

He came from Yorkshire. He had a caravan with a horse. He was an artist, and taught in a west-country public school. Rumours of his death, when published in a Yorkshire provincial paper, were greatly exaggerated, and brought him much amusement. He lived on, and on, and on. Finally he died. His name was William Lyons-Wilson, and he taught me to paint. But he did more than that. His was one of the most profound influences my life has known.

Now that I come to write this down, and now that I give it some thought, I perceive that it is not the anecdotes and stories that are the important part, fun as they are, for these are the outward show. Deep down there was an independent spirit, an attitude of mind, that directed it all, and was important, and made it all worthwhile.

"Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart".

I came to the school when black-outs were still being placed in the windows each night in case the Germans flew over with bombs. It was an heroic period, with a concentration upon growing food for survival. For some elusive reason I had by then determined that my life would be spent as a farmer and so when we were told that every Monday afternoon had to be spent doing some formal activity I joined the school horticultural society. This was a bedraggled group on the edge of a paddock filled with khaki-cambell ducks. It did little for my proposed career and, apart from learning the word quagmire, little for my schooling.

The worst part was the rosta for feeding the khaki-cambell ducks. We took it in turns to do this. Winter came early that year and at six a.m. the bins of food scraps outside the kitchens were frozen solid. My fingers were red and raw. The pain under the nails extreme. I actually wept with pain. I decided upon a career change and reported to the art room.

This, lets face it, had always been seen as an easy option so the class was full and everything depended upon Lyons-Wilson fitting me in. The door was locked. I knocked.

"Go away," said a voice inside. "I'm busy."

This was more than promising. He could have no idea who I was. I could have been the chairman of the govenors. I knocked again.

The door opened a chink. "Who are you ? What do you want ? Go away."

"I'm Rae, and I've come to do art."

"Do art," he muttered, and let me in. And so began an encounter that lasted for the next forty years.

There is a danger here, that I feel I must avoid, of simply repeating the events and tales that made such successful and enjoyable groups and classes, slide shows and discussions. He was a brilliant raconteur and the fact that succeeding generations of boys can repeat the same stories, in the same words, and using the same inflections, says it all.

Perhaps not quite all, for the thing that made such an impression was his obvious delight in opposing convention and authority. He never actually said art is subversive, but he lived it in everything that he did. He drew our attention to the inner worlds of Miro and Klee. Miro was a god to him. "All truth is there," he said. And then, to reinforce his point, would give devastating imitations of the more pedestrian masters confronting such works.

Reputedly he practised Indian exercises called surea-namaskas and, on two wonderful occasions, we persuaded him to show us how they were done. "Your shoulders will always be broader than your hips," he would say as he came out of the routine.

Nor must I make the mistake of presenting him in too light a vein. He was dedicated to his art, and worked hard for the successes he achieved. The determination to become an artist came at the beginning of his life. On one snowy day in Yorkshire he failed to report for work, choosing to go out and paint a landscape instead. Taking it to be framed at the local art shop the man there said he would put it in the window and see if it sold. Weeks went by and it did not appear in the window. Finally LW had to go to the shop to buy something. "I've been looking for you," said the owner. "Your picture was sold on the first morning."

Back at work Lyons-Wilson told his employer that when he had pretended to be sick and had not come to work he had in fact told a lie.

"I hope it was nothing worse ?" said the man.

"Well, you must be the judge of that," said Lyons-Wilson, and told him about the painting.

And so began the great struggle with Art that was to continue until the very end. Living, as he put it, in his own shoes.

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I had left school and, years later, he also retired and left. One day I went back and asked the head-master's secretary if she had any news of Lyons-Wilson.

"Lyons-who ?" she asked.

And so I drove out to Tricky Cottage, Ash Thomas, and found him there with Vi, his wife. Thus began a long Indian summer for the four of us - Billy and Vi, Anne and myself. He had an outside loo called, variously, the summer house or the igloo. I remember him standing in the garden and saying, of the view to the valley beyond, "You see. There is nothing to offend the eye." Still the enjoyment of life ran high, and still the pictures came.

One day the telephone rang.

"Guess who this is," said a voice. I confessed that I did not know.

"Lyons-Wilson." Clearly he had a story to tell, and needed an audience.

"They are building opposite Tricky Cottage," he said. "I asked them what it was to be. Oh, you will like it Mr. Lyons-Wilson, they said. It is going to be a Georgian bungalow. How very interesting, I told them. You know, I have never seen a Georgian bungalow."

But back to the school days, and a bright autumn day. We had all been out to paint the canal bridge, a famous and much used subject, and were walking up the deep Devon lane past Old House. Across the road was a thick carpet of golden leaves. Lyons-Wilson broke ranks, went across, and scuffed his feet through them all, thereby for all time confirming me in an attitude of quiet and private independence.

Another occasion. Last day of term. We were walking to the station with holidays stretching before us. On an impulse I and another knocked on Lyons-Wilson's door. Courteously he gave me some advice. "Use more colour," he said. "Make it stronger." I had been doing very tentative paintings with rather dull washes.

"I did a painting once, with strong colour," I said.

"Perhaps I could see it," he said.

I thought about it over the holidays. The painting had been done when I was ten and was a direct response to the bombing of Exeter by the Germans. This was one of the so called Baedeker raids ordered by Hitler against historic cathedral centres. On the Halden hills decoy lights had been set up, and for a couple of nights we watched the display of bombs falling on the woods and farms. Then a solitary spotter plane came over and shortly after that the city centre was bombed into the ground. Coming upon it the next day from the untouched suburbs was.... There are no words. Art took over, and the picture was made.

I think that I was aware of my parents' excitement as I did it, carefully bottled up until I had finished. Certainly they immediately took it off to the framers, and ever since it had hung in their bedroom - now in mine. Looking at it I can see that one does not have to be much of an analyst to make sense of it. The image I saw of ruined South Street with its rubble and smoke is still vivid in my mind. In the picture the ruins are thrust to the side behind the church tower, square topped, in red sand-stone, that alone has survived. In the yellow sky is a white disk in which the Virgin and Child appear, while below strange colourful shapes (actually derived from my observations of lights reflected in bath water) and plants show that a renaissance is on the way.

I persuaded my parents to let me take it back to school. With trepidation I took it to the art room.

"I am afraid I was a little bit mad when I painted this," I said.

There are certain moments in ones life when changes are made, the dice are rolled, the rail-track points are thrown across, and directions are taken. Years later I was to tell my own students that words spoken by a teacher only had relevance if they happened to coincide with the needs

of a student at that moment of time, and that I therefore saw it as my job as a teacher to talk non-stop in their presence in the hope that just one person, in one moment in time, in a whole life-time of talking, would find just one thing that I said had meaning and relevance. They smiled.

"I'm afraid I was a little bit mad when I painted this," I said.

There was a pause.

"Why don't you become a little bit mad again," said Lyons-Wilson.

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My own son was not so well served by his teachers. His illustration of the spider wood from *The Hobbit* was brought home in great disappointment. I do not know what was said, but he tore off his signature from the bottom right corner. I restored this and it now hangs alongside my own early work. It is every bit as inventive as mine, and is in many ways better, stylistically more of a piece. Parts of mine are quite crudely drawn, especially the *Virgin and Child* which, I would suspect, are still beyond me.

But what dullard was it who failed to see and encourage the creativity of a child, and crushed that precious and individual spirit? Blake hated such people.

"A Robin Redbreast in a cage
Puts all Heaven in a rage."

And Wordsworth again.

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy"

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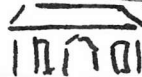
Soon after leaving school I did what, it seemed to me, every young and free spirit should do. I climbed in the Lake District. I sent the sketch book I filled there back to Lyons-Wilson for inclusion in the end of term exhibition the following year, and the letter he sent when returning it is worth quoting for it has the flavour of the true, authentic voice.

"Dear John,

Your charming sketch-book afforded much pleasure to viewers at Speech Day Show. Also, I think it will inspire some of the younger generation to follow in your footsteps and compile a collection of holiday sketches and photographs on similar lines.

Thank you very much indeed for lending it to us, and for remembering our show.

This year I got permission to have the exhibition in Room 2 on Big Field - now Graham Parker's room. It is well lit and architecturally one up on dirty old Milestones festering erection. Very central, and perhaps you remember, just in front of the Tuck Shop.



So we were very much in evidence in spite of the Ashburton Shield!

Turner's 'Crummock Water and Buttermere' has always been a love of mine, and always will be. Naturally I was delighted to see your most able transcription of it - so glad to know that you derive such enduring interest and pleasure from this inexhaustable subject. It kept me more than sane - it kept me happy during the 1914 war. It will do the same for you when you are coupled with Kipling!"

However, this is mere confirmation. The real magic had been done in that inspired comment in the art room, and on that day when he walked across the lane to scuff his feet through the autumn leaves.

John Rae
September 1994

