Sir Edmund Fairfax-Lucy

PM Edmund Fairfax-Lucy attended the Royal Academy Schools and I first met him there as a fellow student over 50 years ago in 1969.The Keeper (or Principal) of the RA Schools at that time was Peter Greenham, a wonderful painter of contemplative observed landscapes and portraits, whose delicate use of tone and colour gave his pictures a feeling of living atmosphere. Greenham opened the eyes of many of us and he was a great influence on Edmund and his painting. Edmund's fortunate position of having a private income allowed him to approach painting as a poet and to give much more time to considering ideas than is possible for many artists. He became a firm friend of Peter Greenham and would go on painting trips with him to Lake Annecy. He was also a close friend of Allan Gwynne Jones - a masterful painter of landscape and still life- also a tonal painter. From these and other influences and through a great deal of discussion and practice and observation of both nature and of the Old Masters, Edmund was able to paint stunning paintings of interiors and landscapes. Such is the intensity of these pictures that although they only rarely contain figures, they give the very strong impression of being filled with life and activity.

Fairfax-Lucy's particular gifts lay in the careful observation and rendering of tone. For him there was no absolute white or black, light or dark, but an intricate gradation, determined partly through the effect of the atmosphere between the object and the eye and partly through contrast with surrounding objects. For instance, one of his favourite subjects was a view seen through the frame of a window. He observed that the window frame, although perhaps it was painted white, appeared dark in contrast with the view outside. Where he was working in colour, he had to try to assess the warmth or coolness (ie tending towards yellow-orange or purple-blue) of the colourless window frame as compared with the outside light. Observations of this kind take a long time to make and of course in the mean time the light itself will change and this will lead to reassessments and re-workings of a passage of the painting.

Sometimes this process would go on for a very long time. I remember a still life that was set up on the kitchen table at Charlecote. There was a jug with roses and a cake stand with a pear placed on the edge, an arrangement that probably came about by chance, and caught his eye one day at breakfast. Edmund set up his easel and started to paint. He worked on the picture for several days, and I visited him from time to time as it progressed. The roses drooped and shrivelled and the pear ripened, over-ripened and turned into a withered skin standing in a pool of sticky liquid, and eventually into little brown mummified husk. All of this time the kitchen table continued to be used for meals and when it came time to clear up, Edmund would shout in agony 'Don't touch it!'

The serious side of this of course is that the picture came to represent not only the delightful vision of a pear and a jug of roses, but of light playing on them, and the passing of time and its accumulation, as if time itself clung to the marks that described the objects.

Edmund was not a natural draughtsman or composer of pictures. I remember that he came to a life drawing session that I was holding at my studio at Mickleton, and after struggling with a drawing, rather well, I thought, he said to me 'I can't draw, it would be much easier to paint it!'. With composition he became very theoretical, and made complicated measurements based on such models as the Golden Section and the Fibonacci sequence and tried to impose them on his pictures. This interest in the theory of composition led him into a study of architecture and garden planning. One of his favourite books was 'Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism' by Rudolf Wittkower, which through analysis of Renaissance buildings links architecture to music, philosophy and science. Edmund

set about transforming the old Slaughter Ground at Charlecote (where deer from the park had been culled in former times) into an elaborate garden with a moat surrounding a raised section on three sides, a 'ram' to force water up into the moat, all surrounded by pools and buildings and plantings. This extraordinary and ambitious project continued for many years and continued to change but was never completed. Another great project was the remodelling of the garden between the Gatehouse and the front entrance to Charlecote Hall. Lawns and flowerbeds were cleared away and replaced by a carefully organised series of box hedges, designed using mathematical principles derived from the proportions of the Gatehouse building compared with those of the space itself. Edmund asked me to make a model of the area so that he could place little cork box hedges on it to help to get them exactly right. This project was realised and it is a lasting contribution by Sir Edmund to his ancestral home.

The burden of his baronetcy and the responsibility that he felt towards Charlecote was a defining element of his life. Charlecote had been bequeathed to the National Trust by his uncle with the proviso that the family should be allowed to continue to live there for as long as it chose. Edmund realised that once this arrangement was given up it would not be renewed, and he felt it a matter of honour to continue to carry on living there. This was a great strain on him I believe, but he persevered with it in the same spirit that he persevered with his painting when a lesser man might have given it all up and lived in ease on his inheritance.

Bro. Richard Sorrell