñ of Anwarpe, goldsmythe, before sayd, Olrycke Obynger, merchaunte, and Harry Maynert, paynter.

XXIX^o die mensis Novembris anno Domini predict. Johannes Anwarpe executor nominat. in testamento sive ultima voluntate Johannis alias Hans Holbein nuper parochie sancti Andree Undershafte defuncti comparuit coram Magistro Johanne Croke, &c. Commissario generali, ac renunciavit omni executioni hujusmodi testamenti, quam renunciationem dominus admisit, deinde commisit administracionem bonorum dicti defuncti prenominato Johanni Anwarpe in forma juris jurato et per ipsum admissa pariter et acceptata. Salvo jure cujuscumque. Dat. &c.

[Ibid. fol. cxxj^o.]

Holbene.—XXIX^{no} die mensis predicti commissa fuit administracio bonorum Johannis alias Hans Holbeñ parochie sancti Andrei Undershaft nuper abintestato defuncti Johanni Anwarpe in forma juris jurato, ac per ipsum admissa pariter et acceptata. Salvo jure cujuscumque. Dicto die, mens. &c.

The discovery of Holbein's Will cannot fail to draw after it some interesting consequences, as affecting the genuineness of works of art ascribed to this great master. The principal of these is the celebrated picture at Bridewell Hospital, commemorating a noble public act of charity in the gift of the royal palace of Bridewell, at the very end of the reign of King Edward VI. viz. 10th April, 1553.^a The long-pending controversy about the authorship of that picture is now for ever set at rest, so far as regards the painter to whom it has been hitherto ascribed. Critics of art must now look out for another artist of that time; and perhaps there may yet lie hidden, among unexplored registers or accounts, the true name, which should be substituted, in this instance, for that of Holbein.

I am not enough acquainted with the history and existing monuments of painting in England to pursue this part of the subject. All that I can do, as a palæographer and chronologist, is to discover written evidence of facts, and to correct dates. The rest must be left to persons of greater artistic knowledge, taste, and skill, than I can pretend to possess.

It may be said perhaps that, as a great architect, so also a great painter, needs no monument beside his works. Walpole observes that "the *spot* of his (Holbein's) *interment* was as uncertain as that of his *death*," and he might have added (if the circumstance of the "plague" had but been considered) of the *time* of his death also. He alludes to Strype's story of Lord Arundel's desire to erect a monument to the painter's memory. Strype's words are (speaking of Saint Catharine Cree-Church), "I have been told that Hans Holben, the great and inimitable painter in King Henry VIII.'s time, was buried in this church; and that the Earl of Arundel, the great patron of learning and arts, would have set up a monument to his memory here, had he but known whereabouts the corpse lay."^b So uncertain is tradition that, although this rumour must have originated in a knowledge of the neighbourhood where Holbein died, yet a wrong place is assigned for his burial; for Cree-Church and Undershaft, those noble specimens of the ancient ecclesiastical buildings of London, are situate in the same street, on the same side of the way, and within 200 yards of each other. The beautiful pile of Undershaft escaped the Fire of London, but the register from 1538 to 1579 inclusively has not been preserved; and if it were extant, who would believe that a John Holbeine, dying and buried in 1543, was the Hans Holbein whose life hath been prolonged by all biographers to 1554, unless upon the infallible testimony of the Will now brought to light?

^a See Stowe's Annals, p. 1030.

^b Strype's edition of Stowe's Survey of London, 1720, vol. i. book ii. p. 64.