

About my Pictures.

A long time ago I invented a game which I played with those friends and pupils who could understand it and who liked to play it. We would sit with pencil and paper, and at the word to start, draw, in about a minute or so, a shape on the paper formed of a line or a curve. The others must guess, when it was finished, who it represented. Or we might play it the other way round. We would mention a person whom we all knew and each would draw the shape that seemed to us to represent his or her personality.

One day I was playing this game with some of my pupils in the house of Lady (Horace) Darwin. Erasmus, her eldest son, did not at first play with us but sat reading, seeming to pay no attention to what we were doing. We decided to draw Sir Horace Darwin. Erasmus looked up from his book and said - "Give me pencil and paper. I believe I could draw Father". There were about five of us playing besides Erasmus. When the drawings were displayed we found that they were all variations of this shape and the variations in proportion were slight.

I have kept some of the drawings we did including my own



portrait done by one of my pupils. When some worthy in Cambridge is mentioned I often see still in my mind's eye not a photographic memory but a curve and an angle.

I mention this game because, although at first it was to me only a game, having no influence on my art, it gradually affected my style of composition. The emotional value of a line, a curve and mass proportion determined more and more the mood in which I worked my pictures. Almost unconsciously I made my picture's colouring and even its technique agree with the dominant line. So, at long last, led by my own game, I reached a point I should have reached before I had entered Art Schools.

Gradually I dropped the study of figures to deal with the combination of curves and rectangular masses that landscapes with buildings gave me. London attracted me more and more for it was full of subjects and they often had the added charm of associations with history. Latterly I spent one day in every week in London. The emotion I felt caused by the forms of its buildings, apart even from its atmosphere, carried me through to the finish of a picture without any flagging. I slid back occasionally into a desire - quite a fierce one - to do nothing but represent a scene, careless of any decorative or emotional reason for representing it. I wanted to find out, by painting it, what a scene really looked like. I may have succeeded in the intellectual aim but I most likely failed



artistically ( unless the gods helped me ) especially as my brushwork is not easy. I have often been influenced by other people's opinions and theories which I have afterwards known to be wrong for me. I was attracted by the work of the Futurists but repelled by that of the Surrealists.

For some years I devoted most of my sketching time to studying water. One summer I worked at a scene on Coe Fen below the Bishop's Mill. To me the charm of the subject was the Mill race and the movement - and the pause in the movement - of the water round it and the way the willow trees were reflected in it. I had nearly finished my picture and liked it fairly well in some ways but yet, as a whole, it would not look right to me. I felt almost sure that the failure lay in the manner in which I had treated the calmer water in the foreground reflecting the sky. I was painting much of my picture on the spot and I gazed into the blue depth of the near stream and then I tried to represent that blue depth. I was not satisfied with the result of my effort.

Among my friends was the Master of Downing and his wife - Dr. and Mrs Hill. Dr. Hill was a research doctor and was, I believe, at that time studying the nerves of the eye. I was asked to tea at Downing Lodge one day during the time when I was bothered over my mill stream. Dr. Hill asked me if he might test me in an experiment that he was making. I said yes. I was told to keep my eyes looking horizontally straight in



front of me while he led me through the doorway of the drawing room into another room. I did so. Dr. Hill asked me what I should call the colour of a long piece of paper that had been placed above the picture rail on the high second room. I said "Grey blue". He told me to look up and I saw that the paper was a deep, real blue. Then Dr. Hill explained that the human eye does not see the colour blue in its fullness on the outside edges of its range of vision but it does see red. He thought that it was possibly because the eye had felt no need of developing its full recognition of blue because there was nothing blue in Nature that was dangerous.

This made me think. I went back to my subject. I looked straight across the mill stream to the Fen with its grass, its willows and its playing children. As I concentrated my attention on them I saw no richness of colour in the near water. I saw it the same dark tone but grey. I changed my much worked-at blue and my picture thanked me.

For many years I painted all my pictures out of doors. In 1909 the summer was wet and cold. I still went on working sitting on my campstool in not only unsuitable weather but in unsuitable positions such as on sloping, slippery ground or in dank woodland. During my holidays I was in Gloucestershire and I began to have a strange resentment at the number of trees round the house, along the roads and in the many woods. I had an aching longing for bare spaces and a wide horizon. The



ache in my mind seemed to get into my limbs. I did not know what was the matter with me. One evening my hostess held a kind of spirit seance in her drawing room. I took part and pressed my fingers on a tumbler standing on a polished table. I dont think there were more than five ~~xxxxxx~~ of us who had put their fingers on the tumbler. A question was asked. After we had kept our fingers there for a little while the tumbler began to move and soon it was sliding rapidly from one side of the table to the other. Round the table had been arranged the letters of the alphabet. Some one stood with pencil and paper recording the letters. When the spirit was asked what I ought to do the answer was so rapidly spelt out that I could not follow it until it was read to me. I was told to "Paynte the moon Orynge". I remember feeling bitterly that I would certainly never paint it orange and not in Gloucestershire among so many trees and most likely I would naver paint it at all as I love unromantic daylight too well. I have not yet obeyed the spirit's command and am not likely to do so now.

After I went home my bodily aches continued and became concentrated in my spine. I had neuritis. Signe Laven came over from Sweden to nurse me. When I had recovered she and the doctor told me not to sit on a campstool again. If I must sit out of doors it must be on a firm chair for I had outcampstooled myself. After that I took to working my pictures from many pencil drawings and coloured chalk studies and my feeling



for line, which had not been very strong, developed. My memory is good, I am quick and I did better in my pictures than before.

I was talking one day to a Cambridge lady who paints landscape and paints it well and she said to me :- "I am told that there are some subjects to be got at Wapping but really I dare'nt go there - at all events not alone". I said nothing but I determined to go there - by myself. I shall not soon forget my feeling of adventure on stepping on to the platform at Wapping station. The extreme narrowness of the platform, the trickling water, the damp walls, the sight of the train diving down into the tunnel that was to carry it under the Thames, all seemed strange but delightfully right for Wapping. So did the primitive lift and so did the view of Wapping High Street that I saw as I stepped out of the station. How on earth, I thought, was I ever to get along it in safety ! The paths were not more than two feet wide at most and the roadway was crammed with drays, vans, lorries and waggons placed as close up as possible to the warehouses. These vehicles were, and perhaps still are, all drawn by horses owing to the streets being too narrow to allow of heavy motor traffic. I saw evidence of the effort made to widen the streets but the draymen resented the thought that their horses may have to give way to motors. As goods from the warehouses are dropped into the vehicles from projectios above the only way of getting



along the street was to cross it from side to side. I and the other walkers avoided the moving and stationary traffic, the bales, barrels and sacks as best we could. I found an enchanting view in the street itself and, after some slow exploration, decided to begin with that although I aimed at painting the Thames with its barges and shipping. High Street runs parallel to the Thames and is close to it yet the river is quite hidden from view. On my next visit to Wapping I went up a wider road than High Street and came to a flat bridge. From there I could see, not the river, but docks and shipping. I liked the views looking both ways and I started at once on preliminary pencil drawings. I did not realise that I was standing in the middle of a swing bridge. A bell sounded. I heard it but thought it had nothing to do with me until the bridgekeeper ran to me and rushed me back to the firm road. The great ship waiting to be let through passed from the Outer Docks to the London Docks. How often had I to run off that bridge at the sound of the bell before I had got sufficiently forward with the studies of those two scenes to enable me to dispense with that wearisome standing on the narrow pathway. There was no room for a camp-stool. I was obliged to stand up whether I was working or waiting and I found by the end of a long morning that I was stiff and tired.

I have seen women on that street stamping, shaking their fists and crying out with anger, because, in spite of running



to get over the bridge in time the roadway had swung away from them.

I had now made two studies of docks and had finished a watercolour of the High Street but I had not been able to see the Thames. A policeman was on guard at the entrance of every warehouse court that led to it and permission to go in was denied me so I was really afraid that I might fail in my aim. However I was given an introduction to the wife of the House Surgeon of the East London Hospital and she said that she would take me to a good riverside place. We went together and she pointed out on the way as being famous the public house "The Prospect of Whitby". She even took me through the passage to its verandah over the Thames where old salts drink their beer. Then we went on and passed through a door in a high paling and I found myself by the lockside close to the open river. I was where I wanted to be. The coastguard gave me a chair and I was soon at work. The next week I started off gaily to find my river side, took a wrong turning and lost myself. I soon lost also my sense of direction and it was too grey a day for me to be certain of North, South, East and West. I saw two policemen guarding the court of a warehouse and told them that I had lost my way. They asked me where I wanted to go. I hesitated for I did not know the name of the street or dock. I had not asked for their names when I was guided there. However, a light fell on my mind. I said - "Where must I go to get to



the Prospect of Whitby?" In spite of their real politeness they both had to laugh and I had to join. "Why, anyone in Wapping would tell you how to find that!" they answered. They put me on the right road and I did not lose my way again.

When my work was over I explored. I wanted to find Wapping Old Stairs so I determined to walk by the back of the warehouses bordering the Thames to the Tower, examining every passage leading to the river until I should come to the celebrated stairs. On that side of Wapping there are many ways down to the river. The first day that I explored westward I looked along a passage that seemed promising but it was not the right one. I went down it because the Thames looked so strange that I had to go and see what was the matter with it. It did not look like a river of water but like a greyish road. When I got to the little quay at the bottom I was still puzzled but soon I saw that there were thousands and thousands, I might say millions, of coat hangers floating right across the river. Far up and down they spread over it and so thickly that hardly a patch of water could be seen between them. A man in a barge stooped down and fished up two for me. I have them still and written on them is their story and date. I had to get our blacksmith to put metal hooks to them for none of the floating hangers had hooks.

Another day I found Wapping Old Stairs. The new stairs are not pleasant to descend, the old ones by the side of them



would certainly have been beyond me to climb down for they are made of enormous blocks of stone. I wondered if Nancy of the song had had really to reach the river by those ancient, high, slimy stones to say good-bye to her sailor lad. When her farewell was said it must have been high tide for the boat to come along side but luckily for me and my sketching it was low tide. Very gingerly I went across the oozing mud at the bottom of the steps choosing stones when I could. After a couple of steps I looked back. I saw that from where I stood there was a good view of Nancy's Stairs. Out came my sketch book. I could not work for very long at a time for the effort to balance myself on the stones and draw, standing up, was great. I had to wait several weeks before I could get low tide again, but I had plenty to do with other subjects so there was no waste of time. I walked back often all the way to the Tower. On one windy day I passed an open space and there I got a view of the Tower Bridge with grey clouds sweeping over it. There was a lock in the foreground with woodwork old and green and, beyond the lock, was the rough river with red-sailed boats on it. That formed my sixth subject Wapping way.

I was still entranced with the East of London and when later I was falling in love with Canals, I managed to get permission to sketch Millwall Basin where the barges of the Great Junction Canal meet the seagoing ships to receive and deliver goods. It was not easy to get permission to go in, or even when I had got permission, to find my way to it. When I reached



it I found it was jealously guarded by very high, close palings and at the entrance, of course, was a policeman. He was most kind when he had seen my permit. I had been warned of the roughness of the dockmen but I found there was no need to be nervous of them. I was a rare and precious article, cared for as I had never been in the West End. I had a stool provided for me and enquiries such as - "Are you comfortable, my dear?" I was dismayed at first at the difficulty of my subject but, as week by week went by and I saw my tangle of barges take different shapes in the crowded pool, I could see my way to make a picture of it. In the afternoon the sun shone on the old disused railway bridge in the background and it gave a glow to the scene. I worked my picture through to the end doing more to it on the spot than usual.

From early days I had chosen a particular locality in London and studied every subject that I could find in it; then, having as it were sucked that orange dry, I would move to another quarter. I painted more pictures from round about Adelphi than from any other district. From the roof of my cousin's flat at 14 Buckingham Street I could see far up and down the river. I could sit there and draw undisturbed. During the last war I painted the search lights crossing one another over St. Paul's and the war huts being built on the Embankment at night by artificial light. I wandered from the Temple to Lambeth Bridge. I sat under one of the Adelphi Arches and



drew it bringing in the old blacksmith's forge. The statue of Eros was then in the Embankment Gardens. It was not on its pedestal, but it looked well with the Duke of York's Gate and the old dark coloured buildings of Buckingham Street behind it. That made one of my best watercolours.

Before I had begun to study canals I came up to town one day with Helen. We were to part after arriving at King's Cross - she to see some workmen's flats that were taking the place of slums - I to go to my sketching grounds. Helen asked me to go first with her and I, after an inward struggle - for I did not care to see slums or workmen's flats - consented. After wandering for some time about Somers Town hunting for the flats we suddenly found them. I had my reward for agreeing to come with her for I was surprised and delighted at the flats that had been built. The first set we came to formed a square court. On each side of the path leading to it were six high poles of stone or concrete, surmounted by gaily coloured models of Elizabethan sailing ships. In the centre of the next court were 24 posts arranged in a circle topped by carved and coloured blackbirds and a carved wren perched on the taller post in the middle. The next court had again a circle of 24 posts each one with a tailor on the top carrying scissors and the central post was crowned by a snail. From the central to the outer posts in each court hung ropes and on the ropes hung sheets and shirts, curtains and aprons, for they were the laundry poles



of the surrounding flats. This last court was called St. George's Court and here I deserted Helen. I would go no further, for I had found a subject. I went again next day - losing my bearings of course on the way to it. However when I at last found it I was made comfortable. The people were kindly, I borrowed a chair and began a careful drawing which had the most difficult perspective in it that I had yet grappled with. I paid many visits to my strange slum before I had finished a fair sized oil painting of it. The children often gathered round me when I was working to ask questions. Then they would entertain me by dancing round the snail post and threading through the other posts singing :

"Four and twenty tailors went to kill a snail,  
 The best man amongst them durst not touch her tail.  
 She put out her horns like a little Kylow cow -  
 Run tailors, run, or she'll catch you even now".

I took the finished picture of St. George's Court to Bourlet's to be framed with two other London scenes. While they were in Bourlet's room the head of the Renaissance Gallery in Lower Regent Street happened to go in and see them. I received a letter from him asking me if I would hold an exhibition of my pictures of London in his gallery. I feared the expense that is so often connected with such a show and hesitated but I was told that he would be content with a percentage of the sales effected. I was doubtful whether that would be



to his advantage but thought it might be to mine so I consented. I borrowed many of my pictures of London that had been sold and I had many at Harston. I was puzzled how to get them up to London. A Harston lorry owner, Mr. Seagrave, makes it his business to fetch and carry goods to and from London and I arranged with him to take them up. I thought it best to insure my pictures for the journey but I found that my insurance agents were unwilling. Apparently they do not like insuring pictures in transit unless they are in the care of their owner. I told them that need not be a difficulty as I was quite willing to drive in the lorry with them. The clerks looked astonished but the business was put in hand at once. I looked forward to my drive and my two Swedish helpers, Ingrid and Merthe, implored me to let them come with me.

We started on a showery summer morning. The pictures were packed carefully on the lorry and arranged round Merthe. A big tarpaulin covered the pictures and allowed Merthe's head to peep out if she wished it and she could dive under the tarpaulin in a shower - if it came. I mounted the seat beside the driver, Ingrid sat near me and off we started after many instructions from the lorry owner to the young driver to be careful of us and the pictures.

Owing to sitting so high above the road I had a clearer view of the country than I had ever had from the motor car. The alternate sunshine and showers beautified the landscape. As we neared London we drove along different roads and streets



than I had seen before for the ones I knew were forbidden to lorries. We arrived at the Gallery, Lower Regent Street, during a particularly heavy shower. My driver had other work to do so the pictures had to be unpacked at once. Merthe poked her head from under the tarpaulin. As she cautiously crept out the water resting on the tarpaulin emptied itself all over her. She had no hat on and as she emerged with her summer cotton dress clinging to her, she looked like a water nymph. Apparently the proprietor of the Gallery was more shocked at my vehicle than even the insurance clerks. I wondered why.

My Exhibition was to be called "London Past and Present". I had gathered for it many pictures which I had painted from the time when I was a student to the year 1936. "Eros on the Embankment" was one of the pictures lent to me by the owner of it who, being very anxious for its safety, went himself to the proprietor of the Gallery to speak of the care he wished bestowed on it. In spite of his injunctions however when a purchaser chose it, he was allowed, by a mistake, to buy it and pay for it and he refused to give it up. There was some hot talk about the matter and there was no way out of it except a promise to make a replica. I did so very sadly. The second would-be owner was to have the choice between the two. The copying of "Eros" was a ghastly effort for me. Up to the end I felt sure I should ruin it. The effort however was worth it. In some ways the copy was better than the original. In any



case both owners were satisfied.

It was indeed an exciting day for me, the day when my one-man show opened. I had never dreamt I should have such a time during my life. Without any other reason for excitement just to see my own pictures hung together, - some that I had no seen for years - was enough ! And to add to it all my people came to support me. Friends and friends of my friends gathered to the rooms. There was no cloud in my sky. At lunch I was carried off by my family for a gay meal at Fortnum and MasONS.

The show proved a success for me. Before it was closed the Proprietor of the Gallery gave me a luncheon feast at the Savoy. He told me that he was thinking of holding an Exhibition of canal scenery and he gave me a magazine with an article in it on canals. I was fired and began to draw every picturesque bit of a canal that I could find, both in London and the country but the shadow of war began to darken England. Pictures lost their interest. The owner of the Renaissance Gallery, feeling the shadow, retired and the scheme of that Exhibition fell through. I however did not lose my interest in canals.

I had a notice in the "Times" of my picture show of "London Past and Present" and one in the Evening News. I was pleased with the first but I was made rather angry by the second. The article made much of my age and my lorry ride. Why either should be stressed I could not see. The Renaissance owner apologised to me for having talked with the reporter about my



age and the lorry drive. I accepted his apology but was not satisfied with that alone. I dislike personalities in papers and so I was resolved to get an apology from the Editor of the Evening News. I learnt where the office was and I found it in a street humming with the noise of printing presses. I was actually let in to the Offices of the Evening News and was shown up into a room with two grave gentlemen in it. They were polite. I said my say quite firmly. I could hear myself speak but the noise of the machinery was so loud that I could not properly hear the reply of the elder Editor. To me it sounded like my required apology and I bowed my head graciously and got up to go. I was however asked to wait for a moment. I was then conducted through passages, not to the street door, but to a little room far quieter than any I had yet entered. A young man came in and I found, to my great surprise, that I had consented to be interviewed.

I don't know what an ordinary interview is like but very soon the young man and I were talking about London, what we each knew of it and how much we loved it. I enjoyed my talk and left having had a new experience and a very pleasant conversation. I was quite aware that the result of the "interview" would never appear in any number of the Evening News.

Since my Exhibition I have devoted myself to painting along the riverside in London and the Canal scenery. I have sketched canals when and where I could get at them whether in



London or the country. Brentford Pool attracted me and I worked there for a long time. I spent a summer holiday at Devizes and explored the Kennet and Avon Canal and found along it many subjects. In the Spring of 1940 I stayed in Montgomeryshire and found delightful scenes along the Shropshire Union Canal. When I was drawing them I half expected to be warned off as I was told that to draw canals was forbidden, but no one stopped me.

I did not feel quite so safe when working in London. I had to depend on my photographic memory helped by hieroglyphic signs on postcards. These queer strokes of my pencil were often drawn under the protection of a cape or flap of my coat. As it happened, I fell in love with the subjects to be found along the river in Chelsea as both the old and the new Power Stations compose well in pictures but to draw them would be illegal in war time - but it had to be done. One by one three pictures were started. One day I seated myself on a bench facing the new, Cathedral-like Battersea Power Station to study both that and the arches of the railway bridge. I think my gaze was too intent and perhaps the slight movement of my hands was suspicious. A man seated himself by me and looked well at me. I was annoyed when he began to talk and much disturbed when he began to criticize the Government and evidently wanted to draw me on to do the same. I fled. But anyhow I had got what I wanted.

I had finished the three pictures of the Power Stations



and then I became entranced with a view of the old one in morning mist. It must be done from Battersea Bridge. Eva was with me one early sunny morning. There were so few pedestrians and so little traffic that I took out a postcard and jotted down a note. A workman stopped and demanded of Eva, who was a pace or two away, "What is she doing?" "Studying reflections in the mud", was the answer. He repeated her words with angry scorn and growled "Well, she must'nt do it". He looked back at me and I joined them. "That mulberry tree", I said "must be the last remnant of the garden of Henry VIII". Still more puzzled and still angry the man stalked away.

Oddly enough I have enjoyed sketching London during the war more than I had ever done . I find it almost dull being now, in peace time, encouraged to do it even by policemen. The other day two stood behind me looking on when I was drawing the old red brick "Devonshire Arms" at the back of the Regent Palace Hotel. They remarked in wonder "Well I never ! All done by hand !"