

Exeter Dissenters

No. 2 – The family of William Nation

WILLIAM NATION (1763-1831) was a significant figure in Georgian Exeter. His father, Kellow, was a successful tobacconist and snuff manufacturer and William followed him into the family business. Kellow owned land close to the North Gate in Exeter as well as properties elsewhere, at least one of which was jointly owned with his father, William, who had been a controversial Presbyterian minister in his early days. Kellow married Elizabeth Tremlett, the daughter of a prosperous Exeter merchant, on 19 March 1757, and they had two children, William (born 27 January 1763) and Samuel Kellow (born 24 June 1764). Samuel died, aged 9, of an ‘uncommon nervous condition’ and was buried in a single grave on Sunday 18th April 1773 in the Exeter Dissenters’ graveyard. In the same year William, Kellow’s father, died (aged about 78) and was also buried in the same graveyard.

Shortly afterwards, in 1780, Kellow, Elizabeth and William (then aged about 17) were sketched by John Downman, a renowned portraitist of the time whose clients included Queen Charlotte, Admiral Lord Nelson and Hugh, Lord Percy, as well as many notable Devon worthies, including his relative Dr Hugh Downman MD who practiced medicine in Exeter. It has not yet been established whether Downman was a close friend of the Nations, or the sketches were privately commissioned. William is shown at a writing desk and as Dr Sadru Bhanji has reported¹ he wrote a private journal from 1776 until shortly before his death in

1831. Nation’s description of the death of his wife, Elizabeth (née Codrington) at the tragically young age of 32, and on the eve of their thirteenth wedding anniversary, was both poignant and critical of the way she had been treated by her family.² Elizabeth was buried in the Dissenters’ graveyard on 24th October 1798, leaving two young children.

William was a merchant, banker, a trustee of the Devon and Exeter Hospital, a staunch Unitarian and Whig, a trustee of Exeter’s Mint Meeting House and, like his parents, known and respected for his charity. On the death of his mother in 1818 his journal records: ‘Nov. 3 Elizabeth Nation, the venerable Mother of this Journalist died in her 88th year having been born February 29th 1731’, whilst Trewwman’s *Exeter Flying Post* reported her life in touching terms, ‘Yesterday morning at her house, in this city, full of faith, and rich in good works, Mrs Nation, relict of the late Kellowe Nation Esq. aged eighty eight years – To a vigorous mind and cultivated understanding, was added a most benevolent and humane heart; and many are there in this city left, to deplore the loss of a most kind benefactress.’³ Elizabeth was buried in the Dissenters’ graveyard on 11th November 1818.

References

1. Bhanji, S. *Rep. Trans. Devon. Ass. Advmt. Sci.*, 147: 45-72 (2015).
2. Bhanji, S. *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 38: 234-237 (1997).
3. *Trewwman’s Exeter Flying Post*, Thursday Nov. 5 1818.

Ian M. Varnell



William (top) and Elizabeth Nation (née Tremlett, bottom) sketched by John Downman A.R.A. in 1780. Images courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



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