

NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

ARTISTS' LIVES

Kyffin Williams

Interviewed by Cathy Courtney

C466/24

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F4540 Side A

....begin absolutely at the beginning. Could you tell me where and when you were born please?

I was born in Llangefni on the 9th of May 1918.

And into what sort of family were you born?

Well I suppose we were a sort of middle-class land-owning family who didn't own land any more.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

....child?

No.

So who had come before?

I had a brother born eighteen months earlier.

And his name?

His name was Dick, or Owen Richard Inglis Williams.

And what were you christened?

I was christened John Kyffin.

And you were just telling me about the derivation of Kyffin. Could you tell me for the tape?

Kyffin is actually a Latin word, confinium, a border, a boundary, and it was corrupted in Welsh to Kyffin. And there was a small village called Pentre Kyffin and a few farms called Kyffin Ganol[ph]. And one of my ancestors in the 15th century, a Meredith Apmadog Abivanfahan[ph] was sent out to be nursed, as children were in those days, into the village of Pentrekyyffin[ph], and it was just at a time when people were beginning to take surnames in

Wales, because all the aps[ph] made things terribly complicated, and he took the name of Kyffin. My grandmother was a Miss Kyffin, so that's how I got to be called Kyffin.

And you were also telling me that, as you grew up you were actually known as John and you had changed your name at a certain point.

Yes, when I was young I was always called John, and when I started painting and started exhibiting in London, I found there was a John Williams who was exhibiting fairly regularly, so I had to use my second name, Kyffin, which has been extremely useful to me.

And do you ever now think of yourself as John?

Oh yes. I mean lots of my friends around here call me John, who knew me when I was young, and they call me John.

And, do you have any memories of your grandparents? Did you know them?

My only grandparent who was alive when I was born was my father's father, the Reverend Owen Lloyd Williams, and he christened me at the age of 90. And I was only the second child in all his long life he had christened in English, the first one being my brother. My mother, who was Welsh speaking, somehow she was brought up to believe that all Welsh people are vulgar and the Welsh language really should never be used by anybody respectable, so it was very very difficult, I was thoroughly brain-washed.

And, obviously you were pretty small when you were christened, but do you actually remember your grandfather?

Oh no, no he died not long after he christened me. He remarked that I was a nice clean-looking little boy, and then expired at the age of 90.

And do you know much about your father's growing up? Do you know what his parents were like, what...?

Oh I think his parents were wonderful parents; everybody always spoke tremendously warmly about them, and still do now, he died in 1919, and my grandfather is still known to the old people in his parish in Anglesey and always called him the old chancellor, he was Chancellor of Bangor Cathedral. And he was extremely unconventional, and he used to say things in church, he would say, 'May the Lord have mercy upon you, you miserable sinners,' and he

would never count himself in on that. And everybody came to him for all sorts of advice and things like that. And my father was brought up with his three brothers and two sisters without much money. I mean they would have driving in tandems and things like that with the harnesses always done up with string I think, and they careered round the roads of Anglesey, or the lanes of Anglesey in those days. But my father of course was born with a hereditary - not a hereditary, a congenital defect of the hip, so he always was terribly lame, and he didn't have much of a schooling, and he was sent away to a private school in Lancashire. And of course he couldn't do anything for a long time until eventually he was found a job with the North and South Wales Bank, because my family with their connections in Paris Mountain, copper mines, it was the biggest copper mine in the world, and one side of my family became immensely wealthy from the sale of copper. They cornered the whole of the copper of Britain. They had started a thing called Williams Chester and North Wales Bank, and that had sold out to the North and South Wales Bank, so my father in his thirties got his first job, it was with the North and South Wales Bank.

And that's where he remained, was it?

Well that was sold out to the Midland Bank, and he ended his very brief time in banking with the Midland Bank.

And, obviously his father had been a churchman; did he grow up with a very deep religious conviction, was that...?

Oh all my family have had very deep religious convictions I think. Maybe, I don't know how deep but anyhow it was considered that they should all be parsons, because my uncle, the Reverend O.K. Williams, Owen Kyffin Williams, he was a parson, and my two grandfathers, my four great-grandfathers and several great-great-grandfathers were all in the Church.

Can you sum up at all, I know this is quite a difficult question, but can you sum up what your father's values would have been, and his morality?

My father's main thing was people. He loved people, and he could see no difference between a duke and a farm labourer. Somehow there was no difference to him, he loved everybody, and he used to tell wonderful stories about people, and I fed on these stories. And, he could not believe that anybody was other than an absolutely wonderful person, and this meant of course occasionally he was desperately disappointed, and when he was disappointed he was terribly disappointed, he couldn't understand how people could be beastly.

And did you get an impression of what the community was like when he was growing up, as opposed to what it's like now?

Oh yes. He was born in the rectory at Boduan on the Lleyn Peninsula, but very soon they moved from there to Anglesey, to the north-west corner of Anglesey, to the next parish where my great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were parsons. And what was interesting there, the only people there were the farmers really, and the cottagers, so all my father's friends as a boy were the farmers and the cottagers, and he was very very welcome, and when we used to go and stay there, when I was a boy, he was welcome in every cottage and farm in that part of the island. And of course he spoke Welsh fluently, as all my family have had to, because in the parishes they wouldn't have been able to get on if they couldn't have spoken Welsh. And they all loved him, and he was a very lovable person, and a very very simple person really, and he of course, when he was ill, as he was when he was young before he could get a job, he used to go up from the rectory in Llanrhuddlad to a little cottage on the hill above, and there he used to do a lot of carving.

What sort of carving?

Wood carving. He was a good wood carver. And when he got his first job in the North and South Wales Bank in Pen-y-darren, one of the toughest areas of the mining in south Wales, he did a reredos behind the altar, carved a reredos for the church.

And is that still there?

Unfortunately no, a new church has been built, and my father's reredos has disappeared.

What was your father's name?

He was Henry Inglis Wynne Williams.

Right. And do you know where he met your mother?

Well, that was easy, because their fathers were parsons in adjoining parishes, and they were very very different. My mother's father was a very sort of tidy upright man, very very concerned always with doing the right thing, and in the next parish my father's father hardly ever did the right thing; he never did anything wrong, but I mean he was unconventional. And he was such a lovely old man I believe that a lot of the parishioners of Llanfaethlu, my

mother's father's parish, they used to move over and go to church with my father's father in Llanrhuddlad, which upset my mother's father considerably.

But did the two of them not get on terribly well, or were they quite fond of each other, the two fathers?

That I don't know. They must have got on all right, yes, I think they must have done really.

And what was the name of your mother's father?

My mother's father was another Williams, Richard Hughes Williams he was. I mean the Williamses are a very powerful breed in Anglesey, they outnumber the Joneses I think.

So your parents would have known each other all their lives almost, would they, or what?

Yes almost I should think. But they didn't get married until comparatively late in life.

And what about your two grandmothers, what were their names and what were their personalities, do you know, was something handed down?

Well, all I know about my father's father was that he...

Mother.

My father's mother, she was a very very kind and gentle person.

What was her name?

Margaret Kyffin. And my mother's mother was highly neurotic, and spent most of her time with brown paper wrapped around her head in darkened rooms because she suffered from migraine and things like that. And she was...her husband, my mother's father, was rector of Llansadwrn, and when he lived in Llansadwrn all was well really, because she had all her friends around her. But then my grandfather wanted his son, my uncle Owen, to go to Westminster School, and this meant quite a lot of money, so in order to pay for him going to Westminster he moved to an outlying parish of Llanfaethlu, miles from anywhere, where the salary, the stipend, was better, so that he could send his son to Westminster. And it so happened my uncle Owen got a scholarship to Westminster so the move was really pointless. But out in this parish of Llanfaethlu miles from anywhere I think my mother's mother got



more and more neurotic, and I am told by the late rector who was there that she haunts the house now.

In brown paper?

I don't think she wears brown paper when she materialises. But that was what people did with migraine, they used to wrap themselves... Other members of my family I also remember living in darkened rooms, which is rather interesting.

And did your mother have brothers and sisters?

She had just this one brother who, he went to Westminster, and he was always very impulsive, he always wanted to enjoy himself, and he joined the Territorial Army, and he became a sort of, he did quite a lot of drinking, and he joined his uncle's firm of solicitors in Llangefni, and when the old boy died he found he had left no provision for him to succeed him in the practice. And his uncle had got in a shrewd Scotsman called Laurie as a partner, and my uncle went to him and suggested he was brought in to a partnership, and the old Scotsman said, 'Nay, I will na' have that, you can be me articled clerk'. So my uncle Owen said to hell with that, so he married the barmaid from the Dinorben Arms in Amlwch and bolted for Manchester, where I think he worked in a brewery for the rest of his life.

And did you have much contact with him at all?

None at all. I believe he used to write asking my mother for money occasionally. And he materialised in Caernarfon towards the end of his life.

And are your memories of him good?

Oh I hardly knew him.

And, did any of your father's brothers and sisters, if he had them, come into your life much?

Only one. My uncle James... It's rather extraordinary, towards the end of the last century my uncle Bob and my uncle James left the rectory in Llanrhuddlad and went down to Chile to fight for the revolutionaries against the Spanish. Why Lord knows. And my uncle James stayed there and became a captain in the Royal Chilean Navy. And my uncle Bob came back, and, he was a delightful person. He was extremely easy-going. When he was in Llanrhuddlad as a boy he was the one the farmers always went to to get him to break in some

horse. He was totally fearless, improvident, and he married an extraordinary Belgian woman and had quite a number of children. But he was one of the happier relatives when I was young, and he used to come occasionally to our home, and he was really a breath of fresh air.

Can you remember any stories he told you, or anything he taught you about life?

No I didn't know him well enough, no. And my uncle Kyffin of course, he died just before I was born, he was rector of Coedana and Llangwyllog in Anglesey.

And do you know much about your parents' courtship?

No, none at all. They must have always known each other. And, it was a strange relationship. It wasn't a particularly emotional relationship as far as I can remember. My mother found it very difficult to show emotion, not that she didn't have emotions but she had difficulty in showing them, because basically it was not done, and so I was brought up believing that emotions were a bad thing. And I don't remember my mother showing any emotion towards me, but my father did, I got on well with my father, because he was far more extrovert.

Would he actually give you hugs, did you get any hugs?

My father did, but not my mother, at least not that I remember. She looked after me and my brother incredibly well, I mean we didn't want for anything, and she was an excellent cook, and she was always terrified we were either going to break our necks or get pneumonia and die, and I was brought up with a vision of a totally apprehensive mother, fear written all over her face.

If you don't remember her actually giving you hugs, do you remember being pushed away, or you just don't remember either?

Oh I don't remember being pushed away, because, perhaps I was as inhibited as she was and I didn't make the move. But when I was born I was sent off to a farmer's wife to be nursed, and after the farmer's wife had weaned me I was sent to another house on the island to some friends where there was a nurse, and eventually I came back to hearth and home.

Had your brother been sent away as well?

No no, my brother... It's very interesting about my brother, because my mother worshipped her father, absolutely worshipped him, she thought he was the most extraordinary person who ever lived I think. And with great sort of determination, she recreated him in my brother, and he was christened with her father's name. And oddly enough he looked rather like her father. And she totally doted on him. And so at home, I was never allowed to sit in the best chair in the living-room because that was his chair; he never had to skin the rabbits, lift the potatoes, wash up, lay the table, or anything. And he was clever do you see, he was very bright, he got a scholarship to Shrewsbury, and a good scholarship to Schrewsbury, and therefore in a way they were right, he had to be looked after. And he was better than me at work, miles better, I was a complete idiot, and he was better than me at all games; he used to beat me at everything. But the odd thing is that, I felt this was quite right and proper for him to have preferential treatment because he was so much better than I was. It was logical. It was very interesting. So, he was awfully nice to me, terribly nice. He never put on any airs by being the favourite son, and he was wonderful really, wonderful.

But was there a stronger bond between him and your mother than there was between you and him, as children?

No, do you see, he never got any affection from my mother either. She worshipped him, but she showed him no affection.

Do you think she was frightened of men?

She may have been, I don't know. It's rather interesting, when she...when my...when her mother died in Llanfaethlu, in the parish of Llanfaethlu, she took on the job of the parson's wife, and she told me once how she had been terribly shocked by some story an old farmer had told her, and that made her believe all Welshmen were vulgar. I mean she had very odd ideas. She was pretty bright my mother was, but she never went to school of course.

Not at all?

Her father sent her up to London to Camden School, which was the junior part of the North London Collegiate, and she lodged, she was the only Camden girl who lodged in a hostel for the North London Collegiate, and she was considered inferior because she went to Camden, and she ran away, and after that she never went to school. She was brought up with a governess in a wealthy family in Liverpool.

Did she run away home, or where did she run to?

She ran home.

And why was she sent to Liverpool then?

Well, I think some wealthy people from Liverpool had their holidays in Anglesey in the parish, her father's parish, and she got on well with the girls, and they suggested that my mother went to live with the family in Liverpool and be brought up with them.

And how do you imagine she found that? Did she tell you?

I think she enjoyed it. There were three girls, one was a Miss Tate of Tate & Lyle, and the other was a Miss Gossage of Gossages soap, and the other was a Miss Squarey I think. They all got on very well I think.

But do you think at the same time she felt that she had been sent away? Do you think she felt rejected in some way?

No, I don't think she felt rejected. I think she probably thought it was rather smart to live with extremely wealthy people. I mean her father and mother hadn't got much money.

So do you think that damaged her in a way, that she always did want a different kind of standing? Is that why she was anti the Welsh?

She thought the Welsh were pretty low class. It was really rather extraordinary. She hated people speaking Welsh, although she could speak Welsh fluently, and what was odd was, towards the end of her life when we got a wonderful old Miss Williams, another Williams, from Penmynydd to help her in the house, she only spoke Welsh to Miss Williams, Maggie Williams, and they became very friendly. But that was towards the end of her life.

And what do you think her attitude to your father was?

Well when he died she showed absolutely no emotion at all, probably because it's not done to show emotion. I never saw any sign of open love between them. It was all very efficient, Victorian, and it was all terribly terribly normal so to speak - not normal, but, terribly terribly abnormally normal, or normally abnormal. (laughs)

But do you think she wanted him to be a stronger person or a wealthier person, or a different kind of person?

Oh I think she did. I have a feeling she felt, as he was in the Midland Bank that wasn't really terribly terribly good really, but he didn't give a damn. But I think she minded. I remember when I used to, when I was starting to paint I used to go out painting, and I couldn't drive then because of my epilepsy so I had to ride a bicycle, and my mother's horror if I went out on Sunday, because I would have to pass the church and people might see me on a bicycle, and that appalled her. I'm afraid I was rather bad, I totally ignored her attempts to stop me painting on Sunday. Oh it wasn't because she disapproved of painting on Sunday, she didn't approve of the local people seeing me going painting on a Sunday, that's all it was.

Right. And, do you actually remember being sent away? Have you any memories of being with the foster parents?

Oh no, because I had only just been born. I was just...so I am told, I only have it on the authority of my old landlady in London, when my mother came to stay with her once, she told my old landlady, she never told me.

Oh so it wasn't something that hung over your childhood in any way?

Oh Lord no, I was too young. Though it may have done, you never know what goes on.

And, what was the house like, can you describe it to me?

Our house, I suppose, the first house I really remember was when we moved from Llangefni to a place called Chirk on the English border where my father was manager of the Midland Bank, and we lodged in a farm. I suppose I must have been just about a year old. I remember that farm, and I remember the horses, the shire horses, and I remember the name of one, a lovely light bay called Gambler. It's quite a good memory for one year's old. And of course I remember the nannies, I had a series of nannies, I remember the nannies. And then we moved to a very nice house in Chirk, it was the old rectory, and we called it Treffos, which is our old family home in Anglesey. And I remember that well, I remember all the terrors of the top floor, and I believed it was inhabited by terrible giants and things. But that was a nice house, I remember that.

And how long were you in that house?

I must have been in that house from about 1920 to 1926, six years, something like that.

And when you had nannies, were they warm with you or were they very strict nannies? What were they like?

One I think used to beat me up, which didn't do me much good. I used to get terrible pains in the head, and I didn't know why they came on, and dealing with my epilepsy I mentioned this to a neurologist, and he said, 'Well were you beaten up by your nanny, if you had a nanny'. And I said well I did actually. And after that I never had that pain, so it must have been true.

And do you know what you would have done to provoke these beatings?

I've always provoked people all my life I think, especially the art world. (laughs)

But nobody's beaten you in the art world, have they?

Nobody's beaten me in the art world, no. They'd like to. But, no, from all the photographs of me as a little boy at that time, I was always smiling. My brother looked as glum as a suet pudding, but I was always beaming, so I must have been happy.

And was it a very separate existence in a nursery, or was it a family living as a whole?

No, do you see, we weren't smart enough to have a separate existence in the nursery, that was only the aristocracy and very upper middle classes. No, it was...everybody lived very much together, but we had to have a nanny. It's ludicrous really.

And did your mother have other help in the house?

Yes, she always had different help in the house. One time we had two maids. Oh I was always brought up with domestics in the house, and they were always told that never at any time must they speak Welsh in front of me. It's very odd this brain-washing, because in after life it meant that if anybody spoke Welsh to me I would automatically switch off, and then I had to try and switch on again, because I was really brain-washed.

And did any of the maids and people like that, were any of them your friends, or were they separate from you?

Not really, no. Not really, no.

And what was the furniture like in the house you mainly remember?

Well we always had good furniture, because the family, I mean we had been reasonably wealthy so the furniture was always good, and, we had nice pictures, because the family had always been interested in art.

What were the pictures?

Paintings by members of the family, and good prints by Seymour Lucas after Constable, and works by, etchings by Seymour Hayden, my great-aunt; the doctor was Seymour Hayden and Seymour Hayden was the brother-in-law of Whistler. And we always had that connection. And I had some relatives called Ramsay, my father's first cousins, they were the daughters of a very remarkable man called Sir Andrew Ramsay who was a great geologist and a friend of Darwin, and they were good painters, some of them, and my cousin Fanny studied in Paris under Bouguereau, and we had their paintings. We had sporting prints by Ansdell. We hadn't any wonderful paintings. I did in fact eventually inherit some wonderful paintings from my Ramsay relatives, because old Andrew Ramsay and my great-aunt Teresa up in London bought paintings, and I had a wonderful Marco Ricci and a couple of Van Lint and so on. I had to sell them because I was trying to live on £200 a year at that time. And I had a Richard Wilson as well, they all had to go in order to pay for my paint and canvas.

But of the pictures that were on your walls when you were a child, were there any images you remember in detail?

No. It wasn't till a long time afterwards, when I was in the Army, at the barracks at Wrexham, I went to an exhibition put on by Ceema, that was the precursor of the Arts Council, in Wexham, and I saw a painting by Stanley Spencer; it's very odd that it should impress me, but this painting somehow impressed me. It was of a farm, and, I mean at that time I had no idea I was going to be a painter, but that picture suddenly impressed itself on me.

Can you remember a bit more about it? It was a farm; can you remember...?

It was a well-known one of, I think there were some pigs in it, and there was a rather sort of bare tree, and a dreadful old shed, probably a sort of pigsty. It wasn't a typical sort of Stanley Spencer, it was very much a landscape, a tight landscape. It's funny I do remember that very well.

And have you any idea of why it appealed to you?

I don't know. I suppose, I must have always had a latent love of pictures and sculpture, and this was the first picture which really beamed in on that love of painting. But I mean I didn't do anything about it, I was still in the Army.

Can you remember anything about the structure of it or anything like that?

Oh yes, it was quite a long painting, and it was to a great extent a silhouette. The farm building, or the sort of shed where the pigs lived, formed a big shape, and the tree formed a big shape. It's odd that it should have impressed itself on me, and it should have been Stanley Spencer, who is an artist of course who I admire tremendously, I believe he is one of the only true geniuses ever to come out of Britain, but he is a man who would never influence me at all.

As a human being or as a painter?

In either way.

End of F4540 Side A



F4540 Side B

.....ever meeting Stanley Spencer?

I've never met him. A friend of mine, a funny old chap from Cardiganshire called John Evans who was an artist, he was at the Slade, we were having a meal in a restaurant in London and in came Stanley surrounded by huge women billowing over him like ships with spinnakers, and little Stanley was sort of nestling under the huge bosoms of these women. And as he came along, I remember John Evans said, 'Well Stanley, how are things in Cookham?' And this tiny little man in this funny little voice said, 'The cuckoos are still singing, the cuckoos are still singing.' And that's the only time I met Stanley Spencer.

And why do you feel so strongly that he wouldn't have influenced you either in terms of painting or as a human being?

Well I always thought he was an appalling painter. He stained the canvases, and naturally I am quite a different sort of person and I love the sensuousness of rich paint. And little Stanley, you could never say he was a sensuous painter. He was a wonderful artist, and I'm not questioning that, but he would never have influenced me at all.

So what is wonderful about him?

He was a total original. I believe a genius is somebody who has a new vision, a personal vision; he paints things and makes people see in a way they have never seen before. Stanley Spencer was able to do this in a totally dedicated and ruthless way. For the first time he painted these extraordinary pictures of extraordinary people in wonderful compositions. He knitted the pictures together in a most extraordinary way. He never went wrong in colour. He was a visionary, like Turner was a visionary, and our two greatest geniuses were I think Turner and Stanley Spencer. And maybe Stubbs was an extraordinary man, perhaps not in quite the same level, but Stanley Spencer was a true genius.

And why wouldn't he have influenced you as a human being?

Well he was a crumby little man, he really was a crumby little man. He was barmy, do you see. I mean his ideas about God and religion were something totally divorced from my ideas of religion, and he was a total non-conformist, whereas believe it or not I am really a conformist, I have been brought up very much as a conformist, although people think I'm pretty barmy, but I believe that artists should not - well no, I would say, there are two ways an

artist can behave. He can either do as most artists do, say, 'I am an artist therefore I am divorced from society. I am a hermit, I must work out my art alone without any pressures of the local community. I must not contribute to the local community.' But as I've been brought up by such a long line of parsons whose sole thing was duty to the community, I was brought up with that, and so now I believe that I must try and work within the community in which I live, and that's why I do all sorts of odd jobs which artists don't normally do. And, mind you it is not necessary, I'm not trying to say that artists should do this, they should only do it if they feel they want to. But I feel very badly that, I do not believe that in the whole of Britain there is an artist magistrate; I think this is because they have moved so far away from society that the Lord Chancellor probably doesn't think they're respectable enough, and they're rather difficult people who are not really desirable. That is the fault really of the way artists have gone, and so many artists try desperately to be different.

So do you think the standing of the profession of being an artist has altered during the time you have practised?

No it's gone down. I believe that artists are so desperate to be different that they will do anything to be different. They don't do it through their art they try and paint different pictures, but that's quite stupid really; if you try and be original of course you never will be original. People are original sub-consciously, not consciously. I mean a great example of that of course was Van Gogh, I mean he wasn't conscious of experimenting, he was just conscious and desperately trying to find out how to express his love of an object. And, if people called him original he would have been rather surprised, I think. I mean people who have followed him desperately tried to be original, like the Fauves, and they failed of course, they packed it in after a few years.

And you mentioned Turner, when did you come across Turner?

It was quite a long time before I began to appreciate Turner, probably after I left the art school. Certainly Turner was not one of the people who was thrown at us as a god; Constable was, but not Turner. Augustus John was but not Sickert, so we took against Augustus John, which is rather sad because he was of course a very fine artist. No, Turner, somehow, I didn't really cotton on to Turner for a very very long time, and then gradually it was the semi late Turners and the really late Turners with their incredible poetic quality who really moved me very much.

Can you remember where you saw them?

Well I suppose a great Turner exhibition at the Academy was one of the great eye-openers, although I had been going to the Tate regularly and seeing them there, and some in the National Gallery.

The Academy exhibition was in the Seventies wasn't it?

Yes.

And you also mentioned Stubbs, I mean when did you come into contact with Stubbs?

Well it was rather odd about Stubbs. When I was at the Slade, as I had left the Army, I was in charge of a platoon of undergraduates in the Oxford City Home Guards so I didn't fire watch. The only other student at the Slade who didn't fire watch was a lad called Basil Taylor, who was in the Cadet Force. Now Basil had a passion for Stubbs, and he was even then beginning to write a definitive work on Stubbs when he was a student of the Slade. He went to the Slade in order to know how to do it, not because he wanted to be an artist. And I used to see quite a lot of Basil, and eventually after he left the Slade he became the adviser to Paul Mellon and his collection of English painters. It was Basil who bought them, and Basil who really told Paul Mellon about the importance of Stubbs, and gradually the public and the art world began to realise that Stubbs was a very remarkable artist. Another artist who I haven't mentioned is Lawrence. I think Lawrence is very underestimated, he was a simply miraculous portrait painter. I mean I love so many of course, I do love Constable and there are masses of artists I like very much indeed.

And going back to your childhood, would you have been taken to galleries at all?

No never, there were no galleries to go to.

So really the paintings you grew up with in your own house were the key ones at that stage. And was there music in your childhood?

Only in church. My father used to play the organ.

How big a part did church play?

Well we had to go to church pretty regularly when we were small boys. I never at any time understood what was going on. It's rather odd really, even when I was a boy at school and we had to go to services in Shrewsbury School chapel, I haven't got a clue what they were talking

about, most extraordinary. I was in the choir there, sitting like a little angel in the choir, and I couldn't understand what they were talking about, and I still don't.

But did you have prayers at home, for example?

No, we never had prayers at home. Sometimes I used to go and stay with some old friends, and I remember, some old friends in Anglesey, at breakfast all the domestics came in and the chauffeur and the gardener and they kneeled round the table while the old lady read prayers. But I wasn't battered into being a Christian, and my brother wasn't either.

And did you at any stage sort of lose faith, or it was never that [INAUDIBLE]?

I never lost faith because I never had it. It's extraordinary to say so, I mean I don't want to be arrogant and I don't want to talk about it an awful lot, but never at any time have I had any belief; even as a little boy I can't really, at school when we were being battered by Christianity I could never really believe in it all.

And so what do you feel now?

The same as I always have done.

And what do you feel that is?

It's really a feel. I feel probably it might be quite a pleasant happening, not the actual process of dying but I have a feeling that after death, I think it's possible that there is quite a pleasant something happening.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Compared to your mother and possibly your father, there is quite a radical shift in that respect.

Yes. Yes, it's odd. I am the first generation which has not been hermetically sealed into the Church I think.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....with any sense of guilt, the other side of Christianity that's [INAUDIBLE]?

Oh tremendous guilt, I mean Victorians did work on guilt like mad, and I was brought up to believe that if I did all these things retribution would descend on me I think. And, oh yes, I think all people of my generation, not all but a lot of people of my generation were brought up with this guilt.

And can you pin down what the morals and the ethics that you grew up with were?

The great thing was respect for people, and good behaviour. As a little boy I always used to have to take my cap off to everybody, the postman and everybody, and the importance of people was... I mean it was very good bringing-up. It's an odd thing about Welsh people, Welsh people do have a passion for people, and it's a sort of passion which seems to be greater than any other country. We love eccentricities, we nosey about people. I mean a cross-bred Serbo-Croat who came to a village in Wales would be immediately latched on to and fêted, whereas if he went to a little village in England they would ignore him for about five years. Welsh people have a wonderful word called pysnesi. Pysnesi means curiosity, and they're very pysnesi about people. Yes it's interesting, and all the stories my father had about the old people were always delightful stories. He really did love people.

And which of your parents disciplined you? How were you disciplined?

I think my mother disciplined me, she was pretty rough with me I think, because I had to behave really very very well. My brother had to, but he was more able to behave well, he was more naturally well behaved than I was.

And if you didn't behave well, what would happen to you?

Well we used to, I think my mother used to wallop me. My father never did, my mother did.

And what role did your father play in your upbringing? How present was he, or otherwise?

Oh he was very very much there. He gave me a great sense of security, and he was always very cheerful, and... In fact a lot of my family are cheerful. My great-great-grandfather's memorial in the church in Llansadwrn, mentions of continual cheerful or something, and quite a lot of my family have that.

And what would a Sunday lunch have been like?

Oh a good lunch. Roast and two veg, or three veg, and all sorts of things.

And where would it have been eaten?

In the dining-room.

And would it have had, would you have had special cutlery and things because it was Sunday, or was it always like that?

Oh I think we used the same cutlery the whole time. I mean we did have our sort of family cutlery which was really rather nice, I always remember that, with the family crest on, and I was brought up with it.

What is the family crest?

Oh the family crest is a chough. And it's very odd about the family crest because families from the north of Scotland to Cornwall, all along the west coast of Britain where the Vikings raided, they raided under the banner of the raven, and our family motto is [WELSH], which is 'The Lord provideth for the crows'. Now my great-great-grandfather married a Welsh Norman called Corbet, Ellen Vincent she was but they were really disinherited Corbets, and their motto was [LATIN], which is 'The Lord provideth for the crows' in Latin, which was the Viking. So I believe that all these families with crows rather descended from the Vikings to a certain extent all the way along the coast of Britain.

So going back to your Sunday lunch, would your mother have cooked it? Who would have cooked it?

Well we did have a cook at one time, either she cooked it or my mother may have done.

And who would have served it?

My father did, probably my father, or, no, if we had a maid the maid would serve it.

And would your parents have had alcohol?

No, it's extraordinary, I hardly ever remember alcohol. Not that they were teetotal or anti, or temperance people, they weren't, but occasionally we had burgundy, but of course I never did.

But, no, alcohol was something which never came into the house. I don't even remember sherry or port; it might have been there but I don't remember it.

And what would you all have been wearing for Sunday lunch?

Well if we had gone to church, which we had to, I would be wearing a small suit with short trousers and coat to match the short trousers. And then I suppose I graduated to long trousers.

And your parents?

Well they were both pretty well dressed really. My father was a very good-looking man, he was a sort of a biggish man, and he looked slightly military, a gentle military man with a slightly military white moustache. My mother was always well dressed.

But, did she wear long dresses for example, short dresses? What sort of clothes did she wear?

Well she was always...I can't remember actually the length of the dress. I think as a small boy you don't notice these things.

But do you think of her as being rather formally dressed?

She was fairly formally dressed. No, she was not outrageous, she was in no way eccentric, she liked to toe the line very much.

Did she wear particular colours?

She had a passion for mauve or violet, I think she thought it possibly regal or something. She liked that.

And what would a family Christmas have been like, what were your Christmases?

Hell. We all had to go to church, and the whole time I knew my mother was in a terrible state about the goose or, usually a goose, and how it would be over-cooked or something, and then the service was always hell because I knew my mother was worrying about the damn goose and this sort of thing. It was...it was never particularly happy.

Who would be there at Christmas, anybody special?

Oh only my father and mother and us two, we never had anybody in.

And did you have Father Christmas?

No.

Would you have had...

Oh I used to hang up a stocking.

And would you have had a Christmas tree?

I'm not certain about that.

And do you remember particular toys that mattered to you as a child?

I had a small black West Highland terrier, I think that's the only one I can remember. My brother had a teddy bear I think, but we didn't really have toys.

And so were you very much outdoors? What would you have done in your spare time as a child?

Well I was, as soon as I could I was always outdoors, and when I...we had a small dog, a delightful little terrier, a Jack Russell. Actually he couldn't stand me; it's rather interesting, he liked everybody except me. He only loved me when I took him out shooting, and that was, he had a passion for that of course. I always resented dreadful people coming to the house and he made a lot of them, but he never did it...(laughs) He was a wonderful little dog. And I was always out with my small dog and my small 4.10 gun out in the fields, and, my brother would never leave the gate, the house or the gate. He somehow, he suffered I think from some sort of agoraphobia, and he couldn't go out on his own.

And what was the landscape immediately around your house like?

Well the time when I had my first gun and small dog it was hilly and quite close to the mountains with wonderful views across Cardigan Bay right down to St. David's Head. It's a wonderful area to grow up in.

And who taught you to shoot?



I taught myself really, and a keeper, a nearby keeper taught me. And, I gave up shooting when I moved back to Anglesey in 1954. I found that I was never a good enough shot, and you should never shoot if you are not a good shot, because the wounding of birds, there's so much wounding of birds it's really quite appalling. I think compared with fox hunting, shooting is villainous, absolutely villainous. 75 per cent of all birds shot at get wounded, and sort of go away to die or get picked up by foxes, but people don't worry. A bird becomes abstract, and people bang away at it. Only when it's dead or wounded and lying at your feet does it become a real thing, and as long as a flying bird is abstract people will always blast away at them. In a way it makes me sick.

And did you go hunting as a child?

Oh yes, I hunted from a very early age with a pack of fox hounds, foot pack in the mountains. In fact if I hadn't gone out hunting I don't think I would have known so much about the mountains, because a fox would take you to places where people didn't normally go, and out in the mountains I met the farmers. And of course, the interesting thing about hunting in the mountains, a lot of people don't realise the difference between a sport and games. Now a thing is a sport if something is given a chance. A thing is a game when somebody is not ever given a chance. I mean boxing is called a sport; it's not a sport, it's a game, because you want to knock hell out of somebody and you never give him an inch. Everything, football, cricket, they are certainly not sports, they are games. So in sport, like in fox hunting, occasionally when farmers think it would be rather nice to give the fox a chance and not shoot him or snare him, as they have to to keep the foxes down, they hunt him, and he gets away three times out of four. And I was really, from an early age I was brought up with the farmers in the mountains hunting, and that's why so many of my paintings include farmers in the mountains and their sheep dogs, and I still go out hunting now.

And were you aware as you grew up that you were having a relationship with the landscape, or did you take it for granted because you had never known it not be there?

Oh I took it for granted. Totally soaked into me. And I was learning, without me knowing I was learning the whole time how, when there are clouds racing fast over the mountains and the sun breaks through and you get these clouds dashing over the breasts of the hills, and changing the colours of the mountains the whole time, they are all things you learn, you learn how water falls in a waterfall, and this is what you learn instinctively, how it fans out and all this sort of thing. You do learn a tremendous amount. You learn all about the birds. You can see a tiny speck in the distance, which somebody from town would only say it was a speck;

well you not only know it's a bird but you know what sort of bird. And it is in fact miraculous how you do it, but it's all done by constant looking, and you can tell the difference between, miles away, a wood pigeon and a homing pigeon, just by the way they use their wings and things like that. It's tremendous knowledge. And in landscape painting, a tremendous amount of it is knowledge. Naturally there must be some skill of course, but skill plus knowledge is what helps you produce a painting.

And were you imbibing the same knowledge about plants and trees?

Not so much. Oddly enough I didn't really get fascinated with plants until I went to Patagonia, where everything was so totally different, and I did get very interested there, and I found plants I had never seen before, and I photographed one plant which is a very rare plant indeed, that was in Tierra del Fuego.

And were you learning stories about the mountains and the mythology that went with it, or not?

Oh yes, all sorts of stories. All about the ferocious afanc. It was rather interesting, an afanc is the Welsh for a beaver, and there were beavers in the mountains, and there are all sorts of stories about Owain Gwynedd, the Prince of North Wales who caught a ferocious afanc and dragged it with white oxen to bury it under Snowdon, and as it was going up Snowdon, dragging it up Snowdon, the afanc became very sad and wept a great tear and it rolled down the mountainside, and that tear is now Llyn Glaslyn, a lake underneath Snowdon. And the stories of Arthur of course, masses of stories of Arthur, because he fought the Battle of Camlan in a valley called Cwmlan under Snowdon, and up at the top of the valley of the Cwmlan is the Bulch y Saethu, that is the gap of the arrows where the Saxons turned round and fired their arrows and shot Arthur. And then he was taken down to a lake called Llyn Dinas below, where Sir Bedevere threw his sword into the lake and a hand clad in white samite came... Yes, all these stories.

And would children growing up here today know those stories, or not?

Certain families would tell them, but I think possibly it was slightly unusual that I was told all about them.

And are those stories written down?

Oh yes, everybody knows these stories.

But were they told to you by people telling you, or by people reading them to you?

Oh no, people told me these stories I think. No I don't think I read them. I didn't do very much reading. I was very lucky, you see my father always knew the importance of books, so when my brother and I were young, if ever we wanted a book we could have it, as long as the price was reasonable, and I always wanted books on birds and animals, and my brother was much more learned, he liked far more highbrow books than I did.

Can you remember any illustrated books you had as a child?

Oh Lord, I remember English nursery rhymes illustrated by Arthur Rackham, and Arthur Rackham had a terrible effect on me, because I was terrified of those grisly figures. I mean he was a wonderful artist, but for a long long time I remembered these terrible figures of giants with people's heads attached to his belt, the giant cormorant with all these terrible heads. They do scare one, and I was thoroughly scared by these.

Did you have nightmares?

I don't think I've ever had a nightmare in my life. It's rather extraordinary isn't it, really. I don't know why I've never had nightmares. No, I've always been an extremely nervous person, and I've inherited apprehension from my mother, she was terribly apprehensive, and I also am.

Were you apprehensive about burglars or people coming to get you at all?

No, I mean I live here all alone and I don't particularly worry about that. I'm always apprehensive about the way I behave in society I think, oddly enough, I think that was inherited from my family, whereas my mother was scared stiff about me being seen by the people going to church, riding past on a bicycle. I'm terrified in a way of not doing enough in local society.

And, just sticking with books for a moment, can you remember any particular stories that were read to you, or that you read yourself?

It's rather odd. I certainly was never brought up on 'The Wind in the Willows' and Beatrix Potter or anything of those sort of things, I just didn't know about them. I think, I was

brought up by stories of G.A. Henty, about the British Empire and things like that. My father was very keen on Scouting, and he was quite a sort of high up official in the Boy Scouts.

End of F4540 Side B

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So you presumably were a Scout?

No, well only when I was at school. I was in the officers' training corps at school, and when you got to a certain age you could give it up and join the Scouts, so I think I did, for about a year I was a Boy Scout.

But you grew up being very conscious of empire then, did you?

Well I had so many relations who were in the Indian Civil Service and things like that. And the Empire was, when I was brought up it was such a powerful thing, I mean you opened the atlas and there was the British Empire red blazoned across the pages. You were very conscious that Britain was the top country really in the world, it's very odd, it was.

And as you were growing up, was there any sense in your life of the repercussions of the First World War, or not?

Oh yes, I mean I was born in the First World War, and, I do remember the German prisoners of the First World War, because I used to watch them marching past our house in Chirk with spades over their shoulders. This was because they didn't go back until 1922; for four years after the war ended there were still German prisoners; I think they went back in 1922.

And were they frightening to you?

No, no they weren't frightening at all, no.

And did you learn what had happened in the First World War?

Not really, it didn't touch Anglesey, and my father not being really fit of course he wasn't serving. No, it left, the First World War really passed over us.

Did you have tin soldiers or anything like that?

Oh yes, I had plenty of tin soldiers, yes.

And did your family take any kind of periodicals or newspapers?

I forget what they did take now when I was young. I think probably the 'Morning Post'. I don't think we took 'The Times'. No, I can't remember that.

And they didn't take anything like 'The Illustrated London News'?

Yes, they took 'The Illustrated London News', and I think that they took the 'Tatler' oddly enough, I can't think why but they did.

And did those pictures mean anything to you? Did you spend any time looking?

Yes, you see I really wanted to be in the Army, so the pictures in 'The Illustrated London News' probably meant quite a lot to me. But of course if I went to the Army I had to be in the cavalry, because the infantry was no good at all, I had to be on a horse, because my family have always loved horses.

And did you have comics or anything like that?

No. I think we did get the 'Daily Mirror' for a time, and in the 'Daily Mirror' there was a comic caricature, a strip cartoon of Pipsqueak and Wilfred, I remember Pipsqueak and Wilfred, I remember them quite well.

And did you have things like scrap-books, was that the kind of thing you played with?

No, we had scrap-screens, but, I don't think we ever had a scrap-book.

And do you remember the scrap-screens at all?

Oh yes, I remember those, they were really rather good, I always liked the scrap-screens.

Can you remember any of the images?

Not really, I think they were mainly Christmasy with robins and holly and things like that. I can't really remember that.

And when you were quite little, did you see any other children? Were there children nearby?

We seldom saw other children. It's rather odd really, but I don't know if my mother thought they weren't good enough, or what, but at home even when I was, up to the age of 18, I hardly ever saw any other children in the house.

And, did you feel isolated at all, or you just thought that was normal?

I thought it was normal.

And were there any other adults in your young life who were important?

There was a wonderful old girl, my old Aunt Mamie, she was a terrific character. She was really quite a courageous old thing. She had studied singing in Brussels as a girl, and she had always had a crooked spine, and she loved people, she was always visiting people, and she always had wonderful stories. She was the person, every family has a sort of, somebody in the family who preserves the family tree, and she used to tell me who I was related to, and I was related apparently to Cardinal Wolsey. I don't know how I was related to Cardinal Wolsey but she always said I was related to Cardinal Wolsey. All sorts of extraordinary people seemed to be... The Duke of Wellington. Well in a way I suppose I was related, because a relative married a Duke of Wellington, but... Aunt Mamie knew all about them. And she was very generous and she gave me things the whole time.

What sort of things?

Watches, a gold watch from my grandmother, and so on. And, she hadn't any money, but she...she was always cheerful. My mother resented her for being cheerful I think, she thought she was naughty, she shouldn't be cheerful, but she was, very cheerful.

And were you the sort of child that collected things, that made collections?

I think I did. I collected birds' eggs, but what else I am not quite certain. I know, I was...when I was small no bird could actually lay an egg within a mile of me without me knowing, and I knew exactly where all the eggs were, I could find all sorts...even cuckoos' eggs I could find, I knew where the cuckoos would be laying, in some wretched birds' nest, a meadow pipit or something.

And were you allowed to get dirty, or were you expected to be clean all the time?

I was expected to be clean, but of course I always did get dirty. My brother never got dirty, except when he played football and things at school. He was so well behaved it was unbelievable.

And what would you have worn on an ordinary day, not a Sunday?

Oh just the same grey shorts, grey stockings, boots, always boots, black boots.

How did the boots do up?

Oh with little studs at the top. And, always...a little grey hat and an open-neck shirt I think, a white shirt. But I did get fairly dirty compared with my brother.

And when did you first go to school at all?

I first went to school, there were some relatives of mine called Lloyd Williams who had started a girls' school nearby where we lived in Chirk, it was called Moreton Hall. It's now become quite a famous girls' school. My old cousin Lil, she started it, and she had a mass of highly intellectual and brilliant daughters, and one was headmistress of King Edward School, Birmingham, which is rather a smart school I believe; another was the Dean of the Royal Free Hospital in London; and three of them taught in Moreton Hall, and one of them, Bronwyn, was the headmistress after my old cousin Lil died. And I went there when I was five, and I got the best reports I've ever had; I always had terrible reports, even in the Army. I think they said, 'John is a very good little boy', and I suppose I was, I was horribly good. There were only two boys in that school, there was a little French boy and me, and I couldn't understand a word the little French boy said. And I don't remember much about it except that the girls were always crying, and Edward German came once to...no, Walford Davies came to award the prizes on speech day and somebody nicked his gold watch, I always remember that, he was furious. I saw him on the railway station nearby complaining madly. But I'm sure the girls didn't nick his gold watch, I can't think who did, it wasn't me and I don't think it was this little French boy.

And was that almost your first contact with little girls?

Oh the first, definitely the first contact, and they were always crying, it was very sad. (laughs)

So did you find them rather alien, or, how did you find them?



I suppose I did find them pretty alien, yes.

And what about the teachers, what were they like?

I just don't remember them. But I mean I wasn't, I was only there for a year I suppose and then I went off to, before I was seven I went off to a boarding school in Anglesey.

And had your brother been to boarding school?

He was there before me, and of course whenever I was at school with him he looked after me extremely well, he was extremely kindly. And, it was a very very good school. Trearddur Bay is a lovely part of the Anglesey coast. The headmaster, another Williams, Iorwyth[??] Williams, was a local person of a well-known Anglesey family, a wealthy Anglesey family, and he was an absolutely brilliant headmaster. And it was a wonderfully happy school, and.....[TELEPHONE - BREAK IN RECORDING]

....prepared for going off to boarding school?

Not really, but I took it totally in my stride. They were very kindly, they looked after me very well, and of course I had my brother there.

Were you sent away because they thought it was a better education, or because your mother really didn't want to have you around the house?

Oh no, I'm sure it wasn't because she didn't want to have me round. It was because it was done to do that, it was done to send boys away to school. We didn't have much money, but, I don't know how they managed it. I don't know how they managed to send me to Shrewsbury, I think it's because I got in cheap I think. (laughs)

And the boarding school was just boys was it?

Oh one girl. There was one girl called Frances Webb, and she was a very good rugby player, and she played on the wing and ran very fast indeed and, yes there was just one girl.

What was the name of the school?

Trearddur Bay School.

And how long were you there?

I was there from the age of six until I was thirteen, seven years.

And were you generally good at various subjects, or generally bad, or, how was it?

I think I was good at everything until I had an operation for my tonsils and adenoids when I was nine years old, and the surgeon had a heart attack in the middle of the operation and he cut out all my soft palate and my uvula as well as my tonsils and adenoids, and that really mucked me up, and I couldn't go back to school for a couple of terms I think, and when I did go back to school I somehow was not quite the same boy as I was before. I was supposed to be very bright, and I was going to get a scholarship to Shrewsbury and that sort of thing, but when I went back there of course I was stupid and couldn't concentrate.

So had you been kept at home to convalesce, what happened?

I was kept at home, and a nurse came in to look after me, and I had a terrible bad throat, and they all said, well I was a delicate child and I wouldn't get better like my brother had; he had had the operation as well. The truth was of course, the surgeon had the heart attack, and we only learned this later.

And were you actually bedridden during this time?

No, I don't think I was bedridden, I just was, I had a very bad throat.

And how did you spend the time, do you remember?

I remember I spent the time with the keeper on a nearby estate and his son looking for birds' nests and things in the marsh at Stinflin[ph] and that sort of thing.

How old were you when that happened? Nine?

Nine.

Right. And had the radio come in to your life?

No, no. I don't know when we had our first radio, a long time after.

So at this school, were any teachers a particular influence?

There was a man called Glazebrook who was the art master, and he was wonderful. He used to draw glorious Great Western Railway engines emerging from tunnels, and with absolutely fantastic perspective, and I admired that very much.

Was this the first formal art education you had?

Oh yes. It wasn't particularly formal but, I remember Mr Glazebrook, and he was a wonderful man, he was a great fisherman, and he went out one day in the bay and came back with a pollack, which was actually bigger than I was, and I was photographed alongside this enormous pollack and looking an incredibly weedy little boy. And another thing, I think after this operation on my throat which went wrong, I didn't grow, and I was very small, and when I went to Shrewsbury School I was 4 foot 10 and 4 stone 10, and I didn't really grow until I left Shrewsbury.

And did that make you anxious?

Never, no. No. I don't know why, but all the things that have happened to me, they seem to have...I don't know why but I've taken them in my stride, everything.

When did the epilepsy begin?

I'm not certain when I became an epileptic, they don't know. It might have been a battering from my nanny, it might have been meningitis which I got.

How old were you when you had that?

I must have been about fifteen. And, I remember once going out in a canoe with my brother at Criccieth in the sea and getting in an extraordinary panic. A panic is something which epileptics do tend to get, but suddenly I got this appalling panic. I didn't have any fits or anything like that, but it was an unnatural panic.

Can you describe it?

It's terribly difficult to describe, it's just terrible terrible fear. And, luckily I was with my brother and he got the boat in. But I suppose I've always been incredibly sort of highly strung and imaginative. But the epilepsy first started, the first grand mal attack was when I went to a

dinner, a St. David's dinner at the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and I had a glass of port and I had a glass of beer I think and that's all, and I went to bed that night, and I was sharing a room in the Anglesey Arms Hotel with a friend of mine who was also about to join the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, but we hadn't got our commissions through actually. But I woke up the next morning and I was on the floor covered in snow. It had snowed during the night, and the window was open and the snow had come in, and apparently I must have got up, maybe to close the window, and I had had a grand mal epileptic attack. And I was lifted up and put into bed, and then I got dressed later, it must have been a few hours later, and on my way down to breakfast I had another grand mal attack, and then I was unconscious for 24 hours. And I woke up and I was at home. I don't know how my parents took this but, I mean I am now Chairman of the local branch of the Mersey Region Epileptic Association, and I believe that the people who really suffer are the parents, not the people with epilepsy. That's my experience, but I don't know how true that is. It's very odd but it's never worried me.

How much has this affected your life? I mean was it something that you could control?

Oh it's affected my life totally. I mean without epilepsy my life would have been totally different.

In what way?

Well I wouldn't have become an artist, because I was advised, I had a grand mal attack in the Army, the last one I had, and I was sent to the head injuries hospital in Oxford and they did tests on my brain, the first electroencephalogram and all that, and the doctor there said that all the tests had proved that I was abnormal and that I couldn't stay in the Army. And then he said, 'We have decided that as you are in fact abnormal you should take up art.' Well I didn't want to, and I did everything I could not to take up art. I tried to get a job as a prep school master, even I tried as a travelling salesman for Winsor & Newtons, which is really rather bizarre when I look back at it, the amount of money I've paid in Winsor & Newton's paint. And, eventually there was nothing for it, and a girl came to us as a land-girl, not that we had any land but she had had a row with her employer and my mother said she would put her up, and she had been to the Slade, and I told her I had been advised to take up art and she wrote to the secretary of the Slade and he said, 'For God's sake tell him to come, because everybody's gone to the war'. I wouldn't have got in otherwise, because I really was quite hopeless.

But in other ways, I mean has epilepsy carried on being part of your life, or have you...?

It's constantly been part of my life. I've never worried about it, but it has inhibited me to a tremendous extent. I haven't been able to do things normally other people could have done, do you see. When I was young I couldn't get excited, I couldn't go to dances, I couldn't do anything like that. And so in a way the only thing I did have was my art.

But do you still suffer from it now? I mean..

Well if you're an epileptic you will always suffer from epilepsy in certain ways, even if you don't have grand mal or petit mal, it's a state you are in. And it comes with me now in sudden attacks of terrible apprehension do you see, and it's the same sort of thing. I mean epilepsy is not just going clean out or having a temporary loss of memory or something like that; it's a bigger thing than that, it's all sorts of things, and I will never really be anything else but an almost-cured epileptic.

And how often do you have this sense of great apprehension?

Oh I get them very often, very often. Unusual.

Like once a week, or once a month, or...?

Might be every fortnight or something.

And how do you deal with it?

I don't, nobody can do anything with it, you just have to ride it.

And is it paralysing, do you just sit it out, or do you get on with things to distract yourself?

You get a terrible depression, and it's no good going to the doctor because they can't do anything.

And do you feel depressed enough to think about suicide, or not?

Well I did in the past, very often. There was one time I used to find myself going downstairs to get my gun, and in the end I told the doctor that he must send me to somewhere to keep an eye on me, and they sent me to St. Matthew's, Northampton, and, they couldn't do much to me there because the treatment they were giving was electric shock treatment which produces

epileptic attacks. Now with me, there's no point, so they sort of fiddled around with drugs and I was there for about three months I think, and...

When was this?

This must have been 1949.

And do you still ever get near to being suicidal, or has that been controlled?

Not now, no. Well I mean, lots of people who are not epileptics feel like suicide, it's not an unusual thing. I mean friends of mine I know who have wanted to top themselves from time to time. It's not unusual.

But can you paint during those periods, or not?

It's not so easy. When I've had a mild attack of epilepsy I can usually paint better, I don't know why. The one danger to me is, if I am feeling really well I am somehow not stimulated to paint. It's as if there's no grain of sand in my personal oyster shell. But when I've had, as I do still get, hardly ever now but I...at one time I was getting nine attacks a day, do you see, which made me pretty punch-drunk and I was no good to man or beast, but maybe if I have one every three months now, I mean I can cope with it all right, but very often I paint better.

So you come out of it with some energy then?

Well I suppose, it does, I do have energy. I've always had enormous energy. I mean I can do things most people can't do, I mean I used to paint a full-length life-size portrait in a day; they're not many people who do that. I mean even now I can run a long way, I don't know how many miles but I can still run, and I can do all sorts of things like that. I do have terrific energy. My specialist who dealt with my epilepsy in London said I had a built-in source of LSD. (laughs)

And have you had to take medicines over the years, or not?

Oh I've taken an enormous amount of pills. I don't take any now, and when I became a diabetic I think a mixture of epileptic and diabetic pills was pretty lethal, and so I gave up the epileptic pills and I became fitter immediately.

Oh right. And when did you become diabetic?

About ten years ago.

Right. And when you feel depressed do you talk to anybody or do you retreat?

No, no. I can't, if I'm feeling really bad I can't go anywhere. And if I have a slight epileptic attack I can't meet people, it makes it worse oddly enough meeting people.

And, looking at it from totally the other angle, you've talked a bit about the art teacher at the school, but had you drawn as a child?

No more so than any other.

Do you remember what any of your drawings were?

Oh I think a very very early one, I did a drawing I was rather excited about, it was my brother sitting on his pot. I must have been three or something, and I showed it with pride to my mother who became absolutely barmy with rage, and she clobbered me and said I was a filthy little boy. I had no idea why I was a filthy little boy. (laughs)

So that was your first piece of art criticism.

That was my first bit of art criticism, yes, extraordinary. That sort of thing has been, ever since I've had that sort of art criticism.

But did you paint, as quite a lot of children born about the same time, soldiers in red coats and cannons and that sort of thing?

No, no I don't think I did, no.

Did you do nature drawings do you think?

What?

Nature drawings?

Oh I drew quite a lot of birds and animals I think. But when I went to Shrewsbury School I went in for an art competition and I won the prize. I thought I was the only boy who went in

for the prize, and the prize was awarded by the headmaster's wife, and she was some sort of relation, so I didn't take it all very seriously. But later on I learned that the keeper of art in the National Museum of Wales, with whom I didn't really get on, I never knew why, eventually I found out he had also gone in for this prize and I had beaten him.

What was your picture?

Oh it was landscapes I think.

And what materials did you use at that time?

Watercolour.

And when you were much younger what were you drawing with, what were your...?

Chalk probably.

Right. And when did you begin having watercolours?

When I was at Shrewsbury School, I suppose the art master at Shrewsbury School taught me how to paint in watercolours. And I have an old friend called Ernest Nash who is a very extraordinary man who, somebody should record his life, because he was a naval officer, an engineer officer, he had been on the Thetis which sank. He had left the Theatis[ph] just before it went on its last voyage. He came of a family of doctors, and he was a very good watercolourist, and he bought a woollen mill in Anglesey and worked that, and then he bought a farm in the mountains and he's still up there. He also used to advise on rocket propulsion at Woomera. He could do absolutely anything. And a local journalist went to interview him on my advice and said he was quite the most extraordinary man he's ever met. He taught me to paint in watercolours. He is a lovely watercolour painter even now.

I'm sorry, was he your teacher? Where did you come across him?

Oh he was an old friend, I used to meet him out hunting in the mountains. His family had a cottage in Anglesey and they used to come down from Sheffield, and I used to meet him out hunting.

And how did you and he discover you both wanted to do watercolours?



Oh well he had been doing them for a long time. He's now 82 or 83 you see, so he's a little older than I am. And, he introduced watercolouring to me really.

So did you and he become sort of best friends? Was he a very important figure?

Oh we always have been very good, he's about my oldest friend, one of my oldest friends.

Right. So how old were you when you met him?

Oh I must have been thirteen or something.

Right. And, before we leave your Anglesey school is there anything else we ought to say about it? Was there anything particularly significant that happened there? You were just generally quite good [INAUDIBLE]?

Well the first place in my life I think that I became conscious of mood in a place. Now, to me I think mood is something which is terribly important. There's a German word, angst. Now angst is a sort of, it's mood stemming from...stemming from apprehension I think. It's a powerful thing. Well I remember when I was a boy at Trearddur Bay School we had snow, and I remember that snow and I remember the sky became a mustard colour, and I remember I had chickenpox too, and as a little boy of seven I won a prize of sixpence for a poem about the snow. I think it was very simple but scanned rather well. It started off, 'The snow is simply beautiful and all the world is white, and everybody thinks it is a very lovely sight.' And so it went on. I won sixpence. But I'll never forget that snow, and the coast, do you see. I go there to Trearddur Bay where the school was, regularly and I paint the coast at Trearddur Bay, because even as a little boy I remember we used to do a certain amount of riding and I used to ride along the cliffs on a pony and watch the wrecks after a storm, and the mood of that place sort of sank into me. It really was extraordinary.

But as a boy you didn't paint or draw it?

No, oh no, no no. It was just something which went into my library, visual library.

And were there any books that you came across at that school or anything like that that was an influence?

The books?

Mm.

No I don't think so. I won two literary prizes. There was a prize called the Number Seven literary prize. I never won it, I never came second, but I always got a special prize. I don't know why, perhaps I was a little unconventional or something. The first prizes I ever won I think.

And what had you done to get them, do you remember?

I can't remember what I wrote about.

And, did you like games, was all that...?

Oh I loved games, I was captain of cricket. I was too small for rugby really, although I enjoyed it. My brother of course was very good at all games.

And was the team spirit important?

No I never bothered very much about team spirit.

And what about things like drama, did you do any acting as a little boy?

Oh I did a little bit of acting, but not particularly.

And any music at this stage?

What?

Any music at this stage?

Well, it's a very odd thing. I remember, I had never done any music, and one day the headmaster Mr Williams said Liz Fisher, the music mistress, was ill, and there wouldn't be a hymn. I remember I said, 'Well I will play it.' And I got up and I played 'Onward Christian Soldiers', and I had never played the piano before I think. And they all sang. And the funny thing is, I never went on with it. But I can play the piano, and I can remember tunes and play them, terribly badly, but I love music in that way.

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.....school or not, the Anglesey school?

Oh no, no Welsh was spoken. Definitely not. Because Mr Williams came of an old Anglesey landed family, and of course he couldn't speak Welsh, because there's a terrible sort of schism in Wales.

And did you make any particular friends at this school?

I did, I made...I always had friends. It's very extraordinary, I was never without a friend at my prep school. When I went to Shrewsbury I never had a friend, not one boy would really have anything to do with me.

That must have been deeply upsetting.

It was a little odd. I don't remember being all that worried about it. My house was the furthest one away from the school buildings, it was about half a mile, and we used to have to walk backwards and forwards, and boys always paired up, and no boy would ever walk with me, which, I found it perhaps strange, but it didn't worry me unduly because I always was a loner.

But did you get bullied?

No, oddly enough I was never bullied. I think that might have been because of my brother, he was a prefect and all that sort of thing. I was never bullied.

And did your brother make friends?

Oh yes, that's the extraordinary thing. He always had friends at school at Shrewsbury, but as soon as he left Shrewsbury he never had a friend. As soon as I left Shrewsbury I always had friends.

And why was Shrewsbury chosen?

Well my grandfather had been there, a relative was Samuel Butler, and so, - 'The Way of All Flesh' - Butler was some sort of a relation of mine. My grandfather went to Shrewsbury by stage-coach from Anglesey sitting on the top. And, no it was a sort of family tradition, but in

a way I don't think I should have gone there. It would probably have been better had I gone to a local school.

Why?

It was very strange. Now, the way I was brought up meant that I could never cheat. It sounds rather pious, but when I went to Shrewsbury School it was expected of you to cheat like mad, in fact you couldn't get out of the lower school without cheating, you had to cheat your way out. Well, maybe it's the fact I was brought up with an immense amount of guilt, I could never cheat, so I was always, because of that, at the bottom of the form. And when eventually I was put up into the upper school and had to take my School Certificate, which was O'level, the form master of the form I was put into said he would not be responsible for the teaching of such a stupid boy, and I was removed from that form, and a rather kinder master, a very much kinder master, said he would take me on, and he was really a wonderful man. And when I took my School Certificate, which I wasn't really supposed to take, I got more credits than any boy in the whole of the school; this is because they couldn't actually cheat in the examination. Now my brother never had to cheat because he was bright and went straight into the upper school when he first went there; I had to more or less fight my way out. And this was amazing, do you see, to my father, because the reports he got on me were so appalling that he thought that I must be half-witted. I mean one senior master said, 'Never in my whole experience have I met a boy with less ability'. Another master said, 'This boy has no power of lucid thought.' And my house master said, 'It is a tragedy, he is the despair of all who teach him.' Now what is astonishing there was, I was in fact, I must have been brighter than the average, and yet they didn't realise that I was the only boy who didn't cheat, they just didn't twig.

Did they realise you were trying?

Oh yes, I mean always in reports they said it's amazing that somebody who tries so hard can get nowhere.

But how did you manage not to become absolutely desperate about it all?

I just don't know. I've no idea. But then it was very odd, because my father then indulged in a bit of conversation with the headmaster, a little correspondence, and he was, do you see, fed up with all these terrible reports coming, and here was I, got more credits than any boy in the school. And he challenged the headmaster to say why this could be, and the headmaster waffled and said he had total faith in his masters, and my father saying, 'Well I have no faith

in you,' and he said, 'I have no faith in the school, therefore I am taking my son away'. It was far too early for me to be taken away.

How old were you?

I must have been sixteen. But I had one term to do, and what was interesting was that it was the term, it was the form I was put into, of all the odds and sods, the people who didn't fit in anywhere who were going to leave, and the thugs, and the master appointed to look after us was a new man called McKeckran[ph], and McKeckran[ph] had a passion for literature. I mean to a form like I was in, he was cannon fodder, because they were all thugs, but his way of dealing with thugs was to recite poetry and literature, and he got this lot of thugs totally under control purely because he was able to show how beautiful literature could be.

Can you remember what it was?

Oh I know masses, masses of what he taught us. The poems from T.S. Eliot and so, 'Behind a bar in Lower Thames Street the mellow wining of a mandolin, and the clatter and the chatter from within where barge men lounge at noon, where the walls of Magnus Mott[??] are holed[??] in inexpressible splendour of Ionian note[??] and bright and gold.' And German, [GERMAN POEM]. All sorts, Trench and Rimbaud, Rilke, Verlaine, and all these.

But Eliot was pretty fresh off the press at that point too wasn't he?

I suppose he was, but he was a very remarkable man, this man McKeckran[ph]. And what was interesting, there was one boy in that form who was a non-co-operator, his name was Richard Hillary. He was a very good oar, he should have been in the school VIII but he would never train, and I remember he always stood slightly aside from all the other boys at roll calls and those things. He was brilliant at sport, but he was strange. And he eventually went to Trinity, Oxford, where he was a member of a crew in rowing there which used to win races in Germany and places, and the war came, and he was in the RAF, and he was shot down in the Battle of Britain and he got dreadfully badly burnt, his face got terribly burnt, and he wrote a book called 'The Last Enemy' which was one of the most famous books of the last war. And he wouldn't have written it if it hadn't have been for McKeckran[ph].  
Extraordinary really.

And do you still love all that poetry? What does it mean to you now?

I don't know. It's funny, poetry is an odd thing. Poetry to me, it gives me a headache, I have to concentrate so hard. But I do love poetry, I used to write terrible poetry I must say.

At what point in your life?

Oh I suppose in my twenties and thirties I used to write poetry.

Have you still got it?

Oh no.

And, who told you about sex?

Nobody really. I mean, did I...I mentioned in 'Across the Straits' how this terrible chaplain we had used to tell us that sex is like a peach I think he said, and in the middle of it there is a nasty...no, he said that life is like a peach, and in the middle of it there is a nasty horrid gnarled stone, and that is sex. He was a terrible man. He used to love taking small boys for rides in motor cars, and a boy who I was at school with called Richard Cobb, he is now the Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, he wrote a book about Shrewsbury School called 'A Classical Education', and I didn't mention the name of this dreadful chaplain but he did, I mean I felt that was rather naughty really. And he said he used to play tricks on him, he said once he wrote a letter to him purporting to come from the Bishop of Zanzibar, and said, 'It has come to my notice that you are very favourably disposed towards little boys. I am much perturbed about this and I would like to interview you on the matter on Shrewsbury Station tomorrow at 12 o'clock,' do you see. Well Richard Cobb apparently went down to Shrewsbury Station and he hid behind one of the pillars in the station and waited, and this agitated man turned up and dashed around looking like this, furtively looking for the Bishop of Zanzibar. But he mentioned his name, which I think he probably shouldn't have done. Then another boy called Brian Inglis, he was editor of the 'Spectator' at one time, he wrote a book, and that even damned the school more than I did. But the interesting thing was, Shrewsbury School did not approve of my book, but it approved of those two because they were distinguished people. Isn't it extraordinary.

How did they express their non-approval of yours?

Oh I'll tell you about that. The fact that one...you see when I wrote the book I sent it to Curtis Brown the literary agents, and they sent it to every publisher in London and it was turned

down by every publisher in London, and I was told that Michael Joseph sent the manuscript to Shrewsbury School and they were furious apparently. (laughs)

And were you aware of homosexuality among the boys, or not?

it's the most extraordinary thing that never the whole time I was at Shrewsbury School did I know that such a thing as homosexuality existed. Now afterwards, I mean talking to other boys at other schools, I'm sure it did exist but I never realised there was such a thing.

And neither of your parents ever mentioned sex to you in any form?

Oh my God no. No, Lord no.

So do you think that you really had any idea about sex? I mean was it all something rather forbidden and...?

Oh one always has an idea about sex.

But was it something that was worrying, or was it something that you thought you knew all about, or that you thought, you knew you didn't know about it, or...?

Well I think one naturally does know all about it, but it was, in my case it was made even more difficult because of the epilepsy, because I had to be a total loner really, and I had to, any excitement would bring on an attack, do you see, and this sort of thing made life extremely difficult. And, I mean, actually, I mean the only thing I've ever wanted in my life was to get married, and somehow it turned out to be almost totally impossible because of epilepsy, and painting became a substitute. It's very odd really.

Did you ever almost get married?

Well I did get engaged once, to a girl at the Slade, but her mother, who was a member of the Moscow intelligentsia, she was probably by far the most stupid of all the Moscow intelligentsia, she blew her top. I was epileptic and that was out of the question; I hadn't any money; and I was Welsh. And in the end they forced her into marriage with somebody else, and she has been miserable for the rest of her life.

And have you, as a result?

Well I've always been miserable with my life. (laughs)

But about her, I mean did it...?

I got over...well I don't know if I did get over it, because my epilepsy got infinitely worse as a result, and it probably did me an enormous amount of damage, but she doesn't know that.

And when you were at school, were you in love with anybody?

At school? Good God no. It never occurred to me.

And did you have contact with girls at that point at all, were there any girls in your life at all?

No, never.

And did you have any heroes, I mean sporting heroes or anybody like that? Who were the figures that mattered to you?

I've never been a hero-worshipper. It may be very conceited or something, but I've never...I mean the only thing one ever worships is women really; I mean men worship women and women worship men, but I've never worshiped anybody else.

But there wasn't a sportsman who you thought was wonderful or anything like that?

No, never, never, no.

And did you have a sort of cubicle at school where you could put up pictures? Did you have anything that was up there?

No, it was...we all had big studies, and I remember under the lid of my desk there was always a portrait, a photograph, of Loretta Young, that was my particular girl at the time.

And what was the art teaching like at this school?

It was non-existent. There was a very nice man called Mr Woodroff[ph], and we all piled into the art room, and there was a large drawer in which there were prints of all sorts of things, reproductions and so on, and you had to take one out and copy it, that's all it was really.



And any art history?

Oh no, no art history at all, no.

And at this stage, as you came to the point where you would be leaving school, had you any idea what your life, what your future would be? Were you encouraged to think what it would be?

Well I had always wanted to be in the Army originally because I loved horses and I wanted to be in the cavalry, but my father said don't be so stupid, do you see, it's very expensive to be an officer in the cavalry. And then I wanted to be a farmer, and he said, well that's quite ridiculous because in order to be a farmer you've got to have good land and you've got to have money, and we have neither. So he then decided he would put me in an estate agent's office, or a land agent's office in Pwllheli, and I studied land agency, and so I went there in '37, January '37. And that was really rather wonderful, because I had to do my Surveyors Institute examinations, but most of the time I used to go round with George Yale, who was the head of the firm, and he was a member of a very old aristocratic north Wales family; he could speak Welsh but very badly, but I used to go round the farms with him. And they all respected him because he was a member of the Bon-y-Fycion[??], that is the landed families, and, I don't think they trusted him but they liked him because he was a member of the Bonyfiddion. And he told wonderful racy stories about all the people, and he got on terribly well. He used to pull the old people's legs, do you see, he used to go to a farm where they desperately wanted new slates on the roof and mending the popty, which is the oven, and they wanted a new cattle cowshed or something like that, and he would always make them laugh, and by the time he had driven away they had forgotten what they wanted. He was a great character, George Yale. They were always wanting calch poyce[ph], which is lime. And a lot of them of course couldn't speak any English at all, and so I had to learn Welsh in order to speak to a lot of them.

So this is the time that you really learned Welsh then?

Well I didn't really learn Welsh but I knew I could talk about the state of the corn and the crops and the cattle, and my health and their health and all this sort of thing, and the weather and that sort of thing.

And how did you feel about that as a career? Did you go into it willingly, or...?

Oh I went into it willingly. But then...

Sorry, can I just...before we totally leave school, were there subjects you enjoyed more than others? I mean were there things that you have liked more?

I loved history, and I loved literature, but that's about all.

And what kind of science did you do?

Well science I liked as long as it had something to do with natural history. And in a way I was rather lucky, because the year I did take my O'levels, my School Certificate, for the first time they had a paper on general science instead of mathematics, and I could never do mathematics, and I was absolutely delighted when I saw I had to write about the fox, the hare and the otter, and I think that's what got me through.

And by this stage in your life, had you seen much of the rest of the country or been abroad or anything?

No, never, no, almost entirely in Wales.

Had you been to London?

Once I went to London.

When was that?

It must have been in about 1928 or...yes, about 1928. I remember London, being absolutely fascinated by the lights, and, we didn't go to any art galleries, we went to the Natural History Museum, Kensington.

Did you just go for a holiday?

Yes, it really was a holiday, but I mean it was an interesting experience.

And, either at home or then, did you go to the theatre or pantomimes or anything like that?

We went to a pantomime in London, but we never went to the theatre.

What was the pantomime, can you remember?

Yes, it was 'Jack and the Beanstalk'.

Who was in it, do you remember?

Oh Lord no, it was in 1928, I can't remember who was in it.

Right. And you don't remember any, either sort of Gilbert & Sullivan things or opera or theatre being part of life here?

No, we had a gramophone, and I don't think there was much on the gramophone of any great merit.

Classical, or what?

No I don't think there were any classical ones. You see you've got to realise that my family were always out on a limb, in the furthest north-west corner of the island, and when my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, and my great-aunt Louisa and great-aunt Georgie went up to London in, when Queen...1837, when Queen Victoria came to the throne, the same year, they went up there and they worked like mad up there, they sculpted in wax, they went to the theatre, they visited the docks and made notes about the shipping, and they went to the zoo and they went to concerts, and they did it all and then they went back to the furthest north-west corner of Wales where the seas raged around the The Skerries lights, and there they stayed, and they hadn't got the contacts. My great-grandfather was always in touch with the professors of botany in Cambridge, talking about plants and things like that, but it was too far from anywhere, it was almost on an island, off an island.

And was there any other part of life that you were introduced to at Shrewsbury that you hadn't known about before, any other discipline or social life or anything else that we should talk about?

I don't think so, no. Not that I can think of.

And when you were working with the land agent, were you living with your parents again?

Yes.

And what was your brother doing by this stage?

My brother was at Oxford.

Studying?

Well he gave up, do you see. It's very interesting how somebody so bright, he was so ultra sensitive, he was too sensitive really to live, everything affected him. The slightest remark he would turn into something against him. And he decided he wouldn't work any more. It was very bad luck on my father, because he wanted him to get a scholarship to Oxford, which he could have done easily but he just wouldn't take it. And all his other school mates who were junior to him got scholarships, and my brother packed it in. And then he went to Oxford and he spent his whole time playing games, and at the very last moment he scrambled a third.

In what subject?

In modern languages I think, French and German. And then he joined a solicitor's office in Pwllheli and he was there learning to be a solicitor when the war broke out.

And how did he get on with your parents by this stage?

Well he didn't get on so well with my father as I did. There was this strange relationship with my mother which he...I remember once my mother was so excited, she was going over to Llandudno to some friends' house and my brother was going to be there. I remember he paid absolutely no attention to her at all, he dismissed her in an odd way. And the tragedy was that towards the end of her life she realised for the first time that I was actually more fond of her than he was, and the child she doted on really didn't give a hoot. That must have been awful. I really, I mean the main thing, I was terribly terribly sorry for her, terribly sorry for her. I mean she was...she really was an extremely good person who had got lost, totally lost in the sort of strange miasma of society and convention.

And by this stage when you were being a land agent, what was your relationship like with your father?

Well I got on very well with him.

But would you go to the pub together, would you go for walks together?

No he never went to a pub, he never drank. No, he couldn't walk very well because of his leg.

So what would you do together? When would you see each other?

We would see each other in the house, and we would talk, he was very fond of gardening. And, he was just the sort of bulwark of security.

And we talked about the wider landscape, but was your actual garden important to you, as you grew up?

Not particularly, except when I had to dig up the potatoes and peel them and... No I was not interested in gardening then.

And what about politics in your house? What were your parents' politics?

Oh totally, irrevocably and utterly Tory.

And what were yours at this stage?

I hadn't any ideas about politics then.

And were you encouraged ever to talk about it with your parents?

No, we were never encouraged to talk about anything. If my father would have, my mother would have put a boot into it. They really, my mother didn't like opinions.

So when you were a young man, what would your Sunday lunch conversation have been at home, what would you have been likely to talk about?

I can't remember. I suppose it must have been local people. It was not a very stimulating conversation I'm sure. My brother would never talk to me about anything, never, he is an absolutely total clam.

And did you rebel at any stage, did you have a rebellious period?

I had occasionally rebellion, but it was very very difficult because at this time I was almost anaesthetised by drugs. I didn't think further than the next day. I had a tremendous amount of drugs to take, which put me in a state of oblivion really.

But you hadn't begun to be epileptic by this stage?

Oh yes.

You had?

Well no, I became epileptic...this is after I had become epileptic.

Right.

They absolutely filled me up with drugs. First of all with Lumenal, and belladonna, and from there I moved on to phenobarbitone, and from phenobarbitone... At that time, every morning my mother and my brother had to lift me out of bed and lay me on the floor because I wouldn't wake up, I was totally anaesthetised. And then on to a drug called epanutin[ph], and after epanutin[ph] I moved to a thing called tridione[ph] which extracted all my red blood corpuscles, and I couldn't see in sunlight with that drug. And after that I went back to epanutin[ph], and then I got on to eventually a nastier drug called ospalot[ph], and finally I gave up, with a certain amount of trepidation I gave up ospalot[ph], not because the doctor suggested it but I was bloody well fed up with having drugs. Because they did...the drugs kept me alive undoubtedly, but they ruined my life. Well, I say ruined my life, I suppose I've been pretty lucky really, because I'm a painter.

Did you ever try things like homeopathy and other approaches?

Well it's rather funny, there's a friend of mine called Michael Carson, he was a medical student at St. Mary's. He was a wonderful chap really, he was an Irishman who was always putting his last pound on a horse and things like that. And he used to act as a medical adviser to the underworld, which is really rather extraordinary. And I had a great friend called Tom Griffith, who was a very unconventional character, and he and Michael were great friends, and Michael eventually qualified, I don't know how he did, and he decided to go in for, he became an osteopath. Some way or other he got his consulting rooms in Wimpole Street, and one day he said, 'You know John, I can cure your epilepsy by cranial massage. Come along to see me and I will X-ray your skull, and I will give you a course of cranial massage, I have a wonderful man who works for me.' And so I went along, and I had lent him paintings to decorate his waiting-room, and he had all these extraordinary machines, I don't know how he got hold of them because he didn't have much money. And he put my head in some camera and photographed my head from all angles and then he called me in to have a look at my skull, and I must say my skull looked extraordinary, it was all over the place. And he said,

'Now, you can tell why you have epilepsy, it's pressure on your brain.' And it did look rather like that. And he said, 'Look here, I won't charge you, this fellow here,' I forget what his name was, 'he will massage you cranially.' And I said, 'Well I can't do this without the permission of my specialist who has been looking after me for years.' And so I went to see my specialist and he went through the roof, and he said, 'Oh yes,' he said, 'he will cranially massage you. He might get you better but he might also get you wrong.' And he got in touch with poor old Michael and gave him a hell of a dressing-down and threatened to have him cut off the medical register. So I never had my head cranially massaged. It didn't worry me particularly. But I felt rather sorry for Michael because he was doing it for nothing. Oh he was an extraordinary chap. He decided when he first became a doctor that he would become a ship's doctor and he went out to India and he fell deeply in love with an Indian girl in Bombay and asked her to marry him, and she said no, and he was desperate and he got on his boat to come back to this country and it broke down in Bombay harbour, so he got off the boat again, dashed back and said, 'Will you marry me?' and she said yes.

And were they happy?

Well I don't think any girl would be really happy with Michael because he was such an outrageous philanderer.

And did you have moral feelings about philandery or not?

Who?

You.

I suppose I did, because I was brought up in that sort of way.

And do you still feel that?

No, no not...no.

So when did it change?

Oh I suppose it's a gradual changing. Because you know, if you are a painter, what you are searching for the whole time is the truth, to put down the truth, and if you are searching for the truth all these conventions become of little importance if they're not based on truth. And

so gradually I realised how daft a lot of them were. I mean the only thing was you must never do anything which basically upsets other people.

End of F4541 Side B



F4542 Side A

When you say you are searching for the truth and that that leads you to question the conventions, do you think also some of that came to you because, as a result of your illness you weren't being a philanderer yourself or whatever, that you were in a sense observing how the conventions work and whether they...?

I was observing the whole time from the sidelines, I was a spectator, I've always been a spectator. No, it has been slightly strange, my life, but my sort of painting I'm certain it is something, it is a search for the truth, tonally and whatever it is, and...I hate, do you see, pretension, and this is something to do with my upbringing I think, any sort of pretension in art, and so much art is pretentious, and the people are pretentious, and that aggravates me.

And, when you say it's a search for the truth, do you think you have...you can actually take particular pictures where you feel you have found more truth than in others?

No the truth only comes when you are in the process of painting. You see if I put on a bit of paint, let's say I'm painting a girl and there's her cheek, and I say, my God, that's a lovely bit of paint, do you see, but then I have a second think and say, well is it true, as part of the head? And of course if it's not true it's got to go, this sort of thing. It might sound daft to a lot of people but, it is in a way slightly puritanical, but it's the way I do work.

And when you say that, you mean true to that particular head in front of you, or true anatomically to any head?

No, true for that particular head.

And you wouldn't ever at a later point take that as a starting point again, and imagine a head where it would be truthful?

No, I can't...I mean I do paint from memory, but I don't like to imagine heads, because that's not quite true. It sounds as if I am a terrible puritan, but I think in a way my painting is based on... And what is odd is, in my portrait exhibition of 114 portraits two years ago, two brain surgeons came to see it and were fascinated by it from the point of psychiatry or...I mean they were neurologists and brain surgeons, and I met them and they took me out for tea and they said they were amazed at the feeling in the portraits. I mean I couldn't really understand what they were talking about; they did get tremendously influenced, and they said the way I had an uncanny ability to get to the soul of the person. Well it's something I never try and do; I mean

if you paint a portrait it's difficult enough to get a likeness, and I always try and get likenesses, but to get to the soul of a subject, sitter, and to sort of psychoanalyse them is so far from my mind. And so many people say this about my portraits, that they are incredible interpretations of the people's psyche, and I never never would try and do that, never.

And how does that relate to the capturing of a mood or a moment in landscape? Is that a much more conscious thing?

No. With that, do you see, the mood is there. I like to paint certain things in certain moods, do you see, it triggers something off and I like to paint it like that, usually rather sort of mournful. Again, it is again this angst. The introduction to the exhibition in Llangefni opening in June has been written by the Professor of Art in Aberystwyth, and it's very interesting, it's the first time I think I have ever been taken seriously, and it's very interesting to read it, because a lot of what he said I think was quite true, and, I mean I wouldn't...I wouldn't say these things, because one doesn't really, but what he said was true.

What did he say?

Well I can't quite remember. I sent it off to somebody to have a look at it and so I haven't got it with me, but I mean a lot of it was about why I painted and my relations with the world of art, which I've never really mentioned publicly but he did, which is very interesting, how unpopular I am with the world of art. But I can't remember exactly now what he, the things he did pin-point but I said to myself, good God, how extraordinary, he's right.

And did he come up with some sort of explanation or suggestions of why and how?

The funny thing is I can't remember that. He taught a lot about my epilepsy, and being a loner and things like that. I've never really had a wish to be a loner, but perhaps, because I am, it's extraordinary. And what he did say which was interesting is, I am well known for my opposition to what is commonly known as 'modern art'. He said the extraordinary thing is, he may object to modern art but he himself is extremely modern.

And what did you take that to mean?

Well, I took that to mean that unconsciously I have done something which perhaps hadn't been done before. And he does compare me a lot with Van Gogh. You see it's very odd, Van Gogh and I came from the same social background. He had a father who was solid and well balanced and a neurotic mother, as I did. He had no ability and talent, and I had none. He

always had to fight and battle, and I have had to fight and battle. He was an epileptic and I was an epileptic. There are tremendous similarities, and I know, as other people don't know, why he did things. The marks he put down were for epileptic kicks, you want excitement do you see, and when he did a spot it was a spot to give him a lift, and a line to give him a lift.

In what way?

Well it's exciting, do you see. I mean neuroses in art come from strong contrasts. The placid artists have very very little contrast in tone. Somebody like Bonnard, who was a nice old pussy of a man, his tones are very very close, but Van Gogh was neurotic so his contrasts shriek, and if tone against tone is more or less similar he would put a great line through it, and I mean I know exactly why he did the things, exactly. But of course he was a genius, because he hadn't got access to drugs, unfortunately for him, or fortunately maybe. No he made quite a play on it, very very odd. There's another artist too who is similar to me, and that's Edward Lear. Both lived in Highgate, both bachelors, both epileptic, both going on tours and writing books about it, both writing humorous...making humorous drawings, and there again, he and I were very similar, extraordinary really.

What do you feel about his painting?

Well I'm not so keen on his oil painting but his watercolours are extremely good, I like his watercolours, they're very very good indeed. I'm just bringing out, do you see, a book of cartoons now, it's coming out in October I think. It's so funny do you see, because when I was in the Army in the Royal Welch I had a friend there called Sandy Livingston Learmonth who was an expatriate Scot who had married a local girl, and in the evening in the mess we used to sing a song called 'Crawshay Bailey' about a man in south Wales, an ironmaster, who employed Trevethick to make the first steam engine to take his ore down from Merthyr to the docks, and how he stood for Parliament, and his political opponents in order to ridicule him made up a poem about him and his family, and it made him so popular he got in by a huge majority. Well this poem, it got elaborated, so this now, I did illustrations of about 80 verses of Crawshay Bailey's sister Anna, 'She was also play the grand piano, she was also play the fiddle down the sides and up the middle'. They're quite ridiculous. And anyhow, when he died, his daughter asked me to give them to the National Library. Well I saw them and they're all written on dreadful bits of paper, because I used to do one before I left after I had been staying there. So I did the whole lot again and added about thirty verses, and gave them to the National Library where I thought that they would never be seen again. Well somebody was writing a thesis about me and he saw these, and he arranged for them to be exhibited at the Criccieth Festival. Well everybody sort of fell around laughing at these, they thought they

were the funniest things they had ever seen, and my landlord, Lord Anglesey, got on to a local journalist and said, 'Do you know who had published them?' And he told him, and he got in touch with the publisher, and the publisher went barmy about them, and they're coming out in October. And also a book on portraits I think, I've written a book on portraits, but that of course has been blocked by the Welsh Arts Council, they won't give it a grant.

When did you begin writing? I mean you said you wrote poetry in your twenties, but...

Well I really first started writing when I wrote 'Across the Straits'. I was asked to write about my family by the Professor of Celtic at Oxford University, in Jesus College, who was editor of a thing called the Honourable Society of Cymroddorion which is the Welsh literary and scientific society started in the early 18th century. And I wrote about my family, and gradually it came up to the present day and it spilt over into autobiography. Now, I can never really be serious about myself luckily, and so it was very flippant, and the family bit was horribly serious and boring. So what I did was to cut out an awful lot of the family stuff and elaborate my autobiography, and that's how it happened. But I never intended to do any writing.

And do you enjoy writing?

No not really. It's very very aggravating - well so is painting, I find painting most aggravating, I get terrible tempers. And with writing you just fill up wastepaper baskets with bits of paper.

How did you go about writing? Did you just sit down every day and do it, or was it done at midnight, or how did you do it?

No I sat down and did it. If I was writing I wasn't painting probably. And, it's very odd, when I started writing, the thing which I felt I owed most to was learning Latin, isn't it odd? Extraordinary. And when I was doing Latin I never thought it would be any use to me at all.

You mean in the terms of the shapes of sentences?

Yes. Balance and so on.

So that suggests you would get a certain pleasure from it.

No, it's very infuriating because it's never quite right. And then you start getting neurotic about the balance within a sentence. I mean there's no end to it, it's terrible.

And, I've taken you on a long divergence. You were beginning to tell me...how long were you a land agent for, how long did that period go on for?

From '38 until I had my first epileptic attack in '37, March '37, and then I staggered on until my articles ended in '39 and then I had nothing to do, and I had no idea what I was going to do. But I was still in the Army, in the Territorial Army, and they didn't seem to want to chuck me out.

When did you join the Territorials?

Oh as soon as I left school really.

Because you wanted to?

No, a friend of mine, Sandy Livingston Lehrmouth[ph] said you'll get an awful lot of good shooting if you join the Territorial Army, so I joined the Territorial Army.

And did you make a lot of friends there? Is that again where you began to make friends again?

Oh I made friends there, yes. I've always been able to make friends since then, extraordinary.

And did you like the disciplines of the Army? Had you had the corps at school?

Oh yes. No, I wasn't particularly...I mean I was a hopeless soldier, hopeless. I hated giving orders, do you see. I hated ticking people off, all that sort of thing. You see all my men were local boys, I knew them all, and they knew me, and it was...I wasn't...I would never have made a regular soldier.

And what about things like sort of polishing belts and shoes and all that sort of business, what did you feel about that?

Oh well I had that done for me.

But in principle you thought all that was a good thing to do?

Oh yes, you've got to, you've got to.

And did you feel very patriotic?

Yes, I...all these things come naturally, you are patriotic, and one wouldn't question that.

And how aware were you about the build up of war?

Well I knew it was coming, we all knew it was coming, and we all knew we were going to win, and all the way through the war there was never any question about whether we would win or not, it was absolutely certain we were going to win. It's extraordinary.

And how did you feel about Churchill?

Well I think he...I mean he was a very remarkable man. He had a lot of faults but without any doubt he was the man who won the war for us. He wasn't a nice man, I think he was probably a very unpleasant man, but he was a remarkable man in the same way as Lloyd George was a remarkable man.

And so what happened to you from 1939 through the war, what was your life at that point?

Well I was in the Army. We were embodied, and we went over to Northern Ireland. I got on very well with the men. I didn't get on so well, we had a lot of Scots come to us and they were awfully nice chaps but they...I didn't get on so well oddly enough with the Scots as I did with the Welsh boys. They were harder, the Scots were so much harder, and they objected to many many more things which the Welsh would never have objected to. They were tough and argumentative, but very very good, they were very good soldiers I'm sure and, I liked them, but it's interesting, I didn't get on so well with them as I did with the Welsh boys.

Were you frightened at any time? Were you frightened you might die?

What in the Army? Oh good Lord no. No, I nearly did die once when the Germans dropped bombs on my trenches and I was up on the moors when they were bombing Liverpool, but... No, you don't worry about death in the Army, you're trained not to think about death really. It's something which happens.

And what did you feel about potentially killing people?

I don't think I could have done it. (laughs) I suppose, I mean I was never put to the test, but the idea of killing somebody was always pretty awful. But I suppose one would, I would have done it, especially if the enemy was abstract, like the bird. I mean if the enemy was dead at my feet I would have been horrified.

And when did you come out of the Army?

I came out of the Army in 1941, March 1941, and I had been to the head injuries hospital and then I...when I left the head injuries hospital I was told, I went to a medical board in Millbank in London and they said I couldn't stay in the Army.

And were you upset by that?

Furious, because I was so fit, do you see. When we went on route marches I always ended up carrying about three rifles of the men because they weren't fit enough to march properly, and there was I, fit but not fit for active service. And I was so furious that I appealed to the Military Secretary and I went to Cheltenham and I had an interview with him there, and he wouldn't give an inch. I volunteered to do anything, all sorts of extraordinary SAS stuff, but they wouldn't have it. And, it was all rather sad.

So what happened?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We had just got you to the point where you had been told you couldn't stay in the Army.

Yes, I appealed to the Military Secretary, who was a Major in the Scots Guards. I remember I went to Cheltenham, and all I got out of Cheltenham was a fly, a fishing fly, a most exotic fly, and I bought it in a shop there, and I started fishing, and it was absolutely wonderful, all the fish went for it in a big way until they got used to it, and then it failed utterly.

Where were you fishing?

Oh on a little river called the Erch near Pwllheli. It was called an Ashley Cooper that fly, it was a terrible fly, terrible.

So you really came home to your parents did you, at that point, or what?

I came home to my parents, and not knowing what to do.

At this point had they moved house? They were no longer in your childhood house?

They were in a house, in the village of Abererch. We got the house because it had been built for the sister of the man who owned the big estate which I worked on, and she was barmy really and she had never lived in it, and it was offered to us, and it's a very nice little house.

So when did you move into that?

We moved into that at the end of 1938 I think.

And why did they want to leave the other house? Just because it was too large, or what?

Well, this was nearer my office in Pwllheli, a smaller house, and, oh it was quite a good thing to move there.

And up until that point you had been in the house that we've talked about, or was there another house in between?

Oh no, this was a house in Pentrefelin between Porthmadog and Criccieth, because when, we did have a big house in Anglesey we lived in, but a relative brought an action against my mother and we had to pay our costs. The case was dismissed but we had to pay our costs, which meant that we had to sell the house and leave.

So was that a big crisis? It must have been.

Well it was sad, because it was a lovely house with wonderful grapes and everything, and greenhouses and... It was a lovely place really.

So what were the years where you lived in the wonderful house?

Oh it must have been '27, '28, only for a couple of years I think.

Right. And does that house come in to any of your pictures in any way, or in...?

The house?



Mm.

Oh no, it wasn't a very nice house to look at. I was very small then and I just thought it was a lovely place to be, with a lovely view across the Straits and everything. But it was very interesting really because the relative who brought an action against my mother, she was a terrible alcoholic who came of an alcoholic family, and she was terribly keen on hunting and all that sort of thing, and all the hunting set in Anglesey and everybody backed her against my mother.

What was the suit?

Mm?

What was the claim, I mean what was the problem?

Well the claim was, she...her aunt who left the house to my mother disapproved of her, because she had married a man called Gerald Dickson and forced him to change his name to Pritchard Rayner because she didn't want to be called Dickson, and the old girl cut her off without a penny. And her other nieces she just left, one niece she left £500 to buy a couple of hunters, which I suppose she could have done in those days, and the other niece was given the land round the house, and my mother was left the house, but no money. And I was cut out of the will at that time. To begin with she had left the house to my mother, and afterwards to me, and then somebody must have told her that I had an elder brother, and that my father hadn't any money, so she then must have decided to cut me out and leave it to my brother, and that's what happened. Cut out of the will at such an early age is rather interesting.

And, so at that point the family fortunes really took a big dip?

Yes, I mean we never really had any money at all, and we rented this house between Criccieth and Porthmadog and I was there for about ten years, and that was where I really started my painting, not that I painted but I used to wander round the fields and on to the hill above the house and I would sit down there in the evenings and look at the whole of the coastline of Wales going right the way down to St. David's Head, and behind me was Snowdon, and out to the west was the Lleyn Peninsula, and it must have made an enormous effect on me.

So what year was that?

That was between the years we went there, which must have been about 1929 to about 1937.

But you didn't at any point then paint?

Well I did do a few little watercolours in order to win a prize at Shrewsbury School.

But that was all?

That was the sum amount of it, but I never thought I would be a painter.

Right.

What is very odd is, when I became a land agent one of the first things I did in 1937 was to go on an arbitration case to a farm in a lovely valley called Cwm Nant-Col up behind Harlech with my principal, George Yale, and the farm was Hendrewaelod I remember. And the interesting thing was that never at that time did I think I would be a painter. Anyhow since then I've painted so many pictures of Hendrywaylodd[ph]. They're in America, in Iceland, and God knows where; it's gone all over the world that farm.

And what's so special about that farm?

Mainly the situation and the huge stones it's made of and out-buildings and so on.

And do you, each time you paint it you learn something different?

No, I think I like the formation of the buildings and everything so much that I vary them because, painting it from a different angle or something, there's a big mountain behind it. It's a lovely farm.

And actually, going back to what you were saying when we were talking about looking for truth in paintings, you seem to me really to be making a distinction. When you said sometimes you paint from memory, between painting from memory and inventing, the one you are interested in, the other you are not particularly attracted to, is that right?

No, I am not particularly interested in inventing, but I certainly paint from memory, but when I paint from memory they've got to be topographically correct, because I feel I can't take liberties knowing the countryside so well. But I don't mind other people from England

coming and painting Wales and taking huge liberties, they have every right to because they don't know it like I do.

So in other words, if you are painting one particular landscape, a memory of another piece of Welsh landscape won't feed in to that painting in any direct way?

Well not that particular one, because you are motivated to paint the particular picture. No, I mean I muck things around, I shove trees in perhaps where they are not, and you have to do that, but it's all with the intention of putting over the certain mood.

But would you be moving a tree or would you be inventing a tree?

Oh I might invent the odd bush, but I wouldn't invent a tree if it's of any importance I don't think.

Right. And, sorry, can you just describe a bit the house that you were living in when you came out of the Army? I've got confused with all the houses.

Yes, well that was a little, a low house, a nice little house, it must have been built in the Twenties. And, not very big, and it had a wonderful view right over Cardigan Bay, and the river was below, and I used to go down with my dog and shoot snipe and duck down there, and in the summer I used to catch fish down there. And I used to go into the office in Pwllheli, and I used to run home, it would be about two miles, have my lunch and then run back. And, I used to have tremendous sort of attempts at doing things, like the mountain, must have been about six or seven miles away, The Rival, a sharp pointed mountain, I used to leave the house at about 2 o'clock and I used to run and walk to the top of the mountain and then run and walk back. And I had to do it in four hours, and I always did.

And was it hard coming back to living with your parents after you had been independent?

I hadn't been independent.

Well in the sense that you...

In the Army I suppose, in some way, but you are not really independent in the Army.

So it wasn't too difficult a transition, coming back?

No, and the thing is, do you see, if as I was, I was more or less living in a coma, there was nothing else to do except to come back and live with my parents and try and think what I should do. I mean this was the thing, all these years I was semi-anaesthetised by the drugs.

But at the same time you were doing this running up and down mountains.

Yes. It was a sort of mental anaestheticism.

And did you feel anxious about what your future would be at this stage?

Never. No, I don't know why. I never had any ambition you know. I never had any ambition to be a great painter or anything like that. I mean the only ambition I ever had was to get married, oddly enough. Anything I've really tried to do in life I've never succeeded. But when I have had successes it's been outside my control, which is odd, very odd, and I suppose I've been terribly lucky.

Which successes are you particularly thinking of?

Well, I mean I never thought I would be a member of the Royal Academy, I didn't do anything to try and be a member of the Royal Academy. And, it's odd, it may sound very conceited but all through my life I have always been underestimated. I mean at school, all these terrible reports, and everywhere, at the art school, at the Slade they thought I was a complete idiot really, and I was, I was hopeless. But I've always somehow come through in the end, somehow. But in the art world now, I mean they think absolutely nothing of my work, nothing at all, and in Wales, the art establishment in Wales they think nothing of my work. I'm a danger.

What do you mean by that?

Well I don't know what they mean by that. I mean the director of the North Wales Association of the Arts told me he heard the director of the Welsh Arts Council and the director of art at the Welsh Arts Council agreeing that I was the single greatest danger to Welsh art. I mean it's a wonderful statement.

End of F4542 Side A

F4542 Side B

No, it's very interesting, I mean I'm on the Arts Committee of the National Museum of Wales, but if you go to the gallery you will only see two paintings of mine there, and they are both appalling. One was done in 1947, and the other in 1950 I think, and they are appalling. They will not buy my work. It's very very interesting.

What's appalling about the paintings?

Well they were done so long ago, and they're bad paintings. I mean I have improved out of all recognition. But they did buy one for the restaurant two years ago, but that was as a decoration for the restaurant, and I can't see them buying one of my paintings. And yet the public in Wales love my paintings. It's very interesting, I mean two great friends of mine, one is Lady Anglesey you see, who has been a great supporter, and another is a writer called Alice Thomas Ellis, do you know Alice Thomas Ellis? I knew her a long long time ago, she lived in Penmaenmawr. And Anna is an amazingly perceptive...have you read her books?

I've read some of them and I've heard her on the radio.

She is amazingly perceptive. Well, I asked Shirley what she, why she thought that I had all this antagonism in Wales amongst these people, and she said, 'Well they don't like your style'. And I asked Anna and she said the same thing. They look upon me as a sort of, a sort of pretty defunct specimen of the landed gentry, and not serious, not to be taken seriously. Well I don't try and hang the name artist round my neck the whole time, in fact I don't like to go round saying I am an artist and that sort of thing. But it's very very odd, and some people really do hate me. I heard somebody on the radio, a Welsh artist the other day, he was being asked how he paints. He said, 'When I paint I try and get underneath the surface of things, unlike an artist I know of in north Wales who has painted the same black mountain for fifty years and exhibits yearly in the Royal Academy. (laughs) It's absolutely wonderful. And for years and years and years the cry used to go around South Wales, when you've seen one Kyffin you've seen the lot.

And what do you feel when somebody does something like that, says something like that on the radio?

Well I think it's rather funny, but... It's very very interesting that they do, and of course when I became a member of the Royal Academy the antagonism became even greater, and that was

a black mark. I mean none of the people in South Wales can actually get into the Academy.  
(laughs)

And what was it you were telling me about trying to establish a Welsh room within the gallery up here?

Well I've been trying to do that for thirty years in the National Museum, and why I want it is that, first of all people coming from abroad want to see what Welsh painting is like, and they go the National Museum and say, 'Where can we see your room of Welsh painting?' and they're told, very sorry, we haven't got one, and they think, that's a bit odd. But the main reason is that the people of Wales are interested in music, they're interested in literature, but they haven't got a clue about art. And the only way they could become knowledgeable about Welsh art was if there was a room with all the Welsh artists of the past in it, there you are, those are the Welsh artists. But they will not. The first keeper I brought it up with about thirty years ago, he said, 'Never as long as I am keeper will there ever be a room in the museum for Welsh art.' He was an Englishman.

Who was it?

A man called Rollo Charles. And then there was a man called Cannon-Brookes who despised Welsh people entirely really, and there was no hope in him producing a room for Welsh art. Then there was a very nice man called Timothy Stevens who I got on with very well, and I brought it up at a meeting again with him and he said no, not at all, and he told a friend of mine, 'Over my dead body will there be a room for Welsh art.' All those three were Englishmen. We in Wales have so few people studying art, that we cannot get a Welsh keeper, and until there's a Welsh keeper I'm afraid there will never be a room for Welsh art. I mean the Arts Committee now appointed by the new keeper, there's hardly a Welsh person on it. I am the only real Welsh person on it, and I get no support from anybody, nobody at all. It is quite extraordinary.

And so do you feel got at, do you feel cross, do you feel hurt? What do you feel?

I get angry.

And do you show that you're angry?

No, never. I mean on Wednesday I was absolutely furious, and when one of the members, William Feaver the art critic of the 'Observer' was having a go at me, I was damned livid because he knows nothing about Welsh art, nothing at all, or Wales.

What was he saying?

Well he was questioning, why on earth should there be a room for Welsh art? I changed the conversation eventually or I would have said something I shouldn't have said. But I am seeing the President who is an old friend of mine, I'm seeing him on Thursday, and I will bring it up. I am told that if I wrote a letter to the 'Western Mail' the response pouring vitriol on the museum would be intense, but as the museum has had such a terrible time over the purchase of the Rubenses and it's got into very bad odour, I wouldn't dream of doing that, because after all it would be worse than having no room for Welsh art.

And, sorry, can we go back. You're at a loose end after the war, and then what happens?

Then, I had been advised to take up art for the good of my health. (laughs) I had been told to take up art for the good of my health. Now I didn't particularly want to take up art. I suppose I didn't think I had the talent, and talent you know is a totally worthless thing. I believe what is important is obsession. A talent means you can do something easily without thinking; obsession means that you are moved to do something, and you can in fact do it if your obsession is great enough, even though you are not particularly good at it. And I have the obsession because of my background, I knew the people, I knew the landscape, and there was never any question about me doing anything else. I knew I hadn't got the talent, I had to build it up by the obsession, which in a way is what Van Gogh did, he was hopeless, technically he was pathetic. But I didn't want to because I hadn't got the talent. So I tried various jobs, I tried jobs teaching at prep schools but nobody would have me, and...

What would you have taught?

I suppose I would have taught English and history and things like that, games and... Then, this ex-student from the Slade, a land-girl, came to us; we hadn't any land but she had had a row with her employer and my mother said she would take her under her wing. And she had been a very good artist at the Slade but hadn't done anything since leaving, and I told her about my worries.

What was her name?

Gwyneth Griffith. And she said she would write to the secretary of the Slade and see if there was a vacancy, and he wrote back and said, 'For God's sake send him, because everybody's gone to the war.' So, I went along for an interview with the Slade professor, and I hurriedly did some watercolours rather like Peter Scott, a duck winging in over the salt marshes and things, absolutely ghastly. Well the poor old professor nearly had a fit when he saw them.

Who did you see?

Randolph Schwabe. And he said, 'Well Williams, you can come for a term and see how it goes.' So I went there.

And how did you feel about going to London?

No this was in Oxford.

Oh right, because they were evacuated.

The Slade had evacuated. I was lucky because I had an uncle in Oxford and he was quite a character. Anyhow, I went for a term.

And what was it like, what was the routine?

Well, I had to draw from the plaster casts to begin with, that was for the first term I suppose, and then at the end of the term I went to see the old professor and he said, 'Well you can carry on for another term.' And then I suppose in the second term he came and saw one of my drawings of a nude, I had progressed to the life class by that time, and he said, 'Oh Williams, why do you make your nudes look like oak trees? You can't draw, you had better see if you can paint.' So I was sent to the Painting Schools, and...

Hold on, was that the first time you had ever seen a naked woman?

I suppose it was, yes, I suppose it was.

And did that come into it, did that occur to you at the time?

What?

That you were in a room with a naked woman, or did it just seem [INAUDIBLE]?



Well the whole thing is so clinical that there's no attraction at all really in that way.

Was there any embarrassment?

No, no embarrassment for me at all, no.

And how were you taught? Presumably you weren't just put in a room with a model and said, 'draw it'.

Well no, what happened you drew it, given the model, and then the professor or one of the masters would come along and he would say, 'Well get up Williams,' do you see, and he would sit down on the donkey, that's a wooden seat, and he would do a drawing, possibly the skeleton, and then clothe it with muscles and show how the stresses work. In those days people were taught drawing. And the professor would do this, and George Charlton would do this, and in the Painting Schools Allan Gwynne Jones would come along and he would talk about painting and tones and half tones and cool and local colour and that sort of thing, and he would do little drawings in his little sketch-book to show you what's what. And so you learned. And gradually, I was allowed to stay for a term, and then two terms; I suppose it must have been in the second year that doing history of art, our professor was Professor Tancred Borenius, who was one of the great scholars of art history in Europe.

What was he like?

Well he's a funny old boy. Luckily he knew some of my family, and I used to talk to him about art like that, and, he was almost incomprehensible because he was Finnish and his English was very very poor and he talked of things like 'monumental simplicity' and all this sort of thing, and technical phrases, but he did stimulate into me a love of the Old Masters.

In particular?

Well, he was talking about Piero, and I went into the library at the Ashmolean Museum to look up Piero, and I came across this wonderful painting of the Resurrection from Borgo San Sepolcro, it's a figure of Christ rising from the tomb, and I suddenly realised I was weeping, it was...I mean I can weep very easily, and I really was pouring out buckets, I don't know why, it certainly wasn't the religious aspect, it was something to do with the painting, and the very very powerful, again the angst in the face. And that somehow made me realise there was

something more than just reproducing what's in front of you, there's something underneath great painting.

And at this stage most of the paintings you had seen had been in reproduction in books rather than in the flesh?

Yes, because during the war, when I wanted to see paintings in the flesh I would go down to St. Ebbe's where, there was a Jesuit college there, and they, whether they had faith in God I don't know but they didn't evacuate their pictures. And I used to go and look at the wonderful paintings in St. Ebbe's.

And did the architecture of Oxford have an effect on you?

I don't know. I liked Oxford because so many of my family had been there, been to Jesus College, and I had commanded a platoon of undergraduates in the Home Guard and I used to go from college to college seeing them, asking why they hadn't turned up on parade and things like that. I loved Oxford, I loved its style you see. In Wales, what we do not have in Wales is style.

What do you mean by style?

Well Scots have style, because everything Scottish has in fact come from the aristocracy, and the fact that it was a kingdom. Wales as Wales has basically come from the lower classes, and there's been a rift between the aristocracy and the lower classes, landlord and tenant. And, you see in Scotland the gillie is of the same breed as the laird, they're both MacNabs or something, but in Wales we inherited a different thing, we inherited the rule by the Boneddigion or the Celtic nobility, and the Bobiddaer, the people of, the pre-Celtic people, and there was a class distinction as rigid as in India. At one time no member of the Boneddigion was allowed to marry a member of the Bobiddaer until the laws of primogeniture came in and the laws of gavelkind were knocked on the head. And then the members of a family would marry out amongst what were known as the Bobofeya[ph]. So really in Wales now we're all the same, we all intermarry. But there lingered on in Wales this distrust of the landlord by the tenant, and the arriving of the chapels really was objecting to the landlord. Well this wasn't so in Scotland except maybe in Sutherland, the Duke of Sutherland kicking out all the crofters and sending them off to Glasgow or Canada or something. But it's always been slightly better in Scotland, and style is something the Scots have. If you go to the National Eisteddfod in Wales and see the ghastly sort of nighties all the old bards wear, I mean there's no style at all, it is simply ghastly. But in Scotland where you

get the piped bands and their kilts and their skean-dhus and everything, the tammies and...they really can put things over in Scotland. No it's a funny thing.

So which bits of the Oxford style did you like?

I liked the buildings of course. I liked what pictures I could see. I loved the landscape. You know it's a funny thing, I am a Welshman but I've always been terribly conscious that we owned England at one time, and I had distant relatives who lived called Kyffin Lentnall who lived in a lovely place called Besels Liegh outside Oxford, and I've always been very conscious of the fact that the Welsh owned England at one time.

And what was your social life in Scotland?

In Scotland?

I mean, sorry, in Oxford.

Well my social life, I had my old uncle, who was an awful old boy really, he had been in the Army, he was a doctor actually, he had been a colonel in the Army, medical, and he was chairman of the Oxford University boxing, and he, out in his house in Headington he grew beautiful carnations and bred cocker spaniels. His wife was an extraordinary person too, because she was a first cousin of three remarkable people, Christopher Stone, Compton McKenzie, and, who was the third? I forget who the third was. She was quite a figure. So Oxford was a lovely place really. I had very good lodgings, and I was able to walk for miles along the river and things like that, it was a nice place to be.

And who were your fellow students?

Oh there were quite a lot of fellow students. There was this particular girl who I got engaged to, and there were two other men there, one, somebody called William Cole, who was a simply beautiful artist, he was a wonderful artist, and he taught me an awful lot about art.

What?

Well he taught me about colour.

What?

How do you mean, what colour?

Well what did he teach you about colour?

Well he said, 'Now what colour is that roof with the rain on it?' do you see? I mean everything is colour, and tone and things like that, and he had an immense appreciation. But he was not a very nice man. He had been brought up by fairly wealthy parents and he was bone idle; he was immensely selfish. I got a lot out of him because he taught me about all these things, about art really. It came to him naturally, it didn't come to me naturally. He was immensely selfish, and what annoyed me was, I would go in in the morning when we had a new pose, to get my easel for that pose, and you would have to draw lots. He would never come in, because the girls simply worshipped him, and he would come in two hours late and there was always a girl who was willing to give up her easel for him, and the bloody man came in and got a good place. Infuriated me. (laughs) And the other friend of mine was Tom Griffith, who was an extraordinary man. His father was Welsh and his mother was sort of aristocratic English but he was totally Welsh and he was a tremendous arguer, and he had a brilliant sort of legal mind, a penetrative mind, and he would always find, point out the bogus. And, I got a lot out of him because I at this time was a prig I think, I was a bit of a prig, the way I had been brought up, and he more or less exploded that.

How, what did he do?

Well without telling me I was a prig he would more or less point out various things which made me realise I was.

Such as?

Well he was I suppose fairly left-wing, and, I can't remember exactly what particular things he did to...but he was very very good for me.

And have you purposely not named the girl? Do you want her to be unnamed?

Well it might embarrass her.

Right. And, were there any contemporary artists who you all admired, or who you were interested in, or at this point were they not accessible to you really?

Well, August John was pushed down our throats, therefore we didn't like him. Wilson Steer was pushed down our throats therefore we didn't really like him. Sickert was not pushed down our throats and therefore we appreciated Sickert more than the other two.

Who was doing this pushing down your throat?

Oh the staff really.

But anybody in particular?

No, nobody in particular. So really we...we cottoned on to Matisse, and some of us cottoned on to Kokoschka, and I can't remember anybody in that time liking Picasso. But there was an extraordinary boy who came to the Slade then called Hugh McKinnon, and I think he was only about 16, and he was a son I think of a publican, but he had a natural appreciation of the best in art, and he ruthlessly dismissed the second-rate. Now I like the second-rate, I mean something like Rowlandson, who is a lovely artist, he would dismiss as of absolutely no importance. And he was a lovely draughtsman, and he could paint beautifully. I always thought he was going to storm the citadels of the art world, but the tragedy was, he had so much appreciation for other artists that the first exhibition he had in London was based on Matisse, the second on Paul Klee, and the third on Picasso. There wasn't a Hugh McKinnon, and this was tragic because the talent he had was enormous. I mean William Cole had enormous talent, but he was lazy, and of course he went over to Paris where a friend of mine was living with a girl who made hats in the Rue du Louvre[??], and William went to see them just at a time when Frank was coming back to London to get some money out of the bank, and William eased in, and when of course Frank came back William was in the bed so to speak. And he was really a mean man, and as soon as she told him she couldn't have children - this is the girl who made hats - this to him was wonderful. But then you see, Suzie conceived, and he got in a panic, and he came back to this country and his father said he wouldn't give him any money to look after this child, and he got into a panic and he disappeared, he couldn't take it. And it was all terribly sad. Suzie used to ring me up from Paris saying, 'Where is William?' And I would say, 'Well I don't know,' and I didn't, it was quite true. And she used to ring up the whole time saying, 'I hate him, I hate, I hate him. But ah! what a lover!' She always used to end up with, 'Ah! what a lover!' I was jealous of William. (laughs)

And where had you discovered Matisse and Kokoschka? Where had you seen their work?

In reproduction I suppose.

Because there weren't that many books of contemporary art at that time, were there?

No there weren't, no. Oh I think William Cole being of a lazy disposition loved Bonnard.

And so how long were you in Oxford?

Three years, and without any ambition at all.

Can we talk about what happened when you started to learn to paint, when you stopped doing the drawing and you went into the painting classes?

Well it is rather extraordinary. I found there was something in oil paint. It was the sensuousness of the oil paint, the richness of the oil paint; from the moment I started to use oil paint I used it thickly, not with a palette-knife but with a brush, and I painted all my work at the Slade in the art Schools with the brush because I wouldn't have been allowed to use a palette-knife, because there is an unwritten rule in the world of art, thou shalt never use a palette-knife. Luckily the public don't know this rule and they buy my paintings, but of course the art world doesn't. It's an absolute rubbish of a rule because you can paint pictures with spray guns, with anything, with your fingers, you name it, and you can paint with Nescafé or anything, Bovril. But a palette-knife, you must never never use a palette-knife. And so I never did, I knew the rule, you weren't allowed to use a palette-knife, but somehow I wanted to use a knife, and in the holidays when I was painting I used to paint with a knife. Somebody told me he felt I knew the mountains so well I knew what was on the other side of the mountains, and therefore I wanted to model them and mould them. I don't know if there's any truth in this. But, it was extremely difficult for me. I loved the portrait classes because there were people to paint, and I did win a couple of portrait prizes which surprised me.

While you were at the Slade?

Yes. The only prizes I've ever won.

Who were they portraits of?

Oh just models who... Oh one was a boy in the village. Yes, one was a local boy who came in to be painted; I used to paint the children and the people in the village, in Abererch. And I see him now, the portrait of this young lad, and he is a bald old coot, most extraordinary.

What was special about those portraits?

Well, I've always had this sort of interest in people, and painting heads and faces meant something.

But why do you think they won the prizes?

Oh I've no idea, no idea.

So there was nothing special about the composition?

No, no, nothing, nothing at all.

And when you weren't in the portrait classes at Oxford, what were you painting?

I was in the life class, and I had to do design as well, and so I did a bit of sort of book illustration or wood engraving or something like that.

But you didn't paint landscape at that stage?

Oh yes, I used to go out and paint landscapes around Oxford, along the river.

Can you remember them?

Yes I remember them well.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I was just asking you your memories of the Oxford landscapes.

Well it's a lovely landscape, I don't know if you know Oxford but it's lovely on the river below Cumnor and going out to the Trout and, it's very very beautiful there. And I was lucky because I lived in Observatory Street, and out of my window, I was just opposite the Observatory, the Radcliffe Observatory, and it's a lovely building, a beautiful building. And I was heavily drugged in those days I suppose, and, I just...I just sort of existed without any ambition and knowing where I was going, that's the extraordinary thing. Certainly I knew I wasn't going to be a painter, and I had to earn my living as a school master.

So, before we get on to that though, I mean compared to the way you paint now, what were those Oxford landscape paintings like?

Well, in a way they were the same only not so efficient. Because my style has changed I suppose but not intentionally. As the chemistry in your body changes, so your paintings change. I cannot understand people who are always wanting to change their style, to me it's a terrible lack of conviction in what they are doing. All I want to do is to paint better pictures of the same sort of thing. So I think those were very amateur.

But did you find your style immediately when you started painting at Oxford?

Yes, really. It came to me quite naturally, fairly inefficiently but naturally.

And what sort of colours were you using?

More than I do now I think. I was...we were told to use quite a lot of colours which in a way is rather silly, especially if you're not a colourist, and I've never been a colourist. I am mainly a tonal painter, and I limit my colours to about four or five.

So what were the colours you were using then that you don't use now?

Well we were taught to use Venetian red, which is a terrible colour, and alizarin crimson, Prussian blue, who are actually killers; once you get Prussian blue into a painting it's all Prussian blue, and alizarin crimson. No I had to find out really the colours which were best for me.

And were the others using the same sort of palettes?

They all used more or less the same palette I think, because we were told to.

It's a very strange way to teach isn't it?

It is. I would have liked to have taught at an art school because I think I would have tried to associate individual pupils with an artist who I felt would be of most use to them, not try and make them paint in a certain style.

End of F4542 Side B



F4543 Side A

And what were you painting on? Were you painting on canvas?

No I was painting on boards in those days, cardboard which I would size myself, and prime. And with brushes, I don't think I...I was painting with a palette-knife I think paintings of Wales, but round Oxford I was painting more with a brush I think.

Because you weren't allowed to use the knife?

No. Also I felt that at that time the brush was more suited to the more gentle land around Oxford.

[TELEPHONE - BREAK IN RECORDING]

....stage at Oxford, we talked about you doing portraits and we've talked about you doing landscape, but did you ever do, as you did later, which is a figure in landscape?

Well yes I did, they were quite small figures in the landscape, incidental. I remember doing something in the allotments with figures working in the allotments. Yes figures did creep in I think.

And they were always figures that were really there rather than figures that you brought in?

I think they were figures that were there, yes.

And somebody like Piero, were you ever encouraged to do copies and drawings of their paintings?

I've never liked doing copies because it's so uncreative. If I have copied it's only in a black, white, yellow ochre and cadmium red, making it tonally, because then it would be a different picture. I really hate being uncreative and to do an exact copy to me is not being creative.

And, when you were doing these paintings in the painting class, either the portraits or the landscapes, how much actual teaching happened, how much help did you get, how much was it a toing and froing, or was it really just you experimenting?

Oh you got help from your fellow students, and in the Painting Schools I got help from Allan Gwynne Jones, who was a fellow Welshman and a lovely painter, he was a very very good painter.

And how did he help you?

Well just by making me realise how a head can be painted, and how you use cool colours in your half tones and full colours in your...so on, and reflected light and all sorts of things. He was very good like that, very good.

And were you getting tremendously excited by this stage? I mean you had gone there because someone had told you to go there; at what point did you get gripped?

I don't think I was getting terribly excited, because the last thing I could do was to get excited. And I was drugged pretty heavily the whole time. But I...it's funny, I just worked from day to day.

You didn't think, oh I would rather go off and have a picnic today, I would rather not go and paint?

No, I was religious in my attendance. I was a good bad student.

And what did you do in the holidays at this stage?

In the holidays I drew and painted on the landscape, and I made a tremendous mass of drawings so that I could work on them maybe when I was in Oxford or something.

So you came to Wales every holiday?

Oh Lord yes.

So by the end of the course, how had your painting got under way?

Well it had improved immensely, but not to such a state that I felt I could ever be an artist.

And can you just tell me a little bit about the other things you had done, like the wood engraving and the illustration work, what was that?

Oh well that was minor which I did really because you had to, when you had your final examinations you had to do a few designs. But I never went on, I went on with linocutting afterwards, I've done a lot of linocuts, but wood engraving was not my metier.

And the illustration?

Well I've done a lot of illustrations for books.

And that dates from your time at the Slade really?

No no, I did them, only comparatively recently. I illustrated a book, 'A Welsh Anthology' by Alice Thomas Ellis, and I've illustrated a book too about the history of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, illustrated that, which was rather difficult, going back to the Battle of the Boyne, and I wasn't actually at the Battle of the Boyne, and I had to put down what they wore or something, and the weaponry was difficult. And then I have illustrated my own books of course, and I have illustrated a book on Patagonia by Paul Theroux and, what's the other fellow's name? Forgotten the name now. Yes I've done quite a lot of illustration.

And at this point at Oxford, were you keeping a lot of sketch-books and drawing books?

Not a lot, no. Not then, that all came later.

Right. So you left Oxford when?

I left Oxford in 1944.

And then what happened?

Well, I had been applying for jobs at public schools. Luckily my company commander in the Home Guard was also the appointments officer of the Oxford University appointments committee, so he wrote to all the public schools in the country offering me, and some wrote back and said no, some said we're interested, and nobody said yes really. And then I went to various schools to be interviewed. I went to Harrow where the headmaster had been an assistant master at Shrewsbury when I was there, and his dog recognised me because it got up off, in front of the fire and came along and bit me. I don't remember kicking him at Shrewsbury School but it was an immensely old dog. I didn't get the job there. And then I tried for Christ's Hospital, and that was rather a farce, because I met the headmaster in London and he said, 'Right, off you go to Christchurch Station in Sussex, and my art master

will meet you.' And I remember this incredible mournful man met me on the station and he said, 'If you want to be an artist there are two things you must never do.' And he said...what...? Oh, 'Teach and get married,' yes, that was it. He said, 'I have done both.' Poor chap. And what was amusing there, this art master said, 'We have an assistant master we want to get rid of, and look what he teaches the boys to do,' and on all their drawing boards were drawings of fairies and things like that. And anyhow, the headmaster didn't appoint me, and I'm rather glad because it seemed to be a pretty bleak place. And then I applied for Merchant Taylors', and the headmaster, Mr Birley, he, I went to see him, and I was short-listed, and I went for my interview, and I remember he...on the way in I saw an engraving of Samuel Palmer, who was an old boy, and I lightly said, 'I am glad to see that Samuel Palmer was an old boy,' and he said, 'Samuel Palmer? Never met the chap'. (laughs) Then I got a letter from him saying that actually he felt he could not appoint me because I hadn't had any teaching experience.

I was going to say, did the course at Oxford teach you to teach? It didn't, did it?

Oh no, no no no. He said, 'It might be of interest to you, we are appointing somebody who has lately been assistant art master at Christ's Hospital,' i.e. the man who trained them to draw fairies. Well he didn't last long I believe. But by this time I had applied to Highgate School, and I went to stay with the headmaster, and he appointed me, which was lucky because it was far nearer London, and I settle down with a salary of £325 per annum teaching six days a week. He did offer me the post of housemaster at a salary of I think 355, but that would have meant I would have been in contact with the little perishers all day and most of the night as well, and I really didn't feel like doing that. And so, I didn't become a housemaster.

What was the school like?

Highgate? Well Highgate is actually a very good school. It caters for all types of boys, from sons of ambassadors to sons of the bookmaker at the bottom of Highgate Hill, and they all get mixed up. They are two-thirds day boys and a third boarders. And when I went there, because the school had been evacuated to Westward Ho and they had never had any art, and to begin with I realised that the boys certainly had decided that they were not going to have any art even if I was there. And I went there with the wonderful idea that as I was teaching art, no boy should ever be punished, and I stuck to that. Occasionally, in 29 years I think I had about three boys beaten by their housemaster, but that was for insolence or something. And so I was very lucky, but it was hard going to begin with, and luckily I had some very good pupils and that helped.

But was it difficult to suddenly be a school master? I mean did you feel like a school master?

Well I had been in the Army, so it wasn't all that difficult.

And what were the art facilities like?

Well I had to start it. There was a big room, a big empty room, and that was all, and I had to settle down and teach.

And how did you go about that?

I don't really know, I just settled down and taught, and tried to teach them to draw, and I tried to teach them to love things, beautiful things, and I used to occasionally take them down to exhibitions at the National Gallery and places. But it was rather worthwhile, because for me, although I always did want to teach in an art school, but it was a discipline. Eventually, after I had been teaching for two years I was beginning to find that I was not turning up, I was going out painting instead. I remember one morning after the masters' meeting the headmaster, who was a kindly man, said, 'Oh Williams,' he said, 'one minute.' And I said, 'Yes, what is it?' He said, 'Oh Williams, you didn't turn up yesterday, did you?' And I said, 'Well no I didn't actually, I went out painting.' 'Well Williams it's rather difficult, do you see, if you don't turn up; there's nobody to teach the boys. I think it would be better if you turned up.' He was very nice about it, very civilised. And then I went to see him after two years and said I was leaving, and he said, 'Well what are you going to do?' I said, 'I'm going to paint.' And he said, 'Have you a private income?' And I said no. And he said, 'Well you're an idiot, aren't you?' And I said, 'Possibly.' And he said, 'Now look here, get a friend and split the job; you teach three days and he teach three days.' And I hadn't thought of this, anyhow if I had thought of it I wouldn't have thought he would have taken it up. And so that's what I did, I got this friend of mine William Cole to come and teach with me, and he shared the same digs as I had in Highgate. But he was hopeless. He got on terribly well with the boys, far better than I did, I was very jealous of him like that, but he wouldn't get up in the morning so I always had to go and take the first lessons, and this lazy so-and-so would stay in bed. And, I had a wonderful lady, Miss Josling, and I remember she once said, 'Will you go up to Mr Cole's room,' this was when, I think after he had left Highgate and wasn't teaching any more, 'and collect the money from his meter.' So I went up there and I opened the meter and there was just one shilling in it. He had been putting the shilling in and as soon as it had dropped and he wanted more gas he would pull the shilling out and put it in again, so that he had a constant amount of gas for nothing. I remember she laughed like mad when I told her. But he was extraordinary. And amazing to me how the girls always loved him, he was so selfish,

and the girls used to ring me up on the point of committing suicide all because of him. I remember one girl would ring me up the whole time, and eventually she did go off her head. I thought it was absolutely amazing, quite amazing.

And did the attitude of the boys to being taught art change during your time at Highgate, was it different when you arrived?

Well after a year I think they did realise that I was there for keeps and they were not going to get me chucked out.

But I mean as society changed, I mean it must have been different teaching in a school in the Forties from teaching in a school in the Sixties for example.

Not really I don't think, not really. Not that I noticed.

Do you think art was still a marginal subject in schools like that?

It always was. When I went there, I had two options. One was to fight my corner for art the whole time and fighting the headmaster, fighting the house masters, getting boys off games in order to go to art exhibitions, and I decided I wouldn't fight them, I would get on with them. And that's what happened really, I got on with all the staff in the common room, and I was able to get things out of them even though I had to give way in certain things. But, I did actually get on with all the masters, and most of the boys really.

And did any of them stay friends? Have any of those relationships lasted?

Oh lots of them, lots of them, and what is so lucky is, I always wanted to teach in an art school, but had I taught in an art school my students at the art schools wouldn't have been buying my paintings because they couldn't have afforded them, whereas the boys I taught were the sons of wealthy people and they used to go in for Dad's business and things like that, because they had bought all Kyffin's work, and they still do.

And some of your pupils did become painters, didn't they?

Oh quite a lot became painters. One became a member of the Royal Academy, and one was very unlucky not to be a member of the Royal Academy, and I did produce quite a lot of painters. What is interesting is, I always wanted somebody to teach full-time at Highgate, because I thought it would be better for the boys, and teaching pottery and God knows what,

but the headmaster wouldn't have it, he was a new headmaster, he wanted two people, two artists to be there part-time. But I knew there had to be somebody full-time, but I was more or less allowed to appoint my successor, and the headmaster and I appointed a man who was going to be full-time, and he has proved a tremendous success, so art flourishes in the school more than it ever did in my day, but they have not produced the artists I don't think.

So who were the pupils that went on to be painters in your time?

Well, there's a boy called Anthony Green, who was very good as a little boy, he used to go home over weekends and come back with some huge boards covered in paint. I remember, I got him to paint some sunflowers, and I got him to paint a sort of neutral background, and my assistant then was an old friend of mine called Anthony Carr, and he was a wonderful character, and I came in after he had been teaching and I saw that the background was bright blue you see, and I said to Andrew, 'Good God,' I said, 'I told you to paint it grey'. He said, 'Oh Mr Carr said I must paint it blue.' And I said, 'Well paint the blue out and paint it grey.' Anyhow I came in the following week and damn it all it was back at blue again. This went on the whole time. Finally he took the painting down to the Redfern Gallery and sold it to Hertfordshire Education Committee I think, and whether it was blue or grey I don't know, but while he was at school he sold his first picture.

And was there any sign while he was at school of the style he was to develop?

No, quite...he was painting more or less as I painted. And he went to the Slade and they saw how he was painting and they started to disabuse him of painting like this dreadful man Williams. And quite right too, and he became a beautiful draughtsman, and he evolved his own style of painting and subject matter entirely built on his family, which came from him being desperately concerned about the break-up of his parents' marriage. But he has been a very great friend and a great supporter, and I still keep in touch with him.

Was it clear that he was going to be a painter at that stage?

Oh yes, I mean far more than I was to be a painter. He was totally dedicated to it as a little boy.

And you encouraged that?

Yes, indeed, I did.

And you said you were instrumental in getting him a scholarship to...?

Well, all I said was, he ought to go abroad, because he was teaching with me at Highgate School, he came back to teach with me. And I felt his painting was getting a little stuck, so I suggested he went to America and got a Harkness award to go there, and he said, 'Of course I can't get a Harkness award'. And I said, 'Well all you have to do is go to Sir William Coldstream at the Slade and ask him to sign a bit of paper saying you should get a Harkness award and you will get it. And he said he didn't believe me, but he did, and he got it. And he took his wife and one little daughter out to America for eighteen months I think, and he had a wonderful time, and he has never really looked back.

So you think that was very important in terms of his painting?

I think it was, yes.

Can you be precise about why?

Maybe America is a country of individuals, and he saw all different types of very individual work there, and he became freer. I think it was there that he really decided to launch on a whole series of paintings based on his wife and family.

Have you been to America?

Never. Well I have, I've been to Patagonia.

But have you ever wanted to go to the main continent?

No.

And, you were talking before we began recording about Coldstream and the way he used his power. I wondered if you could say that again.

Well I felt, I don't know if rightly or not, that Coldstream had one passion, and that was power and manipulating people in the world of art, and I think he was quite ruthless. He dominated the world of art, he was chairman of practically every possible thing you could have, and if you mentioned the name of Sir William Coldstream you could get anywhere. He was Chairman of the Arts Council I think, he was a Trustee of the National Gallery, he was on the committee of the Tate: you name it, Coldstream was it. And he was not a good painter,



but because he was everything, everybody said what a wonderful painter Bill Coldstream was. Well he was a bloody awful painter, but they had to say that because he handed out the jobs.

What do you particularly dislike about his painting?

Well his painting is totally unsensuous, he never finished a picture in his life, he built it up on tiny little crosses of red paint, and then he started to build the thing on filling in, more or less painting by numbers. And they were never really finished. They were incredibly clever, but there was no real feeling in them of people, they were just sort of clever things. But what annoyed me was the nauseating way people sort of cluttered round him in order to get jobs, because he handed them out, and he said he was a good painter purely because he had the power. Well old Carel Weight, who was a professor at the Royal College, he was totally different. He had power, but he never never misused it. He never wanted power: well you can tell from his paintings, he's not that sort of man. He loves people, and he is a very very fine portrait painter, I thought he was a wonderful portrait painter. He's exactly ten years older than I am, and he's still going strong.

You were saying that you thought his portraits were very different in the way he used paint from his others. Could you elaborate on that?

Carel's portraits are always, I think, immaculately painted, because of the subject matter in front of him. Now his paintings for which he is best known are worrying paintings about people dashing round in fear and apprehension about something awful which has happened or is going to happen, and when he paints those, the subject is all-important, and he sometimes I think fails to carry them through in paint, so there are areas which are not what is known as 'good paint' in the art world. A really good paint is, if you look at a painting by Stubbs or Lawrence or Hogarth, a good paint, doubly solid rich paint. Carel I think very often misses out, but in a way perhaps it's his way of painting, his subject matter, means that it's not so important, because he is a great admirer of Stanley Spencer of course, and Stanley Spencer's paint is totally nauseating. He's the only man who can make a glorious painting of a rhododendron look obscene I think.

And what do you feel about Carel's standing in the art world?

Oh Carel's standing is very high. I think now it is very... I don't know of course, do you see, he would never sell abroad I don't think. I mean Bacon used to sell his abominations for three million in Milan or somewhere. Carel is very much an English painter, he belongs to the English school of potty painters, which are not accepted outside. I mean Stanley Spencer is

not accepted outside, however great an artist he is he's not accepted outside England I don't think. David Jones, a lovely Welsh artist, he's not accepted anywhere except in this country.

And what do you feel about somebody like Lucian Freud?

Lucian Freud is absolutely brilliant. I think, the artist I like best is Victor Pasmore, because he can do anything, he's our greatest abstract painter. He painted the most beautiful representational pictures. He is a man of the utmost good taste. His brother was my doctor in London, and when I used to go and see him he would say, 'Oh well I've just had some pictures from Victor, come and have a look at them.' And they were exquisite. He would sort of breathe an abstract on to the canvas, and his taste was impeccable. Lucian Freud was imbued with far greater energy, but there is some horrible demon driving him and he paints most...most...well, it's very difficult to say. He does paint well, but the nastiness of the paint very often reflects something in the painting. His subject matter is very often repellant. I have a feeling he is not a lover, he doesn't love people. In fact I went to see an exhibition of his in the Tate in Liverpool and there was one painting there, and only one, which showed real love, and that was of a dying girl. Now it must be there somewhere in Lucian Freud, but it's submerged with, not exactly hate but sort of nausea.

And actually you were talking earlier, again not on the tape, about the difference in artists who are just trying to make a reputation and the artists that love their subject. Could you perhaps say that again?

I have a feeling that very often he loves a sort of palm tree or a potted palm more than he loves people.

Freud?

Freud.

But you were talking when we were having lunch, we were generalising, we weren't talking about a particular artist.

Ah yes, I think today the word 'love' is something which is totally dismissed in the world of art. Love was something which has always been in art, people painted it because they really loved it and said, 'Oh my God, if I don't paint it I'll bust'. Now people say, 'Well, I wonder if I paint such-and-such a thing, I wonder if it will make me famous.' They've always got that behind their minds now, making their mark as a young artist. They use the landscape, they

use people to create things, and the love has flown out through the window I'm afraid, but it will have to come back because it's part of the tradition, I hope.

Presumably it's part of being human.

Well it is. I mean the idea, I believe that what happened after the Second World War, I believed that a lot of woolly individuals, woolly intellectuals, got together and said, 'We are now moving in to the 21st century, a century of robots and computers, and by God we've got to create the art of the 21st century to go with the computers and the robots. And of course we cannot do that until we do destroy tradition. Tradition is what's holding back the future of art. So we must abolish drawing, we must abolish all ideas about humanity. We must move into this exciting new century.' And what the silly idiots didn't realise, they wanted to destroy tradition. Tradition is the expression of humanity in the past. They poured out humanity on to their canvases, and in sculpture. And if you destroy tradition, you destroy humanity, and people will always be human, people will always want to love things. And I'm afraid the damage they have done has been almost total, but not entirely, because it will come back because people will in fact love things, and paint things because they love them. You see now, modern work is not bought by the public because there's no love in it, and people if they buy a picture want to see something which they can react to, and they can catch up in their painting the love that the artist had in creating it. That's why they like artists who do love things, and they certainly cannot stand a lot of the artists today who are so famous, who don't love anything at all except their own egos. Now Lucian Freud is an odd mixture. There is something there of great love, and he does his damndest to submerge it. He won't let it out, and it's really rather sad I think.

End of F4543 Side A

F4543 Side B

.....also talking over lunch about the time of the Summerson Committee.

Mm.

Could you talk about that again on the tape? Because it does link with what we're talking about.

Art education since the war has been totally ghastly. It has been the most appallingly corrupt part of education in Britain today. Now if you take colleges of forestry, of science, of medicine, whatever it is, colleges train their students in such a way so that when they leave they will be able to earn their living from what they have learned while they've been at that college, except in colleges of art. In colleges of art, the main thing is always the fine art department, and in no fine art department round Britain would you find anybody teaching the students to earn a living when they leave; in fact more or less just the opposite. So so many of the students when they leave join pop groups as drummers or something like that, they can't...they can't draw, because it was laid down by the Summerson Committee that drawing should be abolished; they can't paint because people are now no longer of any importance, they can't paint people; they can do nothing. I musn't complain because I went to the Slade, I learned to draw, therefore I get the jobs now, because if somebody wants me to draw his stallion on a stud in Cardiganshire I go down to do it, because there's nobody from Wales who can do it, so I'm lucky because I was taught to draw, and all these unfortunate people, they were just hammered. They were told they must not draw, so they leave their art schools incapable of earning a living. They can't get married and bring up children because they haven't any money, they can't earn a living from their chosen profession, and it's been totally monstrous. And then, the Coldstream Committee appointed the Summerson Committee under Sir John Summerson to go around assessing the merits for diploma status of the students in the artschools in Britain. Well the idea was under Sir William Coldstream that the centre of every art school should be the department of fine art, and the fine art in the middle of that, it should be the golden nugget which gave out rays of excellence which touched the ceramics, which touched the fashion, which touched the graphics and the woodwork and everything, and metalwork, and it would stimulate them to do great work. That was the idea. Well I met Sir John Summerson once, and he is a very nice, very distinguished man, and he said rather sadly, 'I took up this job because I thought I could help, and I was told that in the centre of every art school there was this golden nugget.' And he said, 'The longer I worked for the Summerson Committee I realised that there was no golden nugget, there was merely a vacuum.' And that was absolutely true, and he said it with sadness, because none of the

students in the fine art departments had any direction at all. They're told to go into a room and express themselves. And that was a tragedy, and that's gone on for forty years. Now people are wanting to draw again, but of course they cannot find anybody who can teach drawing, because they were told in the past that they must not draw, and it's been totally monstrous. I think a lot of these people should actually be put in prison for destroying the lives of generations of art students. But of course they then will turn round probably and stress the importance of drawing if there's money in it and their job is going. It's full of those sort of people.

And I'm interested that you liked the Pasmore abstracts, because from your book, when you were talking about giving a lecture, I think in Patagonia, when you were taking about the limitations of abstraction...

Oh it is very very limiting.

Can you expand on that?

You should, if you paint a picture on glorious colour, glorious composition, and beautiful texture, it should be a beautiful work of art. But unfortunately it doesn't work out like that, and very very seldom is an abstract a beautiful work of art. So much abstract painting has been done that I don't think any great abstract paintings will ever be painted, because for nearly ninety years people have been painting abstracts, I mean wonderful abstracts, by Malevich to begin with, Kandinsky, and then you got people like Manessier and De Stijl, and all sorts of people, and they are lovely abstracts, Poliakoff, and some of Victor Pasmore's. But you can't develop from that. I cannot see how they can be developed, pure abstract, because it is so limited with representation painting. Of course you can always develop. I must turn that down.....[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....say a bit more, the way of developing with figurative work, as opposed to abstract.

Talk about figurative work?

Well why you feel one can be developed and one can't.

Well because of the continual importance of people. And they can all be doing different things, and they can be painted in so many different ways. With abstract painting you've just got that, and you can't develop it, that's the tragedy I think. And, I mean if you paint an abstract, I suppose a person's personality comes through in the abstract. I mean in a way a

person's personality is probably more evident in an abstract because you haven't got the distractions of representation. But when you've done that, you just have to repeat yourself. I think so many abstract painters, they just repeat themselves, and they're boring, they're thoroughly boring.

Did you first see people like the American Abstract Expressionists at the Tate? Can you remember sort of coming across their work?

Yes, I've come across a lot of them. Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Mark Toby, I rather like the work of Mark Toby, and I don't like Pollock and... Oh Rothko is an interesting person, because in a way I feel that Rothko was misused and went along the wrong angle. I don't think he was basically an easel painter. He should have been employed at decorating the entrance hall to the American Embassy, it would look immensely distinguished. But unfortunately, whether it was his dealer or what I don't know, he was side-tracked into painting easel pictures, and I don't think that was the right thing. But he was a lovely artist, if limited.

And what did you feel about the Jackson Pollocks?

Oh I think they're just the paintings of rather a sick man. You see I...the buck with me stops when a work of art once it's painted, it can be copied by any member of society, artist or non-artist, then that is not valued as a work of art. I believe always that a painting must be seen to be something which is miraculous in some way, and which people when they look at it say, 'My God, fancy, he did actually do it'. Now today, with the new art, everybody can say, 'Well I could do that, my grandson could do that,' and they're right. But these people don't mind that, because they know the grandson could do it.

And did you, in the Fifties did you come across Frank Avray Wilson's work?

Yes.

What did you think of that?

Nothing. Really. I felt it was pretentious. I felt it was somebody trying to make his mark without any love at all, and I don't think he's a particularly good craftsman. Why, is he a friend of yours?

No, he's about to have another show, and I just wondered whether...because he hasn't shown for about twenty years. And what about the Kitchen Sink painters?

Well they had a lot. The one thing they did not have was paint quality. I remember going to the Beaux-Arts Gallery, and Jack Smith was in there, and he had one of his paintings, it was four panels which were on a stretcher with a bar across the centre. And he had the four panels and he was putting them on to the stretcher, and he was knocking nails into the front of the painting, straight through his painting and on to the stretcher. Now that, I thought, good God! He obviously is not interested in painting. How could anybody knock a series of nails through the surface of the painting? I mean, to me it's absolutely unbelievable. But they did certainly have something. I mean Jack Smith, some of his paintings, which were in fact drawings, of children I think, were very good. Horrible little children but they had something about them. Bratby had something about him when he was young, but he was slightly mad I think. When he painted a picture he used blue, it didn't matter what blue, and if he ran out of cerulean he would shout to his wife and say, 'Get me some blue'. She would say, 'What blue?' 'Oh it doesn't matter, any old blue.' So she would bring back cobalt, but it wouldn't make any difference. He had no idea of colour. But where he succeeded was, he had this fantastic vitality, and his vitality carried him through, and his early work was absolutely wonderful. But his later works, some of his Venetian work, I mean he doesn't...obviously he didn't look at Venice, because Venice was the most extraordinary cacophony of colour, and there's no cacophony of colour in Venice, it's all a lovely incredibly subtle haze, it's a very very subtle, and Bratby never saw it. By that time I think he had lost all touch with real art.

And what about Derek Greaves?

Derek Greaves was a very good painter. He was a Rome Scholar, but somehow he never developed. I think he is another of these people who did have great talent, but no objective to tie his talent to. But he was possibly the best painter, I think he was a better painter than Edward Middleditch. It's a pity, but, Leonard Grieves[ph], I think he's still alive.

Derek Greaves.

Pardon?

Derek Greaves.

Oh it's Derek Greaves, yes. He was a very good painter. But it's so difficult, you know, in art. There are very very few painters in Britain in the last 200 years who have in fact got

better after they have reached the age of 40, after Turner. The only one I can think of is Paul Nash, who became much more poetical the later he got. Oddly Turner got more poetical. Titian got more poetical, and his work when he got older, it got more pearly in colour. I don't know what it is in this country, I have a feeling the best of our artists painted best when they were young in an exuberant mood of romance, like Samuel Palmer's early work I believe was his best work. And so most of them... Duncan Grant went off terribly, he started to bring in horrible purple and his later paintings weren't nearly so good. I think practically all the last artists went off.

Earlier you said rather interestingly that you didn't think the same was true for women painters.

Women oddly enough, well perhaps it's not oddly enough, because women naturally have a better sense of colour than men, because they are always concerned with what they should wear and what scarf will go with what dress or something, they're better; not necessarily better at flower arranging, I know some people who are men who are very good at that. But basically a woman is more artistic than a man. They very often start blossoming in their late forties. I think it may be a fact that they put children first and they bring up their children and once they are relieved of their children, then all the sort of pressurising of their art bursts out and they start painting very much better after they're about forty. Mary Potter did, Diana Armfield, Eleanor Bellingham-Smith, a lot of these artists they did develop later on. Mary Fedden is another one.

What do you think about her painting?

Mary Fedden is a lovely, decorative artist. I mean she can't ring your heart strings but she doesn't intend to. They're immensely good taste, and they're very very charming.

And do you regard those last two things as good, or is that said in a slightly critical sense?

What, their taste? Taste is a funny thing. In this country I think that taste is the one thing that worries people. You can tell somebody they've got a face like a back of a number 9 bus or something and they don't worry, but if you attack their taste you are attacking their security, and nobody can survive hardly after being told they have no taste, it's funny. And people are so worried about doing things tastefully.

But so when you say that Mary Fedden has good taste, are you complimenting her or...?



In a way things come naturally to her because she has a fairly wealthy background I think with lovely things around her, so she never worries about taste because it's something inherent in her being, good taste. And lots of artists I know don't have any good taste at all.

Who are you thinking of?

I'm thinking of someone like...well Bacon in a way had very tasteful colour. It's an extraordinary thing, you go into a gallery of Bacon's work with your eyes half closed and you see the most lovely colour, and then you open your eyes and you see all the ghastly things that are going on within the colour. There's a terrible conflict there. If he was really serious about the horrors of his painting he would use colour to compliment the horrors, and he doesn't. I suppose they would be unbearable if he did. I find them unbearable anyhow.

And you were talking earlier about Prunella Clough.

Well she was a lovely artist, she was a very very intellectual artist. She is a lovely colourist of fairly muted colours, and she is a very good draughtsman verging on the abstract. I have a feeling she never developed, I don't know how she could have developed, but she got stuck. But she is a very good artist, there's no doubt about it.

When did you last see her work?

Oh not for years really.

Right. And since we talked about Mary, what about Julian Trevelyan's work?

Julian was a lovely painter. Now he was a very very light-hearted painter, he was a very light-hearted man, a lovely man really, and his paintings reflected his character. I don't think Julian Trevelyan would ever have said a nasty thing about anybody, he was a very very nice man, and his paintings were lovely, charming works, but they would never make me cry. I love artists who would make me cry. There are some...Géricault is a man who would make me cry. Goya would make me cry. Rembrandt would.

They're all painters who are quite often narrative, aren't they.

They're what?

They're quite often narrative painters, those, there's a story there that you find out in their pictures.

I'm not interested in narrative, really.

You're not?

I'm not interested in the symbolism either, I think it's beside the point. A painting to me is the thing, not symbolism or narrative.

And how, when did you come to know Edward Bawden?

Well only when I became a member of the Academy. And he was a wonderfully droll man. You never knew when he was being serious. He came up here to stay with me, and he wanted to see my work so I took him into the studio, and I showed him a lot of my work and he was absolutely silent. And then I showed him another painting, and he said, 'Ah that's the best.' And, 'That's better than any of the other pictures I've looked at.' And I said, 'Well, that was painted by a friend.' And he said, 'Yes I'm a bit deaf do you see, I'm speaking as a friend. It's far better than any of the others.' And, I said, [SHOUTING] 'It is painted by a friend.' He said, 'No, it's not the end at all. The others are simply dreadful.' (laughs) And I never knew if he was pulling my leg or not. But he wasn't to know it wasn't by me. It was in fact by this fellow William Cole who had taught me so much.

And what did you feel about Bawden's work?

Oh he was wonderful. What is interesting is, at the time I was illustrating a book, a limited edition book for the Gregynog Press on the short stories for Kate Roberts, and I was having great difficulty because I was having to cut them in linocut site size, and he was amazed, he said he had never done any linocut for illustrations site size, he had always done them bigger and had them reduced. Extraordinary.

And he was one of the people, when you were trying to get watercolourists accepted at the Academy he was one of your main enemies wasn't he?

No, he...no he was never an enemy. No I was trying to get Laurence Whistler nominated as an engraver, and the Academy said he couldn't be nominated because he didn't take prints from his engravings, which was totally fatuous. And in the end I complained to Hugh Casson, he asked me if I would like to address the general assembly on the subject, so I did,

and I caused a lot of anger because a lot of people started muttering about bringing bloody craft into the Academy, and Edward Bawden was so angry that afterwards he came and gave me a jolly good ticking-off. And anyhow the next day I saw him and he apologised, and took me out to lunch. It's very interesting because today when they have all these avant-garde so-called sculptors, like Richard Long, nobody would complain about him, which seems to me extraordinary, all these people, and, I can't understand the art world really.

What do you feel about Hugh Casson's work?

Well, Hugh is...he's not an artist, but he does do the most delightful lightweight drawings which slip away from him. He's very naughty you know, the one thing we are always being asked to, if you are an artist, we are always asked to give works to be auctioned in aid of charity, it goes on and on and on and on. And if you gave works to be auctioned in aid of charity, artists would be bankrupt. You always get a letter saying the same thing. 'Sir Hugh Casson has very generously donated a few of his watercolours.' Well Hugh just knocks them off like that. I suppose I've given away half a million pounds' worth of work in my life, and I'm still continuing to go on, and going on forking out pictures. It's incredible, the ruthlessness of these charity organisations. They won't go to anybody else other than artists, it's always artists. And sometimes I get angry. The Academy said they wanted artists to give their work in aid of the Academy. So I wrote a furious letter back saying, 'Why don't you ask farmers to give heifer calves and geese and ducks and horses and we could have a wonderful auction in the Burlington House courtyard.' And I did a drawing of this, do you see. The next thing I heard, this was up for auction. And so it goes on. Extraordinary.

What did you think about Hugh's time as President?

He was very very good indeed. Now, Tom Monnington, who he succeeded, was extremely good, but he was very very traditional. Hugh realised things had to change, and he had this fantastic ability to get through to people. He was a wonderful speaker and he was a lovely little man really. And he had that ability to make the Royal Academy respectable to the public, and everybody really. He wasn't tough, and when I went to see him about Laurence Whistler not being nominated, and his work being rejected, he said, 'Kyffin, you must realise, nobody likes his work.' And I remember I said, 'Hugh, the real truth is, nobody knows his work they're that ignorant.' Anyhow he wasn't nominated. But, I don't think Hugh, that was not his scene; he wanted to make the Academy a happy place, he wanted to try and get the best artists into the Academy, and he really was extremely good, he was a very good President.

And, we've talked a lot about painters but going back again, I mean what did you feel about the sculpture that was happening in the Fifties, people like Lynn Chadwick and Kenneth Armitage and Butler?

No merit at all really.

None of them?

They were very unsculptural. Reg Butler, I never thought much of Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick; Kenneth Armitage, I wondered why he was considered to be so good. Liz Frink I think was far better, but she wasn't quite the same sort of sculptor. At her best she was very good. A very nice person. And one person who is very very much neglected is Ivor Roberts-Jones who is a wonderful portrait sculptor. Nobody knows anything about him, but his portrait heads are some of the finest done in Europe in this century, and he lives very much out on a limb in Norfolk, and he is a very fine sculptor, especially of animals, I've got one in the other room there, a beautiful thing of a cheetah. But when I had the keeper of the National Museum up here to see what he wanted me to put in my will to go to the National Museum he wouldn't even look at it, because nobody knows anything about Ivor Roberts-Jones's animal sculpture.

And what about your own work in the Forties? I've seen listed that you did paintings of Kentish Town, what were they like?

Pretty awful.

What were they actually of?

Oh the archway, the viaducts and the trains going over the viaducts. I did quite a lot in London, round Billingsgate and on the river, I was just trying to find my way.

Because this was really your introduction to London, wasn't it?

Yes, but I first went there in 1944, I did quite a lot of work on Hampstead Heath, loving couples arm in arm walking across the heath in the twilight, all very romantic.

And where are they now?

Well one thing's rather funny. The Professor of Philosophy at Swansea University rang me up one day and said he had just bought one of my paintings in Hay-on-Wye, and it wasn't signed, could he bring it along and sign it? He said, 'I enclose a photograph of it.' So I wrote back and said, 'I'm very sorry to tell you, you have bought stolen property. But I will sign it if you like.' What had happened was, I had been...I was thrown out of my lodgings by a particularly offensive landlady, and I ended up in the first floor of a semi-detached in Woodside Park, and the ground floor was occupied by unmarried mothers and their children put in by the council. And when I was out, one of them I think managed to get in to my flat at the top and there I had an unlimited source of wealth for her, because she pulled out paintings, take them up to a junk shop in Tallyho Corner and flog them for a quid. Altogether I lost about 100 paintings I think, and this was one of them, which ended up in Hay-on-Wye.

And, were you beginning, at this point presumably you were going to the National Gallery and to the Tate Gallery, and to the commercial galleries, were you?

Oh continuously, yes.

And what were the things that really had an impact on you?

Things which rung my heart strings, being always an emotional person I liked my heart strings being rung. I loved Zurbaran, Velasquez and Goya and...oh there's so much, so much I liked.

And were you going to the theatre and things like that?

No, hardly. I used to go to the music halls, Collins and so on. I occasionally went to the theatre but I'm not a great theatre-goer.

Did you go to the Festival of Britain?

I went once.

And what did you think?

Not an awful lot. What was interesting was, there was a man from Anglesey called Richard Hughes who lived quite close, up here, he had a thing, a sort of fountain with buckets of water poured into buckets of water. It was one of the main attractions of the whole festival. He was a strange man.

And did you like that piece?

Well it wasn't a great work of art, but it was a very very intriguing object.

Did you know the other Richard Hughes, the writer?

Oh Lord yes, I knew him very well. I saved his life once. [BREAK IN RECORDING]  
Extraordinary man.

I'm going to have to.....

End of F4543 Side B

F4544 Side A

You said you knew Richard Hughes as in the author of 'A High Wind in Jamaica'.

Yes, well I knew Richard Hughes' mother actually. I knew Richard Hughes of course. I always seem to have known the mothers or fathers of well-known people better than the well-known people. I knew Richard Hughes' mother, and I knew Robert Graves' mother.

What was she like?

Oh formidable, very formidable. I remember, I went to a public inquiry in Penrhyndeudraeth once, because there had been the condemning of property, and people objected to having their property condemned, and a man came down from London, an inspector, to receive the objections. And Mrs Graves, who lived in Harlech, she descended on this inquiry, and she completely flattened this inspector from London. She was damned if she was going to have her property condemned, and he was not going to condemn it, and he really slaughtered her (sic). And we felt sorry for this little man. I knew Boris Pasternak's father; I didn't know Boris Pasternak of course. I knew Lewis Casson's aunt. All these incredibly ancient people. Well the Cassons came from Porthmadog you see.

What were the Casson family like?

Well they were a very very respectable family of solicitors and quarry owners, slate quarries, and they produced the hardest slate in north Wales called difwis casson(ph)and, a very tough slate. When Hugh got elected President of the Royal Academy I sent him a telegram, 'Local Boy Made Good'.

Tell me a bit more about Richard Hughes.

He was always to me an oddity. It's very difficult I think for people to get to know Richard Hughes. He lived in an extraordinary house from time to time called Park, a very very old house, and he married a very landed lady from the Cotswolds I think who had plenty of money, and they were a strange couple. But they had five, I think, very nice children; Robert and Owen were the boys, Penny, Lecky and Katy were the girls I think. And they were a very nice family, and he did love children, Richard Hughes. His mother lived in a little cottage beside the river which crashed down from the mountains, and when the river was in flood it came bursting in to her cottage. But of course she had it taped, because she had a chair built like a boat, like a big black boat, and she got into this chair and the river would come bursting

in and knock her round into the wardrobe and into the side of the walls, and there she used to sit until the floods subsided and left the house. She was a funny old girl.

What had happened to his father? Did you know the father?

I think he was a mystery.

And how did you come to save Richard's life?

Oh well, I mean, he never knew anything about it. We were out hunting and he, I never saw him out hunting before and he wasn't really built for it, and he was trying to get over a wall on the edge of a precipice, and I suddenly saw him going like this, and I had my stick and I put it out like that and I slotted the handle in the belt. Otherwise I'm sure he would have gone straight the way down. He never knew I saved his life. He was a funny writer you know, I've never found it easy to read his books. Certainly 'The Fox in the Attic' and 'The Wooden Shepherdess', I never found it easy to read them. He comes to life when he writes about little girls I think, he's awfully good about writing about little girls, he seems to sort of understand them in some odd way. And he was a strange, strange man. He lived in a house opposite Porthmeirion called Moredrin. It was a house in a field, because there are no borders, it grew up out of the field, most extraordinary. He was very much tied up with the Williams Ellis family and Porthmeirion. I don't know where his family came from originally, I think it might have been south Wales.

And do you think of him as a Welsh writer?

He is. The odd thing is that the greatest Welsh novelists have written in English, like Richard Hughes, Charles Morgan, E.M. Forster, they've all written in English. Welshmen are basically not novelists. I have a feeling we're brilliant short story writers, but the novel is something which has to be organised, prepared, planned in a very methodical way, and Welshmen like to do things in an explosion. That's why they're so good at short stories, it's something short and explosive. But, it's very very difficult to find great novelists. One extraordinary thing is, Clough Williams Ellis was only half Welsh, his mother was an old dragon, I remember, I knew her better than I knew Clough. And Clough married Annabel Strachey, who was a hundred per cent English, and their daughter Susan married a man called Ewan Cooper Willis who was a hundred per cent English, and they had a small boy who calls himself Robert Llewellyn, and has become a great Welsh nationalist and writes novels, and he is considered to be the most remarkable novelist in Wales at the moment, writing in Welsh,



and he will only write in Welsh, and he is only an eighth Welsh. It's interesting, very interesting.

And what about Leslie Norris?

Is he a novelist?

No, he's short stories. I wondered if you were thinking of him as a poet.

Ah, no, I'm thinking of novelists do you see. Robin (sic) Llewellyn is a novelist.

But when you said the Welsh are very good at short stories, who were you thinking of?

Oh, Rhys Davies, Caradoc Evans, Gwyn Thomas, and even Dylan Thomas could write good short stories. It comes naturally to Welsh people, whereas the novel doesn't. I would love to write to a novel, but I haven't got the time to do the research on it, but it's something I would like to do. Well so many people say I would like to write a novel and they never do it, so I'm just one of the many others.

By the way, when we were talking about other painters, what did you think of the work of Burra, Edward Burra?

Burra was brilliant, and he was a really genuine artist. He painted totally naturally in a very strange way, because he was a bit of a strange man. He was a very significant artist of that period, very, he was one of the important ones I think.

Why do you think he was important?

Because of his own vision. He had a very very unusual vision, slightly macabre, but he was his own man, he wasn't influenced by anybody, and he would be a bad influence. People with vision are bad influences because they are only sort of geniuses because of their personal chemical make-up, and they are bad influences because people can't be influenced unless they have the same chemical make-up. That's what I feel. And Burra certainly was an unusual man.

And what did you feel about the work that was done by quite a lot of painters as war artists in the Second World War?

Oh brilliant some of them, brilliant. Very often artists, if they are told to do something they would not have done previously, come and do something very good, and there was a lot of very good war artist work.

In particular?

Now let me think. Now what's that lovely...he did lovely etchings. Anthony Gross did very good work, Edward Bawden did good work, Carel Weight did a certain amount of work. Leslie Cole did good work. There were so many. Barnett Friedman. No, it was extraordinary really.

And last question for tonight perhaps, what about Johnnie Minton, what did you think of him?

I only met John Minton once. He was a tragic artist. He wasn't really a painter, he was a beautiful graphic artist who painted. He was a sad man, and he was a very good artist. The Academy never elected him. He was always kept out by somebody else; I think possibly people didn't like him possibly because he was homosexual, and I think he probably was being blackmailed and all sorts of things. He was a tragic character, but he was a very...he should have been a member of the Academy. I think it was arranged in the end that, there were two artists, James Gunn the portrait painter, a lot of people wanted James Gunn; a lot of people wanted Minton and they cut each other's throats in the election. In the end it was decided that if the Minton camp wanted Minton, if they allowed the Gunn camp to elect Gunn one year, the Gunn camp would elect Minton the next year, but by this time Minton had killed himself, which was very sad really.

Actually there's about to be an exhibition of Gunn's work. What did you think of that? I've just seen one so far.

Well Gunn, he was much despised by people, but he was early on a very good painter. I mean there's a wonderful one in the National Portrait Gallery of Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton and Lord Berners I think, the sort of conversation piece which nobody could do today. So, at his best he was a very good painter.

When you say nobody could do it today, you mean nobody could do it technically?

Technically they're incapable of doing it.

And actually last question for today, what about Keith Vaughan?

Keith Vaughan was extremely talented. He concocted his paintings for me too much. They didn't come out naturally. He is considered very highly; he was, along with other people like Colquhoun and MacBryde, there's a whole group they called Neo-Romantics I think, Michael Ayrton was more or less on the edge of them. I bought a Keith Vaughan once in the Leicester Galleries, and when I got it home it meant absolutely nothing to me, I think because it was concocted and not painted out of love of the thing, it was of a boat-house on a lake. So I took it back and got my money back. But there is no doubt he was a very good artist.

And do you read his writing at all?

No, I've never seen his writing.

Actually, I promise this is the last one, I keep thinking of people, what about Richard Eurich?

Well, I mean Richard Eurich was one of my only friends in the Academy. He was a lovely artist and I've got a picture by him in the other room done when he was fifteen, of some feathers and beetles and things. He was a lovely man and a very very good artist.

What kind of a man was he?

He was a very quiet, retiring little man, who never wanted to be in the public gaze. He made pictures out of nothing, certain pictures which really shouldn't have been paintings of importance. But Richard Eurich, he was such an honest artist, he was unbelievably honest. And what is nice, that towards the end of his life the art world suddenly took him up and he started to sell his pictures quite well, and then he died, and it was sad because he was so nice, so quiet, so gentle.

And what do you think was the strength of his pictures?

Their honesty. I think that somehow is something that does appeal to me in an artist. And he could paint figures in landscape very well. And his paintings are the sort of paintings you go to an exhibition and you pass them by, and then suddenly you go back and you realise that they are very very good.

And how often would you see each other?

Oh only once. (laughs) Once a year at the Academy.

So you never went to stay with each other or anything like that?

No, no. He knew very few people. Well Leonard Rosoman did a lovely portrait of him, and they must have got on. I know hardly anybody in the Academy.

You were saying you think Leonard is one of the strongest painters there.

He's one of the best. He's not a strong painter but he's one of the best. He can draw so well. He learned how to draw, I mean he's over 80 I think, he's about 81 I think or 82, and he learned to draw, and he can draw beautifully.

And what about his use of colour?

He's a very good colourist. Tonally perhaps he's not a great tonal painter, but I mean it's unnecessary. He's so decorative as well as being a great draughtsman. He knows how to place his figures in a canvas and... He is overlooked, it's incredible how he is overlooked.

[Interview on March the 22nd 1995.]

When we were talking yesterday, the one friend I didn't ask you about was Bernard Dunstan. When did you meet him?

Bernard Dunstan is my oldest artistic friend. When I got to the Slade in Oxford in 1941 he had just left, even though he's younger than I am he had left, and he was looked upon with great awe by the younger students. And he lived fairly close to the Ashmolean Museum, off Broad Street, and, I somehow, I got to know him, and I respected his draughtsmanship, and his painting, and I saw a lot of him. I used to go and see him in his little lodgings off the Broad, and I got on very well with him, and we have continued to be friends ever since. And he married Diana Armfield, and I've always kept up them all the way through their married life. He's a very sensible, cultured, gentle man, and he is a very...he's a very very nice man indeed, they both are, a very nice couple.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....quite a lot at the Royal Academy?

Oh I think so, I think it's possibly he who whipped up support to get me elected, and I am pretty certain about that. He is a very very good painter, and it's very gentle painting, which is not particularly fashionable, gentle painting is not fashionable now, it's hard, cruel painting seems to be more important at the moment. But people do love his work, because they do reflect his love for people and landscape and things.

And could we go back now to your time in the 1940s when you were teaching at Highgate at the beginning. What was the pattern of your life as far as your own painting was concerned? Where were you going out to paint and how was the process happening?

I was lucky that after two years of painting - of teaching rather, six days a week, I was allowed by the headmaster to do three days a week. And this was very good because it broke up my week so that I taught three days and I painted four days. And in the four days I set myself two pictures a week, and that compartmentalizing was good for one's discipline. And I didn't paint so much to begin with when I first went to London, I painted a lot round Hampstead Heath, because I was living on the edge of the heath, and I used to go down to London, to Billingsgate and places like that, and Kentish Town, Richmond, I used to paint round there. But most of my work was really done from my drawings of Wales, and when I was in my studio, cut off from all London influences, it became to me part of Wales, and I painted pictures of the mountains, and the farmers in the mountains and their sheep dogs and things.

What were your drawings made with? Were they ink drawings, pencil drawings?

A lot of pencil drawings. Sometimes when you are out in the mountains in the wind you can't handle ink, because ink gets blown all over the place, and you have to draw in pencil. And very often of course the vaguer the drawings the better the painting that comes from it; the more efficient the drawing usually the worse the painting is, because you've done it, and you don't want to do it again. I did a lot of drawing in ink on the spot, and what I used to do was, I used to sharpen the wrong end of my brush into a wedge and I used to draw with the wedge, sometimes the broad wedge or the thin line of the side of the wedge. And that really was the way Van Gogh drew, although he used a reed pen, and it makes a strong image, and that's why I always like doing it. I used to do a lot with spit too, if I haven't any water I put my line down in ink and then spit and it gave a beautiful texture.

When did you first start to draw in ink?

I must have started to draw in ink I think while I was at the Slade, because a friend of mine, William Cole, he drew in ink and he drew beautifully. And, he must have taught me. The students always say they learn most from their fellow students, and I did learn a lot from him.

And am I right in thinking that you dilute the black ink with sepia in some way?

Yes, well black ink on its own is cold, so I usually use 50 per cent black Indian ink and 50 per cent sepia, or peat brown or something, to warm it.

And when did you start that recipe, when did you begin to do that, do you know?

While I was at the Slade I think.

Right. And so, what would happen would be that, when you were in Wales you would go out for the day drawing, or what would happen?

Yes.

And you would make sketch-book drawings, or what would...?

Yes, I would do all sorts of drawings, some vague some finished, and, I could get good paper in those days, it's far too difficult now to get good paper, so my drawings probably aren't so good now. It's very difficult to get good paper.

You mean in the world in general, or in Anglesey?

Yes in the world in general.

Right. But, in these days you were actually using sketch-books, or they would be on individual sheets, or what?

I liked using sketch-books because they were easier to handle, and sometimes I could put them in my poacher's pocket. And if I went out hunting I always took a sketch-book with me, and I drew the farmers and the mountains.

So are you very swift when you draw?

I'm very swift when I draw and when I paint. And I think, oddly enough, why people like my drawing and painting is, they are very immediate because I want to do them quickly, and people seem to like the immediacy. That's one reason why I think people do like my work. It's very odd why people do, but they do, they definitely do seem to like my work.

And can you tell me how the process happens when you are working from a drawing, how it is translated into a painting?

Well it's not quite the same of course. It evolves, I draw straight on to the canvas in black paint, in the same way as I would do a drawing in black ink.

So this is an outline drawing?

Yes. And then, having drawn it in, I then start laying it in. I used to lay it in with the brush, with one tone rather lower than my final colour, and then I would put the final colour on with a palette-knife and allowing the undercoat to show through at times. But there is a danger in this, because usually I put my undercoat on with a certain amount of medium, and my palette-knife paint was put on the top without medium, and very often it didn't quite work, it either bubbled a bit.

Sorry, I don't know, what is the medium?

Oh turpentine. I use turpentine, I don't use any oil because there's enough oil in the paint, so I use turpentine.

And so, when you started you would know what that top colour was going to be, you would be very conscious working towards that recipe.

Yes, yes. And having put that colour on with the palette-knife, then I would work the brush into it and tie the whole thing up, because painting a picture is rather like doing a crossword puzzle, or putting up the big top of a tent; you put up the tent and then you have to pull all the guy ropes so that it is absolutely taut and finished and complete within the area of the canvas. In the painting on a canvas you do the same thing, well I do, I try and tighten the whole thing so it is correct, it's worked out correctly within the confines of the canvas.

And how might you tighten it, what might you do to tighten it?

By drawing in lines, and getting...if I draw in a strong line to the right, somewhere on the left-hand side you must balance it with another bit of dark, and so you tie it up so that in the end it is correct. That's why I hate signing my pictures, because it is a blemish on a correct statement.

Could you sign them on the back? I mean why have you given up signing?

People always want them on the front, and people won't buy your paintings unless they're signed, which is absolutely daft really.

And what about the texture? I mean it's very thick paint a lot of times.

Well I do love the texture, and I found out that if I wanted to get an effect of light using a palette-knife I would get that effect by not exactly mixing fully about four different colours, maybe black, white, yellow ochre, and burnt amber. And I would get an effect of light on the breast of a hill by putting it on unmixed, and you would get bits of all those four colours showing in the paint, and it would give an effect of shimmer. Well I found this even painting portraits of light falling on a cheek, I would do it there, and I would have maybe cadmium red, burnt umber, and maybe black or something, and white, maybe lemon yellow, and I would put it on very quickly and it would shimmer. Now that had its dangers, because you can get more interested in the technique than in the painting, and I suddenly found after I had been painting like this for about a year, it was becoming a trick. Now all painting is tricks, but you must never be led by tricks.

When did you begin to use that technique, can you remember?

I suppose it must have been in the Fifties. And suddenly I realised this is a trick, watch it. So my painting developed rather more broadly then, and, not intentionally but somehow, simplification is terribly important, but the simplification has got to be the truth, and you can get more punch if something is simplified if everything is right; if the tone and the colour are right you do get more punch.

And sometimes you use almost naked canvas. Is that to differentiate the textures? I mean there's a much thinner surface.

Well, a painting breathes I think if you have variation in texture, it gives an added depth to the painting.



And how strategically is the place chosen where it would be much thinner?

Well it's not, it just happens. Sometimes you realise that an undercoat in a certain place is important. I don't plan it, I never plan anything really, it just happens.

And if...I don't know, when you are...for example can we take the picture that's in the Royal Academy, is it 'Dafydd Williams on a Mountain'?

Oh, 'Dafydd Williams on the Mountain', yes.

Which is your starting place, where do you begin? Because that's got tremendous flows in it, and layers of light really. I mean, are you beginning with the base?

Well I began with the figure, because the figure is all-important. And I usually like to have my figures moving out of the canvas. A figure moving out of the canvas means that all the day behind him is realised. It may sound daft but, a figure coming in to the canvas, the whole area in front of him is unrealised. This is maybe my own personally neurotic way of looking at it.

Can you explain a bit what you mean by realised?

Well you know that Dafydd Williams had been in that area, because he is going out. But if a man is coming in, what is in front of him is unrealised. Very few people would sort of accept that, but to me that is right.

So in this instance you would begin with him.

Mhm.

And then what? Would you complete that figure or would you just [INAUDIBLE]?

No no I wouldn't complete it, because, you can't do that because everything has to be done working in together. After I had painted him I probably painted the area round him and built up to the top of the hill behind. And I usually when I am painting a landscape I start with the ridge against the sky and work down, and I usually paint lighter sky in at the end so that it does take up a bit of the wet paint on the ridge so to speak.

Because what I was wondering, I mean in a painting of that kind, not necessarily that one, but, I mean you said that when you begin the paintings you know the colour range that you want to get.

Mm.

Would you ever, during the course of painting it, alter, say, what the colour of the sky would be compared to what you had thought it would be?

Oh yes, yes.

Because of relationship to the rest?

Sometimes what I imagine the sky will be just would not actually go with the landscape and I would have to change it.

So every painting is still a surprise in that sense.

Oh yes, every painting is a growing thing, and... This is a great difference between a craftsman and an artist. A craftsman knows exactly what the object he is going to produce will be when he has produced it, he knows. The painter doesn't. And this is why craftsmen are so much more happy than artists I think, they are always very happy people, craftsmen, because they are on top of it, they know exactly what they're going to do, and the painter doesn't know what's going to happen, because he's in the hands of God, and sometimes God is having a snooze.

So where is the point of control that the artist has? I mean the craftsman has control is really what's happening isn't it?

Yes. The artist I think loses control after about half an hour, this is what I find. It's like bicycling up a steep hill. You sweat away, everything's going wrong, and suddenly you get to the top of the hill and you free-wheel, which is when God takes over I think.

End of F4544 Side A

F4544 Side B

Could you just say that again about the point when God takes over or not.

Well you bicycle, you sweat away to get to the top of a hill, and everything has been going wrong, and suddenly you get to the top of the hill and you start free-wheeling, and that's when really God takes over. And you are certainly, he is in control then, and, it usually gets better after that. But usually, if God doesn't take over, the painting is a bit of a flop really.

And you've actually destroyed paintings sometimes, haven't you.

Oh regularly.

What's the moment that you decide to do that?

Well when I realise that they're absolutely useless. I paint a picture and you never really know what it's like, and I put them away, and sometimes I go back and look at them, and I used to turn the canvases and paint on the backs of the canvases because I was pretty hard up. And, well there comes a time when you realise they're pretty rotten, and you want the stretchers anyhow to put new canvas on. So I used to cut them up. Now what I do, I occasionally go into my store-room with a Stanley knife and I cut great holes in the canvases and throw away the holes so nobody can sew them up again.

So, are you saying you've got lots of mutilated canvases?

Oh yes, masses of mutilated canvases.

And what do you feel about them?

Oh a jolly good thing, because I mean I do paint...the way I paint, which is an emotional type of painting, it's natural that you do paint very bad pictures.

But, I am interested that you keep the mutilated bits.

Well I do, because I want the stretchers.

So you then re-use them?

Well at the moment, now, I'm being very very lazy. I used to do all my preparing of canvases, and now I am able to sell a few pictures I am able to buy canvases, which eases things a lot.

Have you ever had any kind of assistant making stretchers for you or anything?

Oh Lord no, I mean I've never been able to have an assistant because, I've never been able to afford an assistant, and... I am considered a slightly dangerous painter anyhow in the art world, because I am a sort of a maverick, I don't paint like anybody else, and I don't know if anybody would want to paint like me. It's very stupid to try and paint like me because the cost is so enormous.

Because of the thickness of the paint?

Yes, yes. If I had an idea of money I would not paint as I do, because if I had an idea of money every time I painted and put a bit of paint on I would say, '20p, 40p, £1,' and so on. And, I mean it would be hopeless.

Do you think anybody does work on that basis?

I think some people do. I mean I had an old friend, Fred Uhlman, he was terribly hard up when he had to flee from Germany, and he went to Paris, and first of all he bred tropical fish until there was a power cut and all the fish died, and then he took to painting, and he was so poor, all he could do was stain his canvases by very turpentine paint on cotton wool and rub it in, because he hadn't any money. And when he did eventually have plenty of money he couldn't get away from this way of painting, so he always painted extremely thin, staining away.

Did he write a novel as well?

He wrote some, he wrote a book called 'Reunion', and he wrote a very good autobiography called 'The Makings of an Englishman', and he was an extraordinary little character really.

Can you tell me a bit more about the painting in the RA? I mean how did that picture come to be done anyway, how, what was the story behind it?

Well, when I used to go out hunting in the mountains, we would start off, Jack Jones, very often Jack Jones and myself, and maybe one other, and we would go up into the mountains

after the foxes and suddenly we would find a couple of figures sheltering under a wall, they would be Dafydd Williams and his son Pierce. And they knew where the fox was going to go, this was under the south side of Snowdon, and if we had found a fox they would be up there telling us where in fact the fox had gone and where the hounds had gone. And old Dafydd Williams, he's a shrewd old man, very very shrewd, he had plenty of money but he never spent it; I believe he used to go in to Beddgelert, walk in to Beddgelert, and he would go in to the Tanronnen pub and there he would sit and wait for somebody to come in and offer him a drink. And, I think he enjoyed hunting. He looked like a fox, and his son Pyrus[ph], he had a pack of hounds himself afterwards, and I used to go out hunting with his grandson. So now that old boy, Dafydd Williams, his great-grandson hunts the hounds now, which is extraordinary really.

So how did the picture actually come about?

Well, I mean Dafydd Williams was always around, and I envisaged him like that with the mountain behind him. It's not terribly like Dafydd Williams but I entitled it Dafydd Williams.

Could you for a moment pretend I am blind, and describe that picture to me so I can imagine it?

Well, it's interesting that in south Wales, when people paint figures they invariably paint them huge, because it comes from painting miners in confined spaces. Well when I paint people in the mountains they're invariably small because of the domination of the mountains. So Dafydd Williams is quite small, he is really quite insignificant, but he is a slightly old, weather-beaten character, and I put him in the corner of the canvas because I felt it was important that he should be down there, it's moving out, it increases his insignificance really. The mountain behind is a very bleak mountain, there are no stone walls on it, it's just a great big mountain, lighter at the top than at the bottom, and beyond that, a lightish sky. It's a very very simple composition. I am not a good composer; I usually compose very very flat.....[TELEPHONE - BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....composition of the RA picture.

Well all my paintings, very very seldom do I lead in to a picture like a road winding in. It's considered rather a good thing that sort of composition, but I like a very very much simpler and starker composition, so the foreground where Dafydd Williams is is flat, and I've cut off

actually Dafydd Williams' legs and everything is flat. And the colour is really very very simple.

What are the colours? Supposing I can't see.

Well he is up against a dark hillside, he is in a sort of grey old coat, and I think a bit of red scarf at his cheek. The foreground grass is very very light yellow ochre and lemon yellow, reedy grass, and then behind him the mountain is pretty black with a greenish top to it.

And you chose that one for the RA? I can't remember how it works.

Well when you get made a full RA, you can't be made a full RA until you've handed over what is known as a diploma work. That's why Stubbs was never made a full RA because he wouldn't hand over a picture, and other artists as well I think. Anyhow, I gave them a portrait, and they looked down their noses at it and said, 'Not good enough'.

What was that portrait?

It's a portrait of a man called Alun Oldfield-Davies, who was the controller of the BBC in Wales. I painted it as a commission for them, and I rather liked it, but they asked me for a photograph of it and they looked at it and wrote me a letter and they said, 'We consider this portrait to be repellent'.

Sorry, is this the BBC rather than the RA?

The BBC.

Right.

And, I thought it was a very odd word to use, and so I wrote back and said, 'Well not to worry,' I said, and I suggested an artist in south Wales who I thought would be better for painting this chap's portrait. But, Alun Oldfield-Davies said, 'No, I want Kyffin to do it,' so in order to try and put him off I said, 'Well next time you will have to stand for your portrait.' And he said, 'Fine.' Anyhow he came and stood all day long, and I did a full-length life-size portrait in a day of him standing like an Atlas missile in the corner of my studio, and I cut his feet off because he was 6 foot 6, and in order to give any portrait, a full-length portrait real size and scale, the only way you can do that is by cutting the feet off, because then you have no idea how much longer the trousers go down. Anyhow that was accepted, and what was I

going to do with the other one? So I offered it as my diploma work and they didn't like it either. They didn't say it was repellent but they said, 'It's not good enough Kyffin, try again'.

But so, were you really trying to give the RA a painting you didn't otherwise want, as opposed to trying to give the RA something that you really liked?

Well I liked the portrait you see, and it had been rejected but I liked it, and I thought, well, I can give it to them.

And so then what happened?

Well then they said try again, and I had this portrait of Dafydd Williams which I had just done, and so I suggested that one.

At that stage were you nearly always putting figures in landscape, or were there...?

I have put figures in landscapes for a long time. There's a word in the Welsh language, cynefin. There's no real word for landscape, although they use the word tirwedd. Cynefin is more important to a Welshman, it means the landscape and the people and everything in it, because Welsh people are barmy about people. And, it's rather a nice thing, cynefin. When they have sheep in the mountains they call that a dafad cynefin, and that is a flock which has been born and bred on that bit of land and won't wander. And so if you want to buy a hill farm with the sheep, you get more for a dafad cynefin, and you don't get so much if it's not. If it's not you have to build walls and fences and God knows what.

And so what about the times when you haven't got figures in the landscape? Why is that balance coming back? Why do you make that decision?

Well, sometimes you don't want figures in the landscape, the landscape is important enough in itself, and a figure probably would ruin the simplicity of it. No, you want to paint landscapes without figures. A lot of people don't like my landscapes with figures, not that that concerns me. No, you can see paintings and the simplification of trying to extract all the juice out of it, a figure would ruin that simplification.

And I've read that snow is very important to you, that you've done a lot with snow. Can you talk about that a bit?

Well I like to paint snow because of course there are great contrasts, and I think I mentioned about Van Gogh loving contrasts for kicks and putting marks down for kicks, well so do I, so when there's snow I like it because things are dark, and the sheep are darker, and the dogs are blacker, and the farmers are stronger, and the rocks are stronger in the white, against the white snow. Also, it's not a particularly serious remark but the white paint is very much cheaper than other paints.

And have you any idea of the proportion of paintings you've done of landscape with and without people in them?

Oh most of them are without people. It's more difficult to paint landscapes with people in them.

And, looking through your catalogues, I mean, every now and then there's a painting for example of pheasants, or of wildlife of some kind, or of a bird perhaps. I mean, what's the proportion there? I suspect it's less.

Oh, I used to, when I lived in London down the road there was a game merchant, Mr Pargiter, and I used to go along there and borrow his birds and paint them, and because I painted very quickly I used to take them back when I had finished. There was also a Mr Richards the fishmonger, I had to buy the fish unfortunately. But at that time I painted quite a lot of still life of birds. But the most successful bird of all I painted was a cock pheasant, and I always think this is one of the most successful paintings in Western art, not because it's a beautiful painting but for the simple fact that I shot it, I painted it, I ate it and I sold it. I don't think Rembrandt even did that.

But why would you choose to do a still life? I mean what leads you to do that?

Well painters have always painted still life, and certain things are very good to paint. I mean game birds are very good to paint.

Why?

Their colouring is very good, they are very compact. A partridge, I painted partridges and they're very very compact. And also the fact that I've always been very fond of birds, and I painted animals, I painted a big painting of a fox once which I liked, it went to America I think and I'll never see that again. The fish of course have always been a joy to painters, and I have enjoyed painting fish.



Why, why do you like that?

It's the colouring and the shine on them, and they are quite small, they're simple shapes. They're good shapes, and you can pattern them on the canvas. I've always liked painting fish.

And do you still do still life?

No I don't oddly enough. I want to paint more flower paintings and I want to paint still life. I might now, this year and next year, do a lot of flower painting, and, I used to love painting flowers.

When did you do flowers?

Oh early on I painted flowers, and...

Wild flowers?

No, never wild flowers, because they aren't in a way big enough. I like a big, single peony or something like that. I think I will start painting flowers, and I've got to try and work out the backgrounds of them a bit more.

And when you were having time in Wales as opposed to working in London from drawings, when you were actually in Wales would you paint outside sometimes, or not?

I painted outside for the first 25 to 30 years of my life, because it's terribly important to know the colour, and what the mountains look like and what the land looks like. But then I realised that the best paintings invariably are interpretations. There's no point in going to a landscape and painting out in terrible conditions if...you interpret; you really, all you can do is paint what's in front of you. So after about 25 to 30 years I realised, to paint my best pictures I would have to do drawings outside, and watercolours, and then paint from my drawings and watercolours, and there in the confines of my studio I could interpret. But various things I did learn which are interesting. I found that in very very cold weather when it was well below freezing point, I could go out and stand in the snow gloveless and I could paint for an hour-and-a-half, say, when it's below freezing point, and when I had finished painting I would find that my hands, my uncovered hands, especially the one holding my palette which would never move, was warm as anything, and I could never understand this. And they got cold as soon as

I started to clean up, when I was actually moving my hand. So it must have been some sort of yoga, and it was...I didn't feel the cold because I was concentrating on something else.

And you have said that at one point to do with medication that you found light very painful.

Ah that's when I was taking a drug called tridione, and that made it impossible to see in sunlight.

But that was not very many years; since then it's been all right?

No, it wasn't very successful and after a year I gave it up.

Right. So painting snow isn't harsh on the eyes in any way?

No. I find that the canvas, I could never go out painting with a white canvas; I used to put an abstract of the colour of the season on the canvas, because the sun on a white canvas was devastating, you couldn't see what you put down. Of course if you put down anything dark it was just cold black. So I had to paint like that.

Right. And in terms of the mountains, would you go back and back to the same piece of mountain, or were you always exploring a new piece of mountain?

No, I mean I go back to the same bit of mountain because the light is always different, and I paint it in different lights. And there are certain places I could go to because I knew I could go there because it was out of the east wind. I know the mountain so well, so I know exactly where to go in various winds.

Can you tell me some of the main places that you paint?

Well at the moment I usually paint around Nant Peris and the Nant Ffrancon, and I paint quite a bit between Aberglaslyn and Penrhyndeudraeth, up there. In Anglesey I paint round the Llandona area, but mainly I like to paint the sea, and if I paint the sea I go along the coast to the south of the island, because then the sun is always on the sea, and it adds another dimension. On the north coast of the island you can't see the sun on the sea, so it's cold.

And how is the process of painting the sea different from painting a mountainside?

It's very different, because I have a feeling that painting the sea you are not in control of the painting, it's a moving thing, and I feel very often that you are more part of the picture when you are painting a seascape than if you are painting on the land. It does take over more control, the movement of the water and everything. It's certainly more in control.

And the wave movement works very well with your approach with the palette knife?

It's very difficult to do mind you, very difficult. And the sea painting consists of trial and error, trial and error, trial and error. Very tricky.

And do you work as swiftly on that?

Oh very swiftly, yes.

And do you paint again from drawings when you're painting the sea?

Oh yes, always from drawings. Luckily, if you reach my age having painted all your life and looked at things all your life, you are able to conjure up a very very vivid visual memory of something, and so long as I make notes in pencil I'm all right.

And do you have a sort of automatic visual memory? I mean would you for example have very clear memories of the room where we sat and had supper last night?

Yes.

Without even thinking about it at the time that you wanted to remember it?

Oh yes, I can see that room.

And is it...

And the people in it.

And are those details different from a visual memory you would have had of a seascape or a landscape that you knew you were going to paint?

No it's just visual memory. And it's very odd, I mean sometimes I meet somebody, say a woman who I haven't met for quite a time, and I can describe what dress she was wearing

when I first met her thirty years before, something like that. Artists do have very good visual memories.

And do you ever have visual blanks? Do you ever find you haven't remembered something?

Not certain about that. I think I can remember. I have a very very good memory for all sorts of things. My memory is extremely good. When I wrote my second book, 'A Wider Sky', I never had to refer to anything at all, it was all in the head, which is lucky. I did refer to things in 'Across the Straits', that was, I had family things I had to refer to.

Yes. And when you are painting a mountainside, presumably what you're doing a lot of the time is choosing what to leave out.

Oh yes, you select.

Can you talk about any general principles for that?

It's just what appeals to you. I mean if certain rocks appeal to you, you make them more prominent. It is all selection, painting is selection.

And, since we've talked about the other one in the RA, could you tell me about the portrait of the German girl that's there? Again, could you assume I haven't seen it or I'm blind, and tell me what it looks like?

Well, she was rather...she was an excellent model. Her name was Karla Ludewig, and her father was a captain of a Rhine steamer. I first met her when she was an au pair girl to a friend of mine who was an actress, and she struck me as being very paintable, and I painted her very very often.

Sorry, when you say very paintable, what do you mean by that?

Ah, it's terribly difficult to explain. I mean some women, very good-looking women, are not paintable because everything falls in the right place and they look like statues of Greek women or something like that. That's not really paintable. There's always something, if you want to paint somebody there's always something about her. She was a very compact little person, she had a very tidy little head, and her hair was very tidy. I was really very naughty about German au pair girls because I would ask them to sit for me, but there was always another reason do you see, and the other reason was, knowing if they were German and

extremely tidy they would be horrified at the state of my studio and rooms and they would clean it for me. Always it happened when a German girl came, she said, 'Ach, but you are filthy. I will clean for you.' And I would say, 'Oh no no no no no.' And she would say, 'You sit down, I will clean.' And they always cleaned my studio, it's quite extraordinary, and then I painted them. Extraordinary. So I painted Karla; every time I exhibited Karla I sold the painting. That particular portrait is in the Royal Academy. I sent that to the Academy, and it was bought on the first day by somebody who, I forget his name now, and I wrote and asked him for the money and I didn't get a cheque and I wrote again and didn't get a cheque, I wrote again and didn't get a cheque. Finally I got a letter from him and said, 'Dear Mr Williams, my wife is a jealous woman, and she will not have a portrait of a pretty girl in our house, so may I offer you £5 compensation?' I refused the £5 and I put it up for sale again and the Academy bought it with one of their funds.

But can you actually tell me what it looks like?

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.....describe the portrait of the German girl?

Well I think it was the least attractive portrait I painted of her. I painted her against a yellow background and her face is very much darker in a slightly khakian colour, a certain amount of red but... It over...she was a petite person, this makes her look too big I think, too strong, and I quite like it as a picture, although it certainly didn't flatter her. She is fairly low down in the canvas, because she was small I tended to make her... But this one makes her look rather bigger than she really was.

What about the proportion of space that her face takes up?

I painted her face fairly large so it dominates, but there's quite a lot of air above her.

And how much of her is in the picture, how much space?

Well it's her head and her neck, and it was sort of bust length, about that I think.

Are there other portrait painters who you have much admired?

Well masses of portrait painters I have admired a lot, from Rembrandt to Géricault, Goya, Velasquez. Memling, Modigliani, Cézanne, Van Gogh and so on. Oh masses of portrait

painters. Frans Hals, lovely portrait of his of Descartes. Oh I love portraits. If I had money I would probably collect portraits rather than landscapes.

Is there anybody contemporary that you like?

Well of course Lucian Freud is a very fine portrait painter, he's not a flattering portrait painter, but I don't think there's an awful lot of love in his paintings which I find is, I like somebody who paints with love.

And you've sometimes done commission portraits, haven't you?

Mm.

Do you have to like that person, can you do a...?

No. Better if I did. I have...I've painted commission portraits because I felt I had to, because I have to justify myself as an artist. I didn't really do it for the money, although the money was handy. I felt, if you are asked to do something, if you didn't do it you were being a coward. I hated painting commission portraits actually, but I did it, and when I became 70, with all the worry of doing portrait paintings, somehow I decided it wasn't worth it, so I packed it in. But I mean a lot of people say that my portraits are my best work.

And can you just tell me about the show of the portraits you had here?

Well I'm terribly lucky in the fact that they've got a very big gallery now in Llangefni, the capital of Anglesey, and they've got a wonderful girl called Denise Morris who runs that, she is the art officer for Anglesey, and I am lucky in that she seems to like my work. And she wanted to put on several shows of my work, and as people didn't really know I was a portrait painter, I don't know why because I've painted portraits all my life, she decided the first of these should be of portraits. And it was an exhibition of 114 portraits. And people were amazed that I had painted portraits, and I'm not supposed to have painted portraits. I mean in south Wales they always have a sort of parrot cry, when you've seen one Kyffin you've seen the lot, which meant one black mountain, I mean it's so daft. Anyhow it was a great success, and 11,000 people went to see it, and it was very nice for me to look around the gallery and see what might be a sort of life's work of portraits.

And, when you are using paint, say in the German girl portrait, is it very different from the way you are using paint in a landscape?

No, it's the same paint, but of course it's more difficult to paint a portrait than a landscape, because you've got to...you've got to paint the person in front of you, and you've got to, in my way of thinking you've got to get a likeness. There's no point in wanting to paint somebody and then not get a likeness. And certainly if you are commissioned it's your duty to get a likeness. No, I don't think it is different, but very often the paint isn't quite so thick.

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F4545 Side A

You were just saying there was a difference in the way of painting a portrait.

Well, with portraits you've got to be in control much more, because if you lose control it means you are losing concentration, and I mean certain artists like Soutine say for instance, a lovely painter, I love Soutine's work, but I don't think he ever bothers about getting a likeness, and he didn't mind the loss of control. I somehow always wanted to be in control in order to get a likeness, and if you want to be in control you can't use very thick paint, because it's more difficult to control if there's rich paint. But if you are painting a landscape, and especially a stormy landscape or a stormy seascape, then you can to a certain extent lose control and allow the picture to dominate and dictate what goes on.

And presumably in a portrait such as the German girl, your colours are, your starting point for your colours come from the colours in that person.

Yes, yes. But you can fiddle around in that you can paint them against the light, and then you can be interested in the colour within the shadows. I painted the Abbott of Downside once, he only gave me half an hour actually because he's a busy man, and I painted him a very dark head against the light, and I used a lot of variation of colour within that. And then when I painted blind people I invariably painted blind people against a strong light so that their head was dark, it accentuated the blindness really. I don't know, I didn't consciously do this, but I found I wanted to paint them dark against the light.

When were you painting blind people?

When I was lodging in Highgate, when I was teaching at Highgate School there was a blind home nearby, and I used to go there, because somehow tragedy to me is a far more potent force than joy, and I used to go there and choose my model. There were all these old people sitting round, old men, and I would paint them in the blind home, and of course I would take the painting away, and then a month later when the painting was properly dry I would take it back and I would put it in on a table in front of the old man I had painted, and his fingers would finger his own eyes and his nose and his mouth. And they got great satisfaction from feeling their face on the canvas. And of course in my way of painting they could actually feel their face.

And did you feel very different painting somebody who was blind? Was there a different communication?



Well the one great difference is, you didn't bother about getting a flattering likeness because they couldn't see it. It's rather cowardly. So I felt freer, I was not going to hurt them.

And if they couldn't see, when you say you painted them against a strong light, was it...presumably they're not facing that strong light, the light is behind them is it?

Yes. Well I in there, what I would do, I would make it up, do you see, because if you go into a house like that it's very difficult to move people around, put them set against the light and all that. I mean I knew what I wanted to do. And I would paint them as if they were against the light.

And is it different painting a seeing eye from a non-seeing eye?

Well, with a non-seeing eye you certainly exaggerate, you become more expressionist, and you concentrate on the eye more I think.

And where are those paintings?

Oh they're mainly lost. It's a tragedy, one does lose a lot of paintings, they get bought by somebody, the person dies, the work is put in a local sale room, somebody buys them, the auctioneers won't allow you to know who has bought them. One of my best portraits of all, of a major of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, it was in the Royal Academy and nobody bought it until right at the end of the Academy a man came in and bought it, and nobody knows where he is now, it's lost.

Did you keep any kind of records?

No I never keep records really, I've got a good memory.

Did you even keep records of what you had painted?

No.

And, do you mind losing the paintings when somebody takes them away?

I do, especially if they're some of my best.

Have you any idea how many you did of the blind people?

No. I must have done nearly a dozen I think. I used to go to old folks' homes and paint people in old folks' homes, because there again there was tragedy. Although not so much tragedy as people would think; they used to sit round the room and they seemed to be more or less resigned and content with waiting until they in fact died.

Can you talk a bit more about the feeling you have about tragedy being more attractive in a way.

Well most of my painting for some reason, it may be something to do with my epilepsy, is tied up with angst, and painting these people who are blind, or dying or something, was something which appealed to this angst in me. Well I suppose it is in me; I don't spend much time thinking all about myself but I suppose if I do think, it is this sadness which appeals to me.

If you are blind, you are to some extent lonely, aren't you.

Well the funny thing is that blind people are happier than deaf people, and I've never found blind people terribly unhappy. It's strange. I don't really know why that is.

Have you painted groups of people?

No.

It's nearly always one person?

No, I haven't. I haven't got the skill I think, it needs a great deal of skill to paint figure groups. And if you are a very spontaneous painter like I am you can't get the group to pose and paint them in one group, you would have to go backwards and forwards and fit people in and knit them together. It's too much of a palaver really.

But do you tend to think of people as isolated individuals in the painting?

Yes I suppose I am a lonely person myself, and I like single people to paint.

But when you say you are a lonely person, do you mean you feel natural when you are alone, or do you mean you feel lonely a lot?

No I'm a loner I think, that's what I would say. I've come to realise that I can be a lonely person, and I can exist on my own. A long time I hated being on my own but you get used to anything really.

But do you feel that human beings are ultimately alone, even if they're part of a family? I mean is that also why you like perhaps painting people by themselves?

Well, I like simplicity. If it's Chinese ceramics I think I possibly like the most simple, early, undecorated piece, because it is so simple, so perfect. I usually prefer singers single, soloists, to choirs. I think it's the simplicity I like.

And did you paint your family?

Pardon?

Did you paint members of your family?

No, never.

Because they were too close in a way?

Yes, I think so. No, I never painted my family.

So is it easier really to paint a stranger?

Yes, I think it probably is, yes.

And when somebody like the person you said would only give you half an hour because he was busy, how do you actually do that? Do you draw in that half-hour? What happens?

No, I paint in straight away. I bash in on the canvas, draw him in very very quickly, and paint him, and get as much done before he leaves. He was Don John Roberts, a nice man, but he only gave me half an hour.

And how do you think that affected the picture?

May have benefited, I don't know. (laughs)

And, when you had the big show of the portraits, which were the ones that you felt had really worked most? Which were the ones that were crucial to you?

Oh it's terribly difficult to say. The ones with an element of sadness I think.

And which would those be?

Oh there's one portrait of a girl which I think was sad I liked.

What was the name of that one?

That is Anne Bailey-Grohman she was. And there are other ones of men and children.

But is it, you are saying it's to do with the mood rather than any technical achievement?

The mood?

Mm.

Yes, and wanting to do it. If you want to do something enough you will in fact do it.

And what about the man who is on the poster for that exhibition, the soldier?

That's lost. That's the one that's lost.

And what's the name of that one?

That is, he was Corporal Pritchard, Norman Pritchard, the goatmajor of the Royal Welsh...he is now Sergeant Pritchard.

And what did you feel about that portrait?

Well I painted two, because the colonel of the regiment came to see me, General Stuart Cox, and he said they were a bit financially embarrassed and they couldn't pay me very much to paint the goatmajor, so I said, 'I'll do a deal with you, I will do your painting for nothing so long as you will allow me to use him as my model.' And so he said, 'Fair enough.' So the first one I painted of him was 4 foot by 4, and this one I was going to paint for myself. And

he turned up, I remember he turned up late with all his uniform and his busby and all this sort of thing, and by the time I had got him seated there wasn't much time before lunch, and I would paint him before lunch. And his brother had also been...his twin brother had also been a goatmajor. And then I gave him a bit of lunch, and we went back to the studio, and he fell asleep, and I kept shouting at him and he would wake up and say, 'Oh sorry sir'. And he would pose again and then he would go asleep again, and I realised I would have to do it pretty quickly, so I finished that big portrait, 4 by 4, in three hours solid. And it was like him, and I liked the picture, and that's the one I sent to the Royal Academy. And then he came back and I did another one for the regiment, 3 foot by 3, but that wasn't so good. That's the one that was in the exhibition, the best one had been lost by that time, the better one rather.

And just going back to the German girl for a moment, can I just follow the thing about the colours through. You have in her face a given range of colours. How does that lead you in to your background?

Well the whole thing was a sort of colour harmony and that's why her face is quite a yellowish face, and going with the background and bits of red in the face. But, it's not particularly good colour that painting, it's not particularly good colour.

But is it so that with any portrait the facial colouring is really determining the colouring of the whole composition?

No, everything... No I don't think that is so. I mean you can paint somebody very very very dark without any...I mean Van Gogh painted a lot of contre-jour portraits, that is they are very very, it's darker than the background, and their face is almost grey. But he was a better colourist than I am and he could handle the colour in the background to go with the grey of the face.

But in the case of the portraits, the colour in the background is invented, you're not actually painting the colour that is the background.

Sometimes it's invented, sometimes not.

And with the soldier for example, presumably his red uniform is...

Well I wanted that red to be dominant, so I had a pretty neutral background.

And when you were painting, say the old people in the home, I haven't seen those, mostly I've seen the faces, but will you paint what they are actually wearing? Will you ask them to wear a particular thing or will you invent that?

Oh no I would paint them in what they were wearing.

Right.

Mm, certainly.

And if somebody was coming to you for a commission, would you discuss with them what they might wear, or you would just let it come?

I let it come. Invariably when I was painting academic people and they wanted to be painted in their academic robes, I told them to take them off, because they were horrid, quite horrid.

And could we talk a little bit now about your early exhibitions? The first one was in 1948; how did that come about?

Well, I'm a great failure really. I mean, my first book, 'Across the Straits', was sent by my agent to every publisher in London and every publisher in London turned it down as unpublishable. I thought I would like a one-man show so I tried every gallery in London, and there was no gallery in London who would give me a show. Some of them were unbelievably rude. Finally, as anything I have achieved in life seems to have been done through influence, finally an old friend of mine, who was well-known in the world of art, he said it's about time I had a one-man show, and I said, 'Ha ha ha'. And he said, 'Well if you like I'll fix it.'

Who was this?

A man called Ralph Edwards, who was head of the woodwork in the Victoria & Albert Museum; the father, the Secretary of State for Wales, Lord Crickhowell, he was an old friend of the family and we knew the Edwardes family. And he went to see his friend in Colnaghi's, Jim Byam Shaw, and said he thought it was high time I should have an exhibition. So I had my first exhibition there in, it must have been March or February 1948, and I remember I went down for the opening, and there was nobody about, I waited and waited and waited and nobody came in to the beautiful gallery. Finally in the passage leading to the gallery I heard footsteps, and at the entrance to the gallery two old ladies dressed in black appeared and they stopped in the entrance and looked around without coming in, and then one said to the other,

'Oh no Clara, far too Chekhov,' and they turned round and walked out. That was my first bit of art criticism. And then I had...it sold reasonably well though, and then the next year I had another one in Colnaghi's. And then I was taken ill and I had to go to hospital, and while I was in hospital they put on, in 1949, 1950 I think, they put on a show of my drawings along with Augustus John and Muirhead Bone. And then I had a show of drawings alone, and one art critic there, Nigel Gosling I think he was, he wrote it off in three words. He said, 'Herman and Soda.' Which is a crazy thing to say, because I didn't know the work of Josef Herman, Josef Herman didn't know my work, and at that time I don't think Josef Herman was drawing in black ink, I think he took that up later. But anyhow he wrote it off in the three words. But, I always got bad reviews so it didn't really matter.

What was in the first show, do you remember the pictures in that exhibition?

Yes they were drawings and oils, they weren't particularly good I don't think, looking back.

Landscapes, or what?

They were all landscapes. Colnaghi's didn't like my portraits. And eventually why I left Colnaghi's and went to the Leicester Galleries was because the Leicester Galleries would show my portraits and Colnaghi's wouldn't. But we left very amicably, and after I came back from Patagonia I had two shows in the West End at the same time, my Patagonian drawings in Colnaghi's and my Patagonian oils at the Leicester Galleries.

What was Jim Byam Shaw like as a person?

Oh he's a lovely man. I first met him in the Army during the war, and he was a very dapper captain in the Royal Scots with very smart trews and tam-o'-shanter. But he was really the only scholar I think in the art world, art dealing world, and he was a really very gentle man. He wasn't tough enough to be the normal sort of dealer. He was a scholar, and a charming person he was too.

And what about the people at the Leicester Galleries?

Oh they were quite different you see, because they had to sell pictures, they were businessmen. Oliver Brown was an extraordinary man really, he had initiated exhibitions of all sorts of people, like Van Gogh and so on, and he was a very vital man, and his partner, Cecil Philips, also was too, they were a very interesting couple. And then their two sons took over after that, Nicholas Brown and Patrick Philips.

And did you feel slightly protected having a gallery? Had you expected a gallery?

Well I never had a gallery, because I was never under contract, so I couldn't say I had a gallery. I was useful for the Leicester Galleries I think because they would never give me a date for an exhibition, because they knew if somebody let them down they could always go to old Kyffin and he would have a lot of pictures. So I don't think I ever had what I thought were my best paintings, because I had probably sold my best ones, and they would ring me up and say, 'Can you have a show in three months' time?' or something, and I could. I was very lucky to be able to do that.

And do you remember what you felt as you were putting up the first exhibition? I mean what were your expectations?

I've no idea. I wasn't terribly concerned because I've never been concerned with money even though I...when I haven't any money at all, trying to live on £200 a year, I was never worried about money, so the money aspect didn't come into it.

But you were finding sales right from the beginning really?

Yes, for some reason people seemed to like my work from the beginning, and it surprised me really. And I started sending to the Royal Academy very very early; I had my first picture in the Academy in 1946 I think, and I sent regularly then until I was elected. Sometimes I was thrown out, sometimes I wasn't, and I was elected in 1970.

And were there people who began collecting your pictures in the Forties who have remained collectors? Are there very large collections of your work in private hands?

No not really I don't think. I mean there were people who bought them early on, like Leonard Duke who was a great collector of English watercolours, he bought the odd one, and...no, I don't think collectors bought them. People seem to buy my work spontaneously because they seem to like them.

You were saying the other day that you actually have queues of people outside the galleries.

Well this is extraordinary. Apparently I'm the only artist, I think I'm the only artist in Britain for whom a queue forms when I have an exhibition, and the queue forms about ten hours before the opening, and there they sit and stand all day. Most extraordinary. And never of



course is there anybody in the art world in that queue, they stay strictly away and never even visit the exhibition.

And so, presumably, you had your school income as a security, and then painting income on top of it. Did you inherit from your family as well?

I never inherited any money, no.

So you've really had, since you had the Highgate job you haven't had terrible anxiety about money, that's never sort of driven you to....?

I haven't had anxiety. I've never really been concerned with money, and I never worry when I haven't any money. And now of course people do like my work, and they buy my work, and so I never have to worry about money really. And I can buy my canvases and not prepare them myself.

And presumably you came out of the school with a pension.

Oh no, no pension.

No?

No.

Gosh.

Oh, because I was part-time you see.

So your entire income now is really painting?

Oh yes. And my old age pension.

And, in 1955 you had a show at the Glynn Vivian in Swansea. How did that come about?

Well the director of the Glynn Vivian Gallery was an old friend of mine called David Bell. He was a painter and a poet, and he's a very nice man, troubled with illness the whole time, and he asked me if I would have an exhibition. And, it took place there, and a few people went to see it I think.

And throughout your career you've had this balance of shows in London and shows in Wales.

Yes, most of my shows have been in London, I continue to have shows in Wales, and I have a gallery in Cardiff, the Albany Gallery, and they sell my...I have a gallery in Swansea, and I have shown in north Wales in Menai Bridge. What I want to do is to paint more, exhibit more in Wales; I think it's unfair that my best work should go to London. My dealer in London, Priscilla Anderson, was so good and she had done so much for me, and I couldn't really leave her, but now she has in fact come out of the art business and I feel I am more able now to show my best work in Wales, and so my next exhibition after the one which is opening this month - this year, in May, will be I think in Cardiff.

So you've got one coming up at the Thackeray Gallery and one in Cardiff?

Well Cardiff will be next year, although there will be a few of my paintings in an exhibition of Gwynedd artists opening fairly soon in Cardiff.

Right, but the one that's opening in May is at the Thackeray Gallery, is it?

Yes.

And when did you become involved with the Thackeray Gallery?

Well, I was very lucky in that I had two galleries, I had the Leicester Galleries and Colnaghi's, and they both more or less packed up at the same time. Colnaghi's decided they would concentrate on Old Masters and not modern, and the Leicester Galleries finally sort of packed up. And before that I had been asked by Priscilla Anderson if I would exhibit with her, she was opening a new gallery in Thackeray Street. And I wrote and said, I'm rather lucky I did really, I wrote and said that I couldn't really move from my two galleries even though I was not under contract, but that if there came a time when I needed a gallery, could I let her know? And she said yes. Well the two galleries packed up about the same time and with cap in hand I went to her and said, 'Will you take me on?' And she said 'yes'; that was twenty years ago.

Did you know her before?

No, no. And, she had faith in my paintings, I mean the other galleries I don't think they really liked my work. I think Colnaghi's quite did. And so I've shown for twenty years, every other

year for twenty years, at the Thackeray Gallery, and I've always sold better at the Thackeray Gallery than in the West End, because in the West End most paintings are bought for investment and nobody has ever bought my work for investment. People in Kensington buy because they like the pictures, they like the pictures I think, and they had faith in her.

And do you get any kind of different response when you're exhibiting in Wales from London? Do you sell different kinds of pictures? Do you detect anything?

No I don't think so, and they're the same sort of... I sell to ordinary people, that's why I'm so lucky. I don't sell to big collectors of modern work, I don't sell to galleries and I don't sell to the art world, but I sell to just the ordinary person who wants to have a picture.

And, can you tell me, in your book you cover very well the actual travelling in Patagonia, but I wondered if we could talk about some of the paintings particularly, and you said that the colours in Patagonia had a big effect on you.

Well, everything in Patagonia was different. The birds were different, the animals were different, the trees were different, the sky was different; everything was different. And the colour was different. So, I did all my 700 drawings out there, and when I came back I retained the memory of the colour there and I realised, when I paint Wales I do use black, because there's something about the melancholy of the area that demands a certain element of black. But I knew I could not introduce black into any Patagonian picture, it was just not there, so they're all very very much brighter in colour. And when I came back I painted, I suppose, about 48 oils, Patagonian oils, and then I was painting the 49th and I realised that it was in fact a Welsh painting and not a Patagonian painting so I didn't paint any more Patagonian.

Why was that, what made you realise it?

Well it looked Welsh and not Patagonian.

But was that because of colour?

It was because of colour. I think inadvertently I brought in a little element of black, and it was of a barn up above Cwm Hyfryd in the Andes.

There was one particular painting that I wanted to ask you about, but I'm not sure, the people haven't given me a title for it and I don't think there's probably enough to identify it. It's a dark, mainly blue picture of high mountains in Patagonia.

Dark, mainly blue. It doesn't say the size? I think that would possibly be a view looking through, there's a gap going through to Chile, and the valley is very blue and green, and the sky is a fairly yellowy sky, and there are poplars which are in fact fairly blue. I think that would be, it would be in fact a 30 x 30 canvas.

And was that part of a series or...?

Yes. Which was on show in the Leicester Galleries in 1971.

Yes I think that's where it came from. And, had you had in mind going to Patagonia for a long time? I know you did it through applying for the scholarship.

Mm.

Where did the germ of that idea come from?

Well it was such a romantic story about these funny little Welsh people going off in a boat to the other end of the world, and making a go of it against all the odds, it's an incredible story.

And had you always known that story?

Oh yes I suppose, people in Wales knew that story. And so I felt I would like to go there. And when the idea for a Winston Churchill Fellowship came up, I thought, well this is just the chance. And I went for the interview, and, I remember I said that I wanted to hire a horse in the Dyffryn Camwy, the valley to the east of the Patagonian peninsula, and then ride 400 miles across the desert up to the other Welsh valley up in the Andes. And I think that's what got me the scholarship, and it's the sort of Churchillian stuff. But when I got to the Dyffryn Camwy and I asked about hiring a horse they just thought I was absolutely mad, they said I would lose my way and I would be found dead years later and all that sort of thing. So I had to go across the desert in an old bus, which is quite an undertaking since it was all dirt road. It was tremendous fun, one of the most interesting periods of my life.

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.....different from your expectation, or had you no expectation really?

No, I don't think it was different. I really hadn't any preconceived idea. I knew that it was plateau land, I knew it was sort of desert. There was far more bushes than...this is what the sheep will eat, bushes. The Andes were what I thought they would be really. But the people intrigued me. The little farms were not quite...they were sort of oases in the sort of desert land surrounded by tamarisk and weeping willows, and they were beautiful these little oases of mud farm and beaten mud all the way round it, and then flowers growing and these lovely trees, and the irrigation ditches. That was, the irrigation ditches were something that was intriguing. And the people were intriguing. They were very very Welsh, they were very easy-going, gentle people. In fact intermarrying amongst themselves had produced an extra sort of gentleness which meant that they were very often imposed upon by the less gentle Spanish elements. And they were extremely hospitable. But when I first got there they didn't really...they couldn't really understand me, they had never met anybody quite like me before, they had never met anybody who spoke such bad Welsh and claimed to be a Welshman. My Welsh was a constant source of trouble and we had lots of misunderstandings, and I was saying one thing and they were saying another. But I got on extremely well with them. I was passed from little farm to little farm, and the husband and wife would leave their best room and go and sleep outside somewhere and I luxuriated in the best room. It was a very fascinating experience.

Were you homesick at all?

No, no. Not homesick at all, because, mainly I suppose because they were so Welsh. I briefly paid a visit to Tierra del Fuego, because I felt I had been so far south I might as well go right to the bottom. And I did have a distant relative in the past who was a Patagonian missionary, he was a funny chap and he was in the Royal Navy and he decided to leave the Royal Navy to become a missionary, and he went down to Patagonia and his ship dropped him off on his own with his stores and his gun, in order to shoot sea birds to eat, but of course they sailed away carrying the ammunition with them, and of course poor chap then, he was hunted by all the natives of Tierra del Fuego and eventually he died. I know that he was killed, but, that's what becomes of being a Patagonian missionary and going to a land totally incapable of speaking any word of the language of the people living there. It's extraordinary what they did in the old days, quite extraordinary.

And when you realise that you couldn't use black, was that an exciting...

I could have used black.

Well, or that it was going to be inappropriate.

Yes.

Given that that's very much at the heart of your practice normally, was that an exciting challenge or was it frightening?

Oh it wasn't frightening at all, I just didn't use black, simple as that, and the painting seemed to be more like Patagonia without any black.

And it hasn't affected the way you use black now, it's exactly the same?

Oh no no, no.

And did you read Bruce Chatwin's book 'In Patagonia'?

Bruce Chatwin? I read it before I went, and I was amazed how inaccurate it was. I mean he's a very good writer, Bruce Chatwin, but that I didn't think was one of his best books. He met a fellow in Trevelin in the Andes called Milton Evans; I had read about Milton Evans - or, no, I think I had read 'Patagonia Now' [??] when I had come back, and I was amazed at his interview with Milton Evans, because he had turned Milton Evans, who was a perfectly normal chap, into a sort of blaspheming boor who used terrible swear words the whole time. I never heard him utter a single swear word. But I suppose if you're a journalist you can do this sort of thing, you can exaggerate. What amazed me about his book 'In Patagonia' was his total inability to describe the beautiful fantastic landscape, and I thought perhaps he wasn't interested, and then I read that novel 'Under the Black Hill' and it was full of the most beautiful descriptions of the Black Mountains, and I was amazed how different the two books were and how he was able to describe the beauties of the Welsh Border country, he did it brilliantly. Why didn't he do it in Patagonia? Extraordinary. I did in fact illustrate a book for him and Paul Theroux about, 'Patagonia Revisited', and I did linocuts of Patagonia and they used my linocuts.

And did you meet them?

No, no.

And did you ever get any reaction from them, to the linocuts?

No.

And what about other travels, where else have you found fulfilling?

Well after I had been ill I was advised to go abroad, and in 1950, which was Holy Year, I went to Rome to stay with some friends, and that was fascinating. It was in February I went there, and the smell of mimosa was absolutely tremendous, I gloried in it. But unfortunately that was at a time when I was using the drug tridione, which meant I couldn't see in the sunlight, so the pavements of Rome were a continual glare, and I couldn't see really. I had to wear dark glasses and I had to wander around. But when the sun went in of course it was much better.

And were you mainly at that time looking at paintings there rather than painting yourself?

Oh yes, I certainly was looking at paintings, and I did quite a lot of drawing there.

What paintings did you see that made a big impact on you?

Well, there were paintings in the Vatican Gallery, in the Palazzo Doria there were wonderful paintings, and of course the frescoes in the Vatican by Raphael and Michelangelo that were absolutely stunning.

And of the paintings in the collections is there anything in particular that mattered?

In the Rome collections? Well there was a portrait of Pope Innocent by Velasquez in the Palazzo Doria, I mean that was a most memorable portrait.

Why did you respond to that particularly?

Well it's rather a nasty looking man in these holy robes, was a little incongruous. Well it is a very very fine portrait that. And there were other lovely pictures in the Palazzo Doria. I did go into the British School occasionally to see friends of mine who were working in the British School, and, I don't know what other galleries I went to, I can't remember now.

And what about your own paintings from Rome?

They weren't very good. I went down to Anzio, I painted in Anzio, I did quite a lot of drawings round the Folks[ph] Palace and round there, and Tivoli and places like that, Frascati.

Why weren't they good?

Well they just weren't really. Maybe this drug I was taking. I remember a wonderful naval officer, Italian naval officer called Count Barbizetti de Prun, I remember, because I was staying with diplomatic people in Rome they had contacts with people, and Count Barbizetti de Prune[ph] was a very jolly Italian naval officer who, at that time they hadn't got a navy really, and he made pots in the Via Babuino, and he came up and looked at my paintings which I had done on small panels, I remember him saying, 'Un vero Inglese, tutti umbro[ph]', a true Englishman, paint as dark as pitch. (laughs) And I did go from there to Siena, and...no, sorry, it was Orvieto, I went with some friends from the British School, I went to Orvieto, and that was I thought a very impressive place indeed.

Did you paint it?

Well I was only doing small panels. I did, I did two paintings I think of Orvieto.

And did you paint the Italian hills?

Not very much, no.

Why was that?

Because I drew; I hadn't got enough paint or boards, and I hadn't any canvases there.

And what about other travels that have been important?

Well I was very lucky, because a friend of mine who was quite a figure in my life, my cousin Sue Kyffin, she was an extraordinary girl really, extremely wild and beautiful, and she married a man called Michael Bailey Grohman who had been a commander in the Navy and who inherited a most wonderful castle in Austria called Schloss Matzer, and I used to go out there in the summer in the early Fifties, and it was a wonderful place to be. It wasn't easy to paint because it was rather a luxurious castle and luxury and art don't go together, and I was expected to do humorous drawings of all the people who stayed there, and one thing you cannot do is do humorous drawings and reasonable painting at the same time, it's either one or



t'other. But I did paint quite a lot out there. And, it's difficult to paint the Tyrol, because the colour is just the colour, there are no subtleties. The lowland meadows are green, the trees are a darker green, and the rock above that is like the skin of an elephant, and above that there is blue sky, and that is it. Now if you go to Venice, the subtlety of the colours in Venice is enormous. The closer you get to the sea the more subtle the colours get. But I thoroughly enjoyed going and staying in this castle in Austria, it was tremendous fun.

And what about your Venice paintings?

Well I love Venice. I went once, in 1979 I went there, and I only went there for a week but at the end of the week I had done a lot of drawings, and I painted from my drawings, and with a week in Venice I had a whole exhibition of Venetian work actually in Anglesey, and I sold most of them I think.

And presumably those were completely different colours from the colours you would use for a Welsh landscape.

Not entirely. I think I used black in certain of those paintings, because when the sky goes blue-black and the villas along the canals become shimmering grey, it's very very beautiful. Guardi gets that; Canaletto doesn't but Guardi does, he gets that grey.

And what was the thickness of paint on these, what was the texture?

Oh it wasn't particularly... Because it's not tumultuous, it's not wild or anything like that, so the paint wasn't all that thick.

But do you feel differently painting a picture with a different, with a thicker texture from a thinner one? I mean is one more...?

No, I don't think so. You don't feel different, because it's always the subject matter that dictates, so you paint as you are dictated to by the subject matter.

And have you ever been to anywhere that was desert other than Patagonia? I mean have you ever been anywhere like the Egyptian desert, or...?

No.

And has your travel really come about by chance rather than something you specifically set out to do in your life? How has travel arisen?

Well I remember once I found that as I was a school master, if I was prepared to live lower deck aft, below the kitchens and next to the screw, I could go round the Mediterranean on a Swan Hellenic cruise for £65, which is peanuts. So I decided to go on a Hellenic cruise and see what the Mediterranean was like so that if I saw something that particularly appealed to me, I could go back and paint it. Well I think Crete appealed to me very much, but I haven't gone back to Crete. It was a very very interesting cruise really. I went back to Italy after that; I haven't been to Greece again; I haven't ever been to Spain. I've been to France, of course France is so beautiful. The landscape painters of France, you can understand why they were such good landscape painters, they have such wonderful subject matter, the valleys of France and the rivers and everything, and the villages and the towns. I suppose really France is the most beautiful country in Europe, it's got everything, the mountains of the Haute-Savoie and wonderful coast round Brittany, and, it seems to have everything.

And you went to Russia didn't you?

I've never been to Russia.

You didn't?

No.

And would you for example, will you go anywhere this year?

I might go to Scotland this year.

And perhaps we ought to talk about Scotland. Why did you go to paint in Scotland in the first place?

Well the first time I went to Scotland, oddly enough, I went to see a man with extrasensory perception, because another friend of mine had gone to see him because he was rather worried about his daughter who had gone off to Ibiza with some artist chap, and this man, this soothsayer, said that he wasn't to worry about her but he should worry about me, do you see, which, this man was rather amazed, because this man didn't know anything about me at all. And eventually I went to this, and was persuaded to go and see this man who said that I had to go to Scotland, why God knows. But at that time I was having a show at the Leicester

Galleries and I thought if it was a success I might go to Amsterdam for Christmas, I had never been there; if it was a flop I might just have enough money to go to Scotland. Well, the first words he uttered to me when he opened the door was, 'You are going to Scotland,' which meant that my show was going to be a flop, which it was. So he was prophetic in that. So I went to Scotland, but I didn't see any of the landscape. When I first went up to Scotland to paint the landscape it was when I met in a gallery in Cardiff a little Scotsman called Mr Young who was in the Steel Company for Wales, and he said, 'Laddie, I'd like you to go up the Gruinard Bay in Wester Ross and paint it for me'. And I thought this was a commission, so, this was 1960, I had my first car, and I drove up to Gruinard Bay in Wester Ross, and I painted two pictures of it and brought them back to the gallery, and told them to contact Mr Young, which they did, and Mr Young said, 'Och, I was only making conversation'. (laughs) Which I thought was nice, but he wasn't actually, he was a very shrewd Scot. He said that I think because he didn't want to commit himself to buying them, but when he saw the two paintings he said, 'All right, I'll have 'em'. So he was an honourable Scot. And I thought it was so beautiful the west coast of Scotland that I've been up there several times.

And how is it different, painting that coastline to painting the one here?

Well the colour's so different. I suppose the west coast of Scotland is the most beautiful landscape in Europe. The colour is intense, there's no grey in the sky, it's blue-grey, and the grass in the evening gets orange, and the mountains become exceedingly blue and the sky is blue-green, and it's extraordinary, it's very very different and very very beautiful. Not easy to paint.

And are there any parts of England you enjoy painting?

Not really. I have painted in Yorkshire, which is very beautiful in Yorkshire, the stone walls up there are lovely.

Which bit of Yorkshire?

The West Riding.

And how did you come to be there?

Well I had cousins who lived there, and I've been up there. I think the Thames Valley is very lovely, I have a feeling for the Thames Valley, because one side of my family used to live near Marlow, and, it's very beautiful. The Welsh Border country, the England-Wales border,

that is Cheshire and Derbyshire, Shropshire, and Radnor, Montgomery, Hereford, all down there, and Monmouth, Gloucestershire, it's very...the odd thing about Gloucestershire is, I cannot think of any important painting ever done in Gloucestershire. Wilson Steer did some around the Severn, but the true Gloucestershire has never been tackled by any artist, I think it's absolutely amazing. But the Welsh Border counties are lovely country, if it's in Wales or in England it's lovely. I mean there are so many, I've painted in Suffolk which I find is not very easy, it's too highly organised and you can't really get off the beaten track.

There's a work of yours in Hereford Art Gallery isn't there?

Well, it's one of Anglesey, a very small one. I think it's 16 x 20 or something, it's quite small.

And why did they choose that one do you think?

Oh I've no idea. No idea.

So whereabouts in Herefordshire have you painted?

I haven't painted in Herefordshire.

You haven't?

No. No it's just beautiful countryside.

Right. And, so there's no other part of Britain where you've done a whole series of paintings?

No.

No. And could we just talk a bit about some of the works in public collections? There's a painting by you in the Arts Council collection isn't there?

There are some in the Arts Council collection, none of them of any merit at all. And there's only one in the Welsh Arts Council collection which is of any merit. I have very very few pictures in public collections. I've got one in Coventry Art Gallery, one in Southport Art Gallery, one in the Beecroft Art Gallery, Southend-on-Sea. I've got one in the Walker; I've got some very bad ones in the National Museum of Wales; I've got bad ones in the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea; I've got one bad one in Newport Art Gallery. But all my best works are in the National Library of Wales.

Can you tell me about some of those paintings?

Well, they've been buying my work regularly over the years, there must be nearly 300 works in the National Library; most of them are drawings, because when I got back from Patagonia with my 700 drawings I offered them to the National Museum of Wales, and I wrote to the keeper and I arranged to go down and see him, and I drove down from Anglesey and found he wasn't in, he turned up an hour late, and he said he was too busy to see me, and I said I had come down to offer him any of the drawings I had done, and he said, 'Well now you're here I might as well see them'. So he looked at the drawings for a bit, and I said, 'You don't want any, do you?' He said, 'No. Good day.' And so, I drove back to Anglesey, and I offered them to the National Library, who said thank you very much. And that was very lucky, because the National Library makes an exhibition of my drawings and sends them round, and the Museum wouldn't have done that really. All my illustrations I did for 'A Welsh Anthology', of Alice Thomas Ellis' anthology, I gave them all to the Library, and my illustrations to 'A Wider Sky', they're all in the Library, and they've got a lot of my paintings, big oils and small oils and... No they've been very very good buying my work.

So, are there any paintings in a public collection that you are particularly keen on? I mean, if somebody was going out specifically to look at your work in public collections, where would you choose them to go and what would you like them to look at?

I wouldn't send them anywhere except the National Library and Oriel Ynys Môn in Anglesey who have been collecting my work, they've got quite a lot of my best work there.

And in those two places are there particular pictures that you are proud of?

Yes I think so. There's a big painting of farmers on the top of Gluder Fach in the, it's 4 ft by 6, which is in the National Library, they're two big paintings of Llyn Cau. They've got a portrait I did of Keith Andrew which I like, and in Oriel Ynys Môn they've got a portrait of Yolanta, a Polish girl, which I gave them, which I particularly liked and I didn't want to lose; a portrait of Evan Roberts the botanist, and two big seascapes. It's nice to know that certain of my pictures are in accessible public collections, but the Tate would not be interested in any of my paintings I don't think.

And, how important has the Royal Academy been to you as a means of reaching the public?

Well it has been terribly important, because people go to the Academy and they buy, and they see my pictures, and every year I get letters from people who I've never met saying they've been to the Academy and wanted to tell me how much they liked my work, and that sort of thing. And when I had a retrospective in Wales in 1987 it was offered to the Royal Academy, but they didn't reply to any letter for five years, and eventually it was patently obvious the last thing they wanted was my retrospective. And of course it never came off.

And what did you feel about the Academy during Roger de Grey's presidency?

Well he did wonders really. Every president does something I think for the Academy which is different. Hugh Casson was wonderful by getting the public in to the Academy; he was a wonderful sort of figure for attracting people in to the Academy. Roger was slightly different. His main thing was to get the Sackler Galleries created, I think but for him they wouldn't be the Sackler Galleries. I think he was a little too keen to get the very very avant-garde work in. I believe if an academy is an academy, it is something of a preservation of the skills, and the modern work is totally unskilled. It is maybe skilful in conception, but it's not skilful in execution, so people go to the Academy and say, 'I could do that'. But I think Roger was rather too keen on getting the very very new art in to the Academy. But he was always trying to make the Academy a powerful figure in the world of art, and he did a lot of inviting of well-known artists to send work, asking them to send work from abroad and elsewhere; the trouble was they invariably seemed to send their worst work, which is a pity. Though he did do a lot, Roger did.

And what do you feel about Norman Rosenthal?

I remember when we were trying to get my retrospective to the Royal Academy, I rang up in desperation, rang up and Norman Rosenthal, his secretary answered. 'Ah here's Mr Rosenthal now.' And I waited and I waited and I waited, and then she...'Oh, I'm very sorry Mr Rosenthal has just left the office.' I said, 'Right, will you tell Mr Rosenthal I will be in all day, and will he ring me back?' But did he ring me back? No. I don't think Norman Rosenthal believes that I should have any part of the Royal Academy. He is fairly ruthless, and he has artists he likes and artists he doesn't like, and I am pretty certain I am one of the ones he doesn't like.

And what about somebody like Piers Rogers? Do you have a relationship with him at all?

Well I mean, Piers Rogers is always very pleasant when I meet him, but you see, I am such a distant member of the Academy, I'm not there very often. The man on the staff who I get on

with best is Laurie Bray, who is, I'm not certain what he is now, is he assistant secretary or...no, or registrar, or bursar, or...but Laurie is the sort of person who acts for artists. If ever I want anything in the Academy I ring up Laurie Bray[ph], and he's very very good.

And did the formation of the Friends of the Academy help you in any way, did it make any difference to you?

No, it makes no difference to me at all I don't think.

But you were nevertheless very pleased to become an RA, weren't you?

Oh absolutely, it is the only thing of any importance really that ever happened to me in my life. And I hardly expected it, because I had been told I would never be made a member of the Academy.

Can you just...I'm not sure whether we said that on tape, who told you that?

I met a man called Robert Austin, who was a very good engraver, he did some of our pound notes and things, and I was at tea with this old friend of mine Ralph Edwardes, from the Victoria & Albert, and Robert Austin was there, and we were talking about the Academy, and I said something like, I would like to be in the Academy some day, and he said, 'Well you teach at a boys' school,' he said. 'Never in the whole history of the Academy have we ever elected a schoolmaster, and we will have no intention ever of doing so.' I thought this was a bit odd, because I thought they really elected people on merit, of their work. But I saw after a bit it was the art Schools who dominated the Academy, the Royal College, and the Slade particularly, and somehow, to my great surprise, I was elected, and it was...I was delighted, especially as I broke the tradition of no schoolmaster ever being elected. And since then no schoolmaster has been elected.

Do you think the practice of teaching the children had any effect on your own work?

Teaching the boys?

Mm.

Oh none at all, no.

And do you think you taught them in a different way because you were actually a practising artist?

Probably.

Any idea what?

I don't know, but certainly I had some very good pupils.

Apart from Green who we talked about, who were the others who went on to be painters?

Well, Patrick Prockter.

Was he one of your pupils?

He was a very good pupil. But, it's very interesting about Patrick, because as a little boy he used to sort of float in to the art room and do a drawing, and float out again. I remember when he was leaving he and another boy called Mark Cohen asked me out to tea in the village, and over tea they said what a lousy teacher I was. (laughs) They were very nice about it. And then about four years, three years later, Patrick Prockter came to see me once with a lot of his drawings, and he said he wanted me to sign some form about going to the Slade. And there were three categories. He had been in the Navy I think a little time, either.....

End of F4545 Side B



F4546 Side A

Because he came to see me, he wanted to go to the Slade, and there were three categories I had to sign for, and a) was, this fellow's a genius, he must at all costs get a grant; b) was, he's all right, and it would be a good idea if he did get a grant; and c) was, under no circumstances should this boy get a grant, you see. Well I filled in b), because I didn't think his drawings were really all that hot, and he went to the Slade, and he must have done extremely well for the year after he left the Slade he had his first exhibition in the Redfern Gallery, he had upstairs and downstairs and in the passage and he sold every single picture before the exhibition opened. And after that he had regular exhibitions and he became very well known, and he had awful bad luck with the Academy, because one year he was up for election and he became top of the list, he got more votes than anybody, and somebody said, perhaps we ought to look at his work, this was before the Academy opened, it was hanging on the walls. And Hugh Casson I think, he shouldn't have done so, he said, 'Well let's go and see his work.' So, they weren't very good watercolours, so he never got elected. What we didn't know, that the week, a week later, a mammoth one-man show was about to open in the Redfern and all his best work was there. Now he has never again come anywhere near getting elected, which is really very bad luck. I mean he bought one of my paintings which is very nice, he came to one of my shows in the Thackeray and bought one.

Do you like his work?

He's a very good artist, very good indeed, and a good watercolourist, and he draws well. And he has painted good portraits. I mean I feel he should have been a member of the Royal Academy, and I think it was just one of these things. Because it was luck that I got in, I'm certain it was luck; it was bad luck that kept him out.

And have you kept in touch with him, I mean do you know him quite well?

Well I don't. He used to come up here and stay with my neighbour across the Strait here, Sir Michael Duff, and I used to see him when he came down, and he has been here, but I really, I hardly ever see him.

And any other pupils who became painters?

Not that I know of. They went to art schools, but the trouble is art schools didn't teach, and I used to teach them in one way, I taught them the importance of drawing, and they would all go off to art schools where they were told, give up drawing, you musn't draw, and they used

to come back to me totally disillusioned. And before they left me I would say to them, 'Now look here, I teach you Greek, and if you go to an art school you are taught Hebrew, and that's something totally different.'

And did getting the OBE matter to you?

Well I was a bit amazed I must say, because being a total outsider, and somebody who is in very bad odour with the art world, I was amazed. And it's rather interesting because my dealer, Priscilla Anderson, saw this in the paper - no, was told about it, she didn't...and she got in touch with the Royal Academy to check up, and they said, 'What? Kyffin Williams? Oh no, oh no, certainly he hasn't got an OBE, we can tell you that definitely'. Which is rather interesting. It meant that they hadn't been asked or anything about it, and they denied the fact that I had got an OBE. (laughs)

And, can you tell me about this house? When did you move to it?

Well when I...I left London in, I left teaching in '73, and I decided I would leave London in '74 and come back to Anglesey. And I had built myself a studio on my brother's house in the next parish of Llansadwrn, and it was a total disaster, I couldn't paint in it because the light was all wrong. And I was having lunch at Plas Newydd with Lord and Lady Anglesey one day and I was complaining about Williams' folly, and that I had been contemplating suicide as a result of it, and they said they had some derelict property, and they took me to one farm which wasn't very good, and then they brought me down here to Pwllfanogll, and it seemed to me absolutely ideal, it was a ruin, and they said they would do it up. But I wasn't going to be caught again, I had to have somewhere where I could paint, and there was an old sail loft behind, and I asked if I could put a window in at my expense and they said yes, so I put a window in and then I put up my easel and a canvas and I found the light was perfect. So I said right, I'll take the house, and they did it up, and I became their tenant.

Can you describe the house?

Well, it's a small, rather conventional house which had been a public house, and you come in through a central door, windows either side, and the bar room was on the right-hand side, and the snug I think was a small room on the left, and the kitchen, and that was all the downstairs there was. So, they built on a kitchen for me; they knocked down the vaults and the kitchen and the garage where the vaults were. And they built me a bathroom too, there was no bathroom, they must have been pretty filthy people who lived here. And it's really very excellent. It's right on the water's edge, so much so that at a very very high tide three years

ago the sea came in to the house. It's the first time I realised I was a philosopher; I sat on the stairs and watched everything floating round, and knew I couldn't do anything about it.

And can you tell me, we're in a room that's absolutely full of paintings and sculptures and books, can you tell me about some of the things? I mean for example, there is a lovely Gertrude Hermes drawing. How do you come to have that?

Well I bought that, there's a gallery at Menai Bridge called the Tegfryn Gallery, and I more or less got it going for them do you see, and one year I arranged an exhibition of oils by members of the Royal Academy, and the next year an exhibition of drawings by members of the Royal Academy, and this drawing by Gertie Hermes was in that exhibition and I bought it from the gallery in Menai Bridge.

Can you describe it?

Well it's of Tigers, which she had drawn I think with a sort of felt pen, and it's on buff paper, a very very quick drawing at the zoo of animals. I was a great friend of Gertie Hermes, she was a wonderful person and very very good artist. She was a lovely draughtsman and she is a very good sculptor, and print-maker, a very good print-maker, and I got on very well with her.

And, you've got a very interesting Braque. Can you tell me the story of that, what it's like and...?

Well that, I always liked Braque, I thought he was a wonderful colourist and a great artist. I really like Braque more than Picasso, there's more warmth in his work I think. And I knew if I didn't buy something of his before he died I would never be able to afford it, so I saw this print in the Redfern Gallery of the Normandy coast, and I think I paid £90 for it, and, I've never regretted it, it's a lovely thing.

And, above the fireplace there is a piece of stone with lettering. Can you describe that and say what that's about?

Well that's [WELSH], which is the Welsh for, 'As the hot so panteth after the water brooks, such is the longing of my soul to be with thee oh Lord'. I bought that at the Eisteddfod in 1955, it's by a man called Jonah Jones, and I had nowhere to put it, and when I moved down here I thought it was just the right place to be, beside the water.

And what about the animal and bird pieces you've got, the sculptures?

Well I have various bits of sculptures in this room. I have a lovely figure of a horse by David Backhouse in bronze, a sheep by Denis Curry, a bittern and a dik-dik, a little South African antelope, by a man called Adrian Sorrell, who is a very lovely sculptor of birds and animals, and in the other room I have an eider by him, a whimbrel and a coot. And so, I love his work, it's very very good indeed.

And can you talk a little bit about some of the other pictures?

Well one thing is you may notice that I have none of my own work, apart from a drawing of a sheep dog, because I couldn't have my own work... There's something wrong, do you see, with every picture you paint; if you had it on the walls you would be seeing what was wrong with it the whole time, which would irritate you. But I have so many things here really, drawings by my great-grandmother, drawings by James Ward, an etching by Whistler, a drawing by Seymour of a horse, a portrait of myself by Bateman, the cartoonist who I knew during the war, and then various photographs of my family. There's a large measured drawing by Charles Tunnicliffe which is a beautiful thing, because he lived quite close to me along the coast here, and I used to go and see him very often and look at his remarkable measured drawings he did of the birds of Britain. And I then, when I was a member of the council of the Academy in 1974, 3/74...

Is this the Welsh Academy or the Royal?

No the Royal Academy in London. I suggested they put on a show of these measured drawings, and they would not believe that they were good, and I said his sketch-books were miraculous as well. So I had to go to Charles and collect some of the drawings and take them down, and as soon as they saw them they said, 'My God, they are good'. And they put on the first main big show of Charles Tunnicliffe's measured drawings and sketch-books in 1974, and people for the first time saw what a very very important ornithological artist he was. And, for organising that he gave me that drawing of a pochard which actually I shot. And underneath it there's a painting by Theodule Ribot, who was a very lovely painter at the beginning of the last century in France. He is rather overlooked now, because the Impressionists came along and rather put him in the shade. He was an academic painter using a tremendous amount of black, and that's a lovely still life of two oyster shells, moules marinières, mussel, and a snail shell. I rather...I love the still life painting, not that I do an awful lot of it myself but I do love really good still life painting.

And can you tell me about some of the furniture in this room?

Well the furniture was family furniture, and there's a...I always liked that bookcase and desk which was made in Anglesey I think but it's a rather lovely thing. And the old dresser, the dresser actually was given to my father, an old friend, when he was a young man, said he had an empty cottage and if he wanted some furniture out of it he could take it away if he wanted it. So he went to this cottage and there was this very nice small dresser, and he took it away, and we've had that ever since.

And is the china on it family china?

Yes, we've always had that in the family, that's the Rockingham I think. And there are various bits of statues. There's a little portrait, a lovely portrait of my great-great-grandmother who was actually English, one of my great-great-grandmothers, she was called Eliza Della Wright, and she married a man called Thomas Lloyd who was a parson, and she married at the age of sixteen and that portrait was painted when she was sixteen. And her daughter, Frances Lloyd, my great-grandmother, she, with my great-grandfather, started all the lifeboats in Anglesey, and she painted pictures and sold them in order to get the money to buy the lifeboats, and he being the local parson became the coxswain of the lifeboats. And he got the gold medal of the RNLI, and he was quite a remarkable man really.

And what about the clock?

Oh the clock was an old grandfather clock which we had. I've got another one upstairs, a rather better one but it's too big to be down here I think.

And the little table?

Oh it's nothing much, a very ordinary little table.

And there's another Gertrude Hermes...

Oh that's a wonderful linocut of Stonehenge by Gertrude Hermes, and I've got quite a lot of things. I've got...I was so hard up, I inherited a lovely painting by Marco Ricci of Roman ruins, a big painting, and I had to sell it because I had to pay for my paint and canvas and I never got a grant ever at any time, and I dearly didn't want to sell it. I took it to one of the major auction houses in London, and they said it was by Hubert Robert, and I told them flatly it was not by Hubert Robert, and they said, 'Oh yes it is. We know, we are in the trade'. And I said, 'Well I know, because there's an engraving of this picture by Marco Ricci in the British

Museum.' And then one of the directors leant over to me and said, 'Don't be such an idiot. We'll get more for it if we catalogue it as by Hubert Robert. So I was furious. It was rather stupid of me because I would have got more money for it if I had put it into the sale. I took it away and I took it to a friend of mine who was a dealer and he sold it as a Marco Ricci to an Italian collection. But I had...it's a terrible thing to think that that painting, which now would be worth about £800,000, I only got £250 for it.

When was that?

Must have been about 1954. And I felt I couldn't use all the money for paying off my debts, so I kept £25 and I decided what to buy for £24, and I bought one of these wonderful Rouault engravings of 'Miserere et la Guerre' called 'Tenderness', it's the best of all, and that was exactly £25.

And that's here?

It's upstairs in my bedroom, yes.

Right. And, what does your studio look like today? I mean, describe it to me as it is at this moment.

Well it's a mess, like all studios are. Well not...Peter Blake's is not, I've seen a photograph of Peter Blake's studio and you could eat off any portion of it I think. No, mine is pretty filthy, because I am a filthy painter and he's not a filthy...well not a...when I say a filthy painter, an untidy painter. It's full of old canvases and a hoary old easel and, it is a terrible mess, terrible mess really. I can't possibly begin to describe it.

And, what has the role of Lord and Lady Anglesey been? They've been patrons as well, or not?

Oh they've been wonderful. It's rather in the tradition, do you see, Lord Anglesey's father commissioned Rex Whistler to paint the incredible mural in their house, and I used to be asked over, well I still am asked, on Christmas Day, and we used to have dinner at night in the long room, a long long table with candles, and the wonderful Whistler mural on the wall, it looked absolutely glorious. And now most of the house has been handed over to the National Trust, so they don't eat in that room any longer. But that was a tradition of patronage which is rather nice, they commissioned him to do it, and they have lots of the work of Rex Whistler there. And I think Lord Anglesey's best man was Laurence Whistler,

the glass engraver. And so, when I came along they felt, I think, that more or less I filled the position which Rex Whistler had previous held. No they're very very good, and I've had several commissions through them, and Lady Anglesey is extremely interested in art, and she has bought my paintings, and I painted their youngest daughter. So, I am very very lucky to be here. You might say the estate painter.

And what is your relationship with them? What are they like as people?

Well, Lord Anglesey is totally brilliant. He is an extremely brilliant person. He could have done anything, had he not been a marquess and had to be a marquess. He could have been an artist; he could...he is passionately interested in music; he could have been an architect. I think he probably would have been an architect. He could have been an actor. When he makes television films they're absolutely brilliant, he's done them on old buildings and things, and he's a brilliant talker. But he is in fact an extremely important military historian, and he has written, he started writing by writing a brilliant biography of the first Marquess of Anglesey, and that was a very very important biography, one of the important ones since the war. And then he decided he would write the history of the British cavalry, and the fifth volume has come out, and two volumes are yet to come out, it will be a seven-volume work, and it really is a most extraordinary work; there never had been a history of the British cavalry before. And in it, what is interesting is, he has been able to point out certain deficiencies in the cavalry. We have an idea I think in this country that the British cavalry was marvellous and we were good people at looking after horses, but he has pointed out that it was more or less the opposite. We were not good at, we didn't look after our horses well, and certainly in the South African war the horses were treated abominably, and I think the French and the Germans probably were more professional. We were very amateur I think as cavalry regiments. But it's a very well written book, and he has an extraordinary ability to make complicated battles look simple, and it has been a life's work for which he has...one year he received the Gerald Templer medal for military history. So he is a professional, but in a profession which of course doesn't make much money, so he has had to leave his house, hand it over to the National Trust, and they live in the top now, the flat.

And his wife, what's his wife like?

Well, his wife is a very beautiful woman, she has always been extremely beautiful and wonderful sort of bone structure, and extremely intelligent. And she is interested in everything. She has in her time been head of the Women's Institute for two sessions; she has been chairman of the Welsh Arts Council; she has been on several Parliamentary committees on pollution, and she was chairman of the committee for the transport of polluted waste

through urban areas; she has gone round inspecting nuclear power stations; she is governor of several schools; and, you name it, her whole life has been given over to carrying out good works in a most extraordinary way for which she has received the DBE, she is a Dame of the British Empire. And in Anglesey of course she hasn't been able to do all that amount of work because of all her commitments in London, she is continually going backwards and forwards to London. But she is interested in everything, and she has such amazingly interesting friends, like Isaiah Berlin and people like that who come to stay at Plas Newydd, and they have very very interesting people, and I have met the most fascinating people there.

Can you tell me a little about Alice Thomas Ellis?

Alice Thomas Ellis is a very old friend of mine. I first met her, and her name was Anna Lindholme[ph], her mother was Welsh and her father was a Fin, and she lived in Penmaenmawr. I had been up to London, it must have been just after the war, and...no probably during the war, I think there were still raids going on and people were leaving London, and I got to Euston and I got into the train and seated opposite me was this very beautiful girl with extraordinary, unusual features. It was slightly Slavonic her features which she must have inherited from her father. And I got talking to her, and she said she had been working in a Cheshire Home, but she was leaving because she was determined to become a nun, and she was going home to Penmaenmawr prior to going into a convent. And I thought, as she got out of the train at Penmaenmawr, what an appalling waste really, and I didn't think I would ever see her again, then about two or three years later I went to a party in Hampstead and there she was. She had come out and she had married an extraordinary man called Colin Hayraft, who was in publishing, he was a double first and a triple blue, so he was an amazing all-round man, and a complete workaholic, and he with a friend of his bought out Duckworths, an old firm of publishers, and they set up Duckworths, and then the friend died and Colin took it on entirely. And he just worked and worked and worked, every single manuscript which came to Duckworths he read himself I think, and he was a brilliant scholar, Latin scholar too. And, then they had, I think they had five children, six children, a little girl died in childbirth I think, and then the second son, Joshua, he got killed tragically by falling through a roof while he was doing an escapade in the north of London, and he was in a coma for nine months. And I have a feeling in a way she really started writing after that. I remember she told me she was going to call herself Alice Thomas Ellis, and I said it was absolutely daft, but anyway, it worked. I mean she usually is right, she is an extraordinary person. And she started writing, and she has an amazing perception of people, and she is wonderful at dialogue and she really understands people, and that's why the books, her books have been such a great success. And I still see a lot of her now. She's got a house in Wales, which she has as a place for teaching people how to write, and she and her friend Beryl



Bainbridge they teach people how to write. And, anyhow she's a great friend, and I am very very fond of Anna, because she is a very warm person, and she's had terrible troubles, and she has sort of come through them, but life has certainly not been easy for her.

Is she one of the people that one of your books is dedicated to?

Yes, my first book I dedicated to her, because, when I wrote it, it was sent to Duckworths and they turned it down, and then about nine months later they got in touch and said could they have another look, and they said they would publish it. And then Anna, who at that time wasn't really a writer, she said, 'Oh you've made some awful mistakes, you must correct some of your writing,' and she was dead right, I did what she said and I corrected the writing.

What sort of things?

Well there was one description of Anglesey which was really rather like a guide to Anglesey, and we cut all that out. And, anyhow I think it's almost entirely due to Anna that that book was published.

And you've painted her, haven't you?

I did a portrait of her, and I sent it to the Royal Academy. I'm rather sorry I did, because it was one of the best portraits I've ever painted, and it was bought on the first day, on the private view day, by a peer of the realm, and I wrote to the noble lord and asked him for the money, and I got a letter by return, but no money, but a request for my model's telephone number so that he could take her out to dine with him in the House of Lords. Well I thought this was pretty impertinent. I thought, had he been the 15th peer, he would have invited me to take my model out to dine with him in the House of Lords; I thought that he could only be the 1st creation. Well I looked him up in 'Who's Who' and I found indeed I was right. But why I should think that the 15th peer should be better mannered than the 1st peer, it's a bit of wishful thinking I think, because not all of them are. And, anyhow I rang up Anna and I said, 'This randy old...I found he was 71 do you see, I said this randy old septuagenarian wants to take you out to dinner in the House of Lords, you see, would you be prepared to?' And she said, 'Yes, so long as you make it quite clear that I am a married woman,' do you see. So I wrote to the noble lord and said, 'My model, Mrs Colin Hayraft, would be delighted to dine with you in the House of Lords, but I would be even more delighted if I had a cheque.' So I got the cheque, and she was not invited to dine with him in the House of Lords. And then for a retrospective I desperately wanted that portrait, and we got in touch with the 2nd peer, and he said, oh no, it's impossible, can't lend it. And he was pressed, and then he said that his

father had left it to his housekeeper, and I thought, well... And he wouldn't give me the name of the housekeeper, and I thought, well I thought perhaps the old boy had left her the family jewels as well and that's why the 2nd peer was really pretty fed up, but I was quite wrong. Apparently she really did like my painting, and didn't want it to leave her house, the housekeeper. And so, I'll never see it again, I don't know what will happen to it.

How did you discover that?

I discovered that through a peer in Anglesey who went on a skiing holiday in Switzerland, skiing I think for the House of Lords, and the peer, other peer, was in the skiing party, and he broached the subject to him, and he came clean.

Right. And who is the other volume dedicated to?

Well I dedicated that to Lady Anglesey.

Have you ever painted her?

I've tried to, and failed.

End of F4546 Side A

F4546 Side B

.....is, your involvements with Wales. Can I first...

I'll put the heater on, it's a bit cold.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

What's your pattern now? Do you go out most days to draw, or what's the routine of life now?

Well I would like to paint two pictures a week now, but I don't. I get involved in things, and unless I can start in the morning and paint throughout the day I can't finish my picture in the day. So if I have to do something like going to the bank in Bangor, or something, it means I can't paint that day. I'm always getting involved in various things, and, what am I doing tomorrow? I've got to go to the gallery in Llangefni, I've got to teach an aircraftman to paint in Gwalchmai, and Friday I've got a meeting of the National Museum of Wales of the North in Llanberis, and so it goes on. Monday I've got to give a lecture in Aberystwyth.

When I arrived you had just sent off 41 pictures to various exhibitions. How much time has it taken you to build up to that 41, how much does that represent?

Oh that's two years.

Gosh. So, how many days roughly a month do you manage to spend painting, do you know?

I don't know, it might be about ten days, ten pictures, something like that.

And do you have days when you don't get round to doing anything? I mean if you have a day going to the bank, how do you spend the rest of it?

Well I'll probably do a bit of drawing. You've got to keep on drawing the whole time.

And what kind of hours do you keep?

Well after I left Highgate School when I had to get up soon after 7 in the morning, I continued with that, because you can organise your day, you can have your breakfast and you can start painting in the summer round about 9 to half-past. So I always get up at the same time.

And do you stay awake late at night? I mean what time do you...?

I don't go to bed very early, I probably wait for the 12 o'clock news and then I go to bed.

And do you paint only by natural light?

Oh yes, I couldn't paint by artificial light.

And what about things like reading now, what do you read and how often?

I don't read an awful lot. I watch television mainly. I like reading biographies. I forget the last book I read. I forget who, but I do quite a lot of reading, but in bursts.

And do you listen to the radio?

Yes, I listen to it a lot.

What sort of things?

Well, I mean when I'm painting I always have the radio on, even if it's 'Women's Hour' I still listen to 'Women's Hour' which is a very good programme really.

Is it mainly Radio 4?

No...yes Radio 4 mainly, yes. But, oh I do listen to the radio a lot.

And music?

No, I don't listen to music. I love music on television oddly enough, which is rather strange because, I suppose because I can see the people.

What kind of music?

I love these competitions of young musicians, I find them absolutely fascinating, and absolutely amazed at how brilliant they are, and the singers of the world from Cardiff and that sort of thing, I love those.

And what other kind of television do you watch, what's your interest?

Any old rubbish really.

A very honest answer.

(laughs)

And how sociable are you? I mean do you have weeks on end where you don't see anybody, or what's it like?

No I always...I see people a lot. I'm fairly gregarious, and people are very good and ask me out to meals and things like that. So I see quite a lot of people.

And can you tell me a little bit about some of the offices you hold in various organisations in Wales?

Oh, well I'm on the Arts Committee of the National Museum of Wales and I have been for over thirty years. I am President of the Royal Cambrian Academy for the second time. I was going to pack it in this year but they seemed to want me to go on for another year; of course I might not be elected, which in a way would be a relief. We have managed to improve it a lot, we have now a beautiful purpose-built gallery, and I wanted to cover the whole of Wales, not just up in the north here, and eventually I hope it will be accepted. Last year we had a major exhibition in the National Museum of Wales. And I suppose I'm a Deputy Lieutenant for Gwynedd.

What does that involve?

It doesn't involve very much except occasionally making suggestions for honours and Buckingham Palace garden parties, and then you always have to be on tap; if the royal family come to north Wales and the Lord Lieutenant or the Vice-Lieutenant can't be present then the chances are you'll be asked to. I haven't been asked so far.

What do you feel about the royal family?

Well I've always been a royalist really because one was brought up to be a royalist. It's a pity that they are going through such a difficult time now. But I suppose I will always be a royalist. You see my family have been tied up with them. My great-great-grandfather was a

chaplain at Windsor, he was chaplain to Princess Augusta, and we got our livings, church livings in Anglesey through the intervention of the royal family, so in a way it was quite natural that I was brought up with sort of respect for the royal family. I have other things. I'm President of SSAFA, which is the Soldiers', Sailors' and Air Force Association, that's another thing I...it's not very onerous, the Chairman does the work really. I don't know why they should have made me President, but having been in the Army I think it's partly something I like to do. Because I have a feeling that as long as artists can do things like that, it's a good thing, because it makes artists appear to be normal people, and the average idea, the average person about an artist is that he is unpredictable, irresponsible, long-haired, smelly, and generally a pretty bad thing; that's the impression people have of artists.

And you are trying to counteract that?

Well, I mean I can quite understand how artists want to live away from society and dedicate themselves to their work and all that, I quite understand that, but I believe if you can associate yourselves with the community, it probably is a good thing.

And when we've been driving around Anglesey, you've kept pointing out houses that were once belonging to your family or where you have a link, and you said something very interesting when I first arrived about the sense of security you have. Could you perhaps elaborate on that a bit?

Well, if you live on an island, automatically I think you have a sense of security. I mean, Britain is basically an island, England, Scotland and Wales are an island, and therefore over the years we have undoubtedly despised those funny people from the Continent. It's because we were on an island, we knew where we were, we knew our boundaries, and therefore we could laugh at these funny people who spoke ridiculous languages. Well in Anglesey in a way it is similar; you know exactly where you are, if you stand anywhere on the island you know where the boundaries are, and that gives you a sense of security. I know that. I also know all the houses all over Anglesey where my family lived, where they were parsons or something like that, and that also gives you a sense of security. Also the past gives you a sense of back to the old cromlechs security, and the old stones and things like that. So I've always had total security, it's very odd, even though my health hasn't been awfully good and I haven't had much money, but I've always had that security. I think also knowing who you are, because I've known who my family all were going back a very long time on all sides, and, it's not really important but it does give you a sense of security.

And neither you or your brother had children; does that worry you that you're not handing it on in that way?

Even though there are no members of my family left really, but I mean there are a hell of a lot of Williamses in Wales. I mean, it doesn't really matter.

Is it a source of regret that you didn't have children?

Well I mean I would have liked to have been married with children, but somehow it never really worked out, and it's no good moaning about it. I have been left pretty free to get on with my painting.

And I haven't seen any of the television films that were made about you. Do you feel they represent you quite well, are you happy with them?

Well, I had a friend called John Ormond, who was a brilliant man. He was a wonderful poet, a Welsh poet writing in English, and underestimated I think, and he was a brilliant film-maker; he had a free hand with the BBC to make films of people he wanted to, and he made two films of me, which was lucky, one in black and white and the other in colour. One was called 'The Land Against the Light' and the other was 'Horizons Hung in Air'. And being a poet he knew exactly what he wanted, and I felt that I couldn't make any suggestions, because it was as if I was having my portrait painted by somebody, and I wouldn't interfere if I was having my portrait painted. He was doing the same thing on film. And so when he came to talk about epilepsy I wasn't particularly keen on talking about epilepsy but he wanted it, and so I did talk about it. But I am very grateful to him, and people did enjoy the films I think.

Has anyone painted your portrait?

Yes, I had a head made in bronze by Ivor Roberts Jones, which is a very good head, and then long long ago a girl called Margaret Thomas, who was a very good painter and lived exactly opposite Highgate School where I was teaching, she painted a very good portrait of me. And then a friend of mine in South Wales called David Griffiths, he painted a portrait of me.

Where is the Ivor Roberts Jones head?

Well one is in the National Museum of Wales, and, I think that's the only one, only cast, in the National Museum of Wales, but I'm trying to get one for Llangefni.

What are you most proud of?

Lord, I don't think pride comes into it really.

End of F4546 Side B

End of Interview