WILLIAMS, Sir JOHN KYFFIN (1918-2006), painter and author

Name: John Kyffin Williams
Date of birth: 1918
Date of death: 2006
Parent: Essyllt Mary Williams (née Williams)
Parent: Henry Inglis Wynne Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: painter and author
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Literature and Writing
Author: David Meredith

Kyffin Williams was born at Tanygraig, Llangefni, Anglesey, on 9 May 1918, the second son of Henry Inglis Wynne Williams (1870-1942), a bank manager, and his wife Essyllt Mary (1883-1964), daughter of Richard Hughes Williams, rector of Llansadwrn. Their first son Owen Richard Inglis Williams (Dick) was born in 1916 and died in 1982. It was a matter of great pride for Kyffin Williams that his ancestral roots were deep in the land of Wales, in Anglesey (his father's family), in Montgomeryshire (where the name Kyffin came from) and in the vicinity of Strata Florida in Ceredigion (the burial place of his great-great-grandmother on his mother's side). On both sides of his family he was related to numerous Anglican clergymen and he admired their service to their fellow men. There were also some colourful individuals amongst his ancestors, such as Thomas Williams (1737-1802), the man who developed the copper industry at Parys Mountain in Anglesey.

After a short period in 1924 at Moreton Hall School near Chirk, where his father was a bank manager, Kyffin attended primary school at Trearddur Bay in Anglesey (1925-1931). Between 1931 and 1936 he was a boarder at Shrewsbury School, where he was unhappy due to loneliness and over-strict teachers. After he left school his father arranged for him to join 'Yale and Hardcastle' land agents in Pwllheli (1937-1939), during which period he got to know the countryside of the Llyn Peninsula from his home, by then in Abererch. At his mother's suggestion he joined Captain Jack Jones and the Ynysfor Hunt in the Aberglaslyn area, and he would roam the mountains in all weather, hunting foxes and exploring every nook and cranny, an invaluable experience for a landscape painter. It was said of Kyffin Williams that when he painted a mountain, he knew what was on the other side of the slope which faced him - he saw the full picture.

In 1937 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers (TA) but he was discharged from the army in 1940 after having an epileptic fit, a condition from which he suffered throughout his life. In this period he enjoyed the loyal companionship of Sandy Livingstone-Learmouth of Tremadog. It was Sandy who urged Kyffin to join the territorial army. The two had great fun composing 'Crawshaw-Bailey' limericks, comic verses to be sung to the tune of 'Mochyn Du'. The collection was published in *Boyo Ballads* (Excellent Press/National Library of Wales, 1995), a volume which displays Kyffin Williams's splendid cartoon work.

On his discharge from the army the advice which Kyffin was given by the military doctor was: 'Williams, as you are in fact abnormal, I think it would be a good idea if you took up art', words which Kyffin took great delight in repeating when he was the grand old man of the arts in Wales. In October 1941 Kyffin enrolled as a student at the Slade School of Art, which had moved from London to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford because of the war. Whilst gazing at a picture of Piero della Francesca's 'Resurrection' in the Ashmolean, Kyffin experienced such an emotional response that he wept uncontrollably. As he recalled, this was his 'road to Damascus'. He realized for the first time that the act of painting a picture was not just a matter of placing images on paper or canvas, but that love and mood were essential aspects of the creative process. Amongst his teachers at the Slade were Randolph Schwabe (the Principal), Allan Gwynne-Jones and Tancred Borenius, a specialist on the Renaissance art of Vinzenca and Venice in Italy. Despite Kyffin's constant self-deprecating claims that he had no talent in this period, he was awarded the prestigious Robert Ross scholarship when he left the Slade.

In the 1940s Kyffin Williams listed 'those creative men that meant much to me'. Amongst them were Rembrandt and Vincent Van Gogh, about whom he had a great deal to say. He said that some paintings by Rembrandt contained so much emotion that they made him cry. He saw similarities between Van Gogh's life and his own, Van Gogh a pastor's son and Kyffin with his extensive church connections, and both afflicted by epilepsy. He believed that Van Gogh was compelled to express himself: 'He wanted to communicate, he just had to paint his love of things, be it flowers or people or landscape, and that was it'. So too Kyffin. He often claimed that obsession was more important than talent, but Kyffin was both obsessional and talented.

In 1944 he was appointed to the post of senior art master at Highgate School in London. He remainded there for twenty-nine years, his only formal teaching post, although he spread knowledge and shared his learning and his gift throughout

his life. In 1968 he was awarded the Churchill Fellowship to record the Welsh community in Patagonia. This was the greatest adventure of his life. Having reached the age of fifty, he was determined to accomplish something special. He stayed in the Welsh colony for four months, recording the people, the landscape, the birds and animals. He returned home with a unique and priceless collection of paintings. This he presented as a gift to the National Library in Aberystwyth, after the National Museum had refused it. On the basis of his collection of Patagonian paintings and other gifts, Kyffin is considered one of the main patrons of the National Library. By now the Library holds 700 colour slides, photographs taken by Kyffin in Patagonia, 250 oil paintings (including the Patagonian collection) and 1,456 creative works on paper. This is the largest collection in the world of Kyffin's work. During his lifetime he also presented 400 of his own paintings as a gift to Oriel Ynys Môn in Anglesey.

In May 1974 Kyffin left his teaching post in London and returned to Anglesey, where he made a home for himself for the first time in his life, at Pwllfanogl near the village of Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, in a house which belonged to the Marquis and Marchioness of Anglesey, a couple who were generous patrons and supporters of Kyffin Williams. In Pwllfanogl, within a stone's throw of the Menai Straits, Kyffin was in paradise, with the mountains of Snowdonia in front of him and the earth of his beloved Anglesey beneath his feet. This was to be his home for the rest of his life. Although he lived a bachelor existence in Pwllfanogl, he had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

Kyffin Williams is considered to be Wales's foremost painter and the most successful ever in terms of his career as a professional artist. He was about four years old when he painted his first picture, and he continued to paint until the end of his long life. He was known and admired by many as a painter of the mountains and the sea off the coast of Anglesey, but interestingly, in his own opinion, of all his works to put on a pedestal, he selected two paintings of a farmer and his dog in snow battling against the elements and two portaits of two old ladies. For a time he was the portrait artist of choice for Welsh institutions, with hardly a president or chairman or judge whose portrait he did not paint. At the age of seventy he announced his retirement from this task, saying that such work did not come easily to him. He loved to paint flowers and animals, particularly horses and sheepdogs. One of Kyffin Williams's greatest gifts was the ability to 'set' a scene on canvas, which he did using a pallet knife rather than a brush, a technique quite different to that of his contemporaries. He liked to paint in the open air in all weathers, and he continued to do so until health considerations forced him into the studio. He worked very quickly, finishing a portrait in a day.

He held his first exhibition at the Colnaghi Gallery in London in 1948, and for a period of thirty years from 1975 he held exhibitions at the Thackeray Gallery in the same city. In Wales he exhibited regularly over the years in the main galleries. The first retrospective exhibition of his work, consisting of 131 paintings, was held at the National Museum in Cardiff in March 1987, an exhibition which was also seen at the Glyn Vivian Gallery in Swansea and at Oriel Mostyn in Llandudno. A number of memorable exhibitions of his work were held at the National Library in Aberystwyth, one in particular to celebrate his eightieth birthday on 9 May 1998, and another to display his Patagonian collection in 2000. The Library also put on several travelling exhibitions of his work. Oriel Ynys Môn was also very loyal, showing his work regularly and holding two major exhibitions of paintings - Portraits 1944-1991 in 1993 and Landscapes in 1995. And it was in Oriel Ynys Môn that the Kyffin Williams memorial gallery was established.

A number of galleries sold his paintings, and three were particularly prominent, the Tegfryn Gallery in Menai Bridge (since 1968), close friends of Kyffin, the Thackeray Gallery in London (since 1975), enthusiastic supporters, and the Albany Gallery in Cardiff (since 1975). Mary Yapp, the owner of the Albany, acted as his agent. Oriel Plas Glyn y Weddw in Llanbedrog was also very close to Kyffin's heart. His work is now in many galleries throughout Britain and overseas, with the majority of the thousands of pictures which he painted during his lifetime in private collections.

The prestige of Kyffin Williams's work by the 1980s led an unknown wag to claim that 'success is a house in Pontcanna, a Volvo in the garage and a Kyffin on the wall'. By then Kyffin represented status and his oil paintings sold for many thousands. Having begun his career in comparative poverty in the forties, by the nineties he was a wealthy man. In his will which was drawn up in 1999, he left millions of pounds to be shared between his family, close friends and those institutions which he supported, charities and arts bodies, such as the Tabernacle Gallery in Machynlleth and the bold scheme to develop a ruined tannery in the town into an art gallery.

During the thirty-two years that he lived in Anglesey honours were heaped upon him: membership of the Royal Academy 1974, honorary MA of the University of Wales 1978, OBE 1983, Deputy Lieutenant of Gwynedd 1987, honorary fellowships of the University of Wales Swansea (1989), the University of Wales Bangor (1991) and the University of Wales Aberystwyth (1992), the Cymmrodorion medal 1991, President of the Royal Cambrian Academy (for two periods), member of the Court of the National Library of Wales, the Glyndwr Award of the Tabernacle Trust, Machynlleth 1995, and a knighthood in 1999.

In 2004, at the age of eighty-six, Kyffin Williams travelled to Venice for a television programme commissioned by BBC Cymru/Wales, directed by John Hefin and entitled '*Reflections in a Gondola*'. In it Kyffin listed the four most significant and fateful events of his life: his birth in Anglesey, seeing the picture of the fresco by Piero della Francesca, painting on Cader

Idris in 1947 when he first realized that he could perhaps become an artist, and visiting Venice for the first time in 1950, when he marvelled at its artistic masterpieces.

Kyffin Williams published two volumes of autobiography, *Across the Straits* (1973) and *A Wider Sky* (1991), both of which are considered classics of their kind. He was active with the North Wales Arts Association, and lectured extensively on art throughout the country. He gave every support to schools, welcoming countless classes into his home and studio in Pwllfanogl. Although he often said that he did not want to be a grumpy old man, he stood firm against the fanciful rubbish called modern art, even when that led to attacks upon him in the press. He was determined to defend the highest standards in art and to respect tradition. He urged the National Museum to exhibit Welsh art and to emphasise that the artists were Welsh. It annoyed him that Richard Wilson had not been properly recognised as a Welshman, and likewise John Gibson, the great sculptor from Conway. He and others worked hard to preserve for Wales the collection of his friend, the bird artist Charles Tunnicliffe, which was the basis of the Oriel Ynys Môn art gallery.

Although his mother would allow no Welsh to be spoken in the home, his parents were both fluent Welsh speakers, and Kyffin himself spoke a good deal of Welsh, being able to recite passages of poetry by Dafydd ap Gwilym, and he used to write to his close friends in Welsh. When Kyffin declared in the 1980s 'I paint in Welsh', this meant that he had overcome his mother's taboo. When signing books his favourite greeting was 'Cofion Gorau - Kyffin'. During his stay in Patagonia he had to broadcast and address audiences in Welsh, an experience which according to his own testimony did a great deal to improve what he called his 'common Welsh'.

Kyffin Williams had his feet firmly on the ground, he was eloquent, full of humour and a wonderful conversationalist, extremely knowledgeable about his craft and an art historian second to none. He had to deal with difficult problems during his life, the health of his older brother Richard, an able lawyer and his mother's favourite, who was wounded during the war and became an alcoholic, and his own health, the epilepsy and cancer of the prostate and of the lung - the cancer which killed him.

He died at the age of 88 in the St Tysilio Home, Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey, on 1 September 2006, after a period of illness in Ysbyty Gwynedd. His funeral service was held on 11 September in Bangor Cathedral, where his grandfather the Reverend Owen Lloyd Williams had been chancellor. The service was led by the Archbishop of Wales, the Most Reverend Barry Morgan, and Kyffin was buried in the cemetery of Llanfair-yng-Nghornwy Church, Anglesey, where his grandfather was buried. His gravestone was designed by his friend the sculptor Ieuan Rees, a simple unadorned stone from the Aberllefenni slate quarry in Merionethshire. On 18 July 2008 Oriel Kyffin Williams was opened in Llangefni as a fitting memorial to him. The Sir Kyffin Williams Trust works to promote his name and his values in the art world.

Author

David Meredith

Sources

Kyffin Williams, *Across The Straits* (1973)

Kyffin Williams, *A Wider Sky* (1991)

Nicholas Sinclair and Rian Evans, *The Art of Kyffin Williams* (2007)

David Meredith (ed.), *Kyffin Williams: Bro a Bywyd - His Life, His Land* (2008)

David Meredith and John Smith, *Obsessed: The Biography of Kyffin Williams* (2012)

Personal acquaintance

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: Kyffin Williams

Works

ArtUK: Kyffin Williams

Sound and Film

Archif ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: Kyffin Williams, 1987

NLW: Cyfweliad Kyffin Williams Interview 1

NLW: Cyfweliad Kyffin Williams Interview 2

NLW: Cyfweliad Kyffin Williams Interview 3

Lloyd Roderick: The Kyffin Williams Bequest

Lloyd Roderick: Kyffin beyond Wales in the NLW collection

Additional Links

NLW Archives: Kyffin Williams Archive

VIAF: 32092326

Wikidata: Q6450928

Published date: 2014-12-15

Article Copyright: http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our sponsorship page.

Donate