

Mary Joyce, Edmonton

When I arrived at McMaster in '64, the foyer of the Fine Arts stairwell of Mills Memorial Library held a display of full-size human figures hanging, lying, standing with arms outstretched. We did not know it then but these sculptures, made with steel wire from Stelco, were welded by an artist who would surprise us as a force for good in our formation as artists and citizens. George Wallace invited me and many others into the printmaking revival of the 60's through his classes at McMaster. My studies in art history were revealing the wonders of the museums, and his courses in etching, linocut and woodcut gave his students the experience of what it is produce art with your hands and brain from the events of your own world, your lived experience. We met in the Quonset hut; we watched him take a coiled candle and smoke a copper plate dark enough so that the needle drawing through the wax left a bright red line.

Although the coiled candle was an ancient technique, Geo's attitude has proven now to have been ahead of his time. He refused the 60's infatuation with New York Abstract Expressionism in favour of a Eurocentrically motivated insistence that art needs to be about real life right now.

These were profoundly formative years for me. Not only did professor Wallace teach us to produce relief and intaglio prints, but he drew us into the world of the post-war art collector, and from there into the actuality of the inter-war period of Kollowitz and her colleagues in the 20's and 30's. The time of war against Nazi fascism with the interventions of Picasso and his friends also became a living thing.

In the mid-to-late 60's German Expressionist prints and drawings were still available in Europe. Geo and some of his colleagues in the German Languages Department were active in acquiring these works for the teaching collection at McMaster. Students were encouraged to participate in this work through the Wentworth House Art Committee, a group that got to travel to Toronto regularly in Wallace's exotic oleohydralic Citroen station wagon, to tour the galleries, searching for new works for this collection. I was honoured to serve as its chairman for two years, years we transported from Toronto in a red truck, arranged, titled and hung 35 etchings in the Wentworth House Lounge: David Blackwood's first solo show. During these years we decided to purchase the painting "Dinnertime on the Prairies" by Kurelek, looked through portfolios of original rare prints and drawings of Kathe Kollowitz, Rouault, Ensor, Beckman and others. Many of these are now in the collection of McMaster University. It was a rare time of deeply humanist education through art.

I remember one afternoon standing with Geo in one of the small streets around Yorkville, where the galleries were then, waiting for the others to catch up, when he spotted a small gentleman in a cap with hands behind his back, strolling, and told me that was like a figure from Paris. He was right - I have since checked!

Sam Robinson

There is also a sizeable group of fellow visual artists and appreciators of profound sculpture, prints, monotypes, and drawings who keenly grieve George's death and joyfully celebrate his life. His former students, who carry his influence in their work and in their dedication to their work for the rest of their lives, feel a special indebtedness to George.

I came to know George during my tenure (1981-85) as Administrator of the Hamilton Artists Inc. The Inc. is an artist-run organization and gallery founded in 1975 and maintained to this day to a great extent by his former students.

From March 30 to April 30, 1983, a retrospective exhibition of ten large sculptures and twenty-seven graphic works by George Wallace was held at Hamilton Artists Inc. This exhibition was also the occasion of the first publication by the Inc., an illustrated catalogue with an introductory essay by Robert Yates. It was during the planning and the exhibition of 1983 that I came to know George.

I remember the thrill of encountering George during that time. (I had not studied with him.) He was initially somewhat intimidating to a young, aspiring artist. He was so knowledgeable; in all our eyes indisputably a great artist; difficult to read personally: sometimes seemingly gruff, but with a twinkle in his eye and a dry, ironic humour; so well spoken in a way that seemed unattainable to a Canadian-born youth. Yet, he also seemed so appreciative, even honoured, to have an exhibition at the Inc.; so respectful of our efforts to establish a gallery on the street in the north end of Hamilton. We felt he took us seriously, and that meant a great deal to all of us. George had decided to apply paint, in flesh tones, to the figure in his just-completed welded steel sculpture, Lazarus risen from the dead. He shared with us his wonderings about that decision; encouraged our reflections. His apparent indecision about using flesh tones, his quest to fulfill the meaning of the piece, perhaps a feeling within himself that he'd gone 'too far' were for me a lesson never forgotten in the humility, even the insecurity, of the artist, even one who was so accomplished. And he took such joy in startling the viewer into genuinely engaging with the work, rousing the viewer to wake up.

Much before meeting George, I had known and been moved, shocked, by his work. It was probably in the summer of 1962, on a night of driving rain, thunder and lightening, that I took shelter on the back veranda of Wentworth House, the student centre at McMaster. I was a high school student. In a flash of lightening, I saw a figure hanging from the rafters. I truly thought that I'd encountered a suicide. It was George's The Hanging Thief. It was also about 1962 that my parents bought a monotype of George's called Night Sky (1960). It now hangs in my living room and I've looked at that work with awe almost every day for forty-five years. For me, it is the quintessential image of the depth and vitality of the universe.

George contributed so much to the life and work of all the artists who knew him and are familiar with his work. He continues to inspire us.

Bryce Kanbara

I'd like to share two memories with you.

One.

During the 1960s Bob Yates and I met as fellow students in the English Lit and Art History program at McMaster University, and we discovered from each other that we both made paintings at home and were addicted to art. Yet, neither of us was enrolled in the studio art program. We knew the formidable Professor Wallace, from afar. We liked his sculptures, which lurked in campus stairwells and foyers. We liked the wit in his lectures on the history of printmaking, and we knew he was head of the Studio – a facility we longed to infiltrate. So, one summer evening after finishing our summer jobs for the day, with little thought and a lot of presumption, we drove to his house on Governor's Rd., knocked on the front door and beseeched him to teach us how to make etchings. He didn't invite us in. He peered at us in his trademark wary/bemused manner and to our greatest amazement, told us to meet him at the university print-studio the following evening.

George met us there for three successive lessons to teach us the mixing of the nitric acid solution, the grounding and needling of the drawing on the zinc plate, its immersion into the acid bath, and the inking and printing of the etched plate on special papers that were kept in a locked room. We fancied ourselves acolytes in an acidic rite of passage. Then, after he was satisfied that we wouldn't scorch our lungs on fumes, or dissolve our fingers in the acid bath, he let us alone. For some reason, he took us seriously, and I sometimes reflect on the significance of that kind act in propelling both Bob and me towards the serious project of becoming artists.

Two.

When Romano Dreossi called with news of George's passing, I sent an email to three artist friends who had worked voluntarily on a retrospective exhibition of his sculpture and prints in 1984 at Hamilton Artists Inc., the artist-run centre in Hamilton. Bob Yates wrote the catalogue essay, Jim Chambers did the photography, and Brian Kelly did the design. I was the project coordinator. We received a Canada Council grant to put the show together and it was a long project that saw us going out to George's Dundas studio and many public and private locations to photograph his sculptures. In a curious way, this project created a bond among the four of us that has lasted all these years. We're all artists and we share in a kind of mystic Wallace brotherhood. Although flattered by our enthusiasm, George must have had to overcome moments of acute anxiety about the incautious placement of his reputation in our hands.

At the crowded, opening reception, George presented each of us with a copy of the block-print poster he had produced for the exhibition - rolled up and tied with a red ribbon. The central image on the poster was the head of a weeping woman, which expressed the tragedy of warfare in the Middle East. Bob Yates reminded me that the poster was accompanied by a red rose.

In their email responses to me:

Jim Chambers said, "I still remember George looking askance at me with a raised eyebrow whenever he thought I had said something a bit wacky - which, to him, was often."

Bob Yates said, "the end of a great person and an era . . . the responsibility of "senior artists" is now squarely on our shoulders . . . it's too soon."

And, Brian Kelly said, "I remember him saying that the Pissarro (at the Mac Museum) made the Monet (at the Mac Museum) look like a fuzzy postcard. What a guy!"

George was erudite in the best sense of the word. He was professorial and his views were insightful, delightful and fresh. At the same time, this image of academic sobriety was counterbalanced by the fact that he was a saboteur, an artist. He looked critically, compassionately and with humour at himself and the family of characters we share this world with. He looked with affection upon our quirks and virtues, our successes and failures, our smashed hopes and persistent dreams. And his work has yet to be widely discovered, contemplated and appreciated. That task is for us.

Erica Dodd, Past Chairman of the Art Department, McMaster University

George was an exceptional person – but you all know that. Those of us who had the good fortune to be involved with him loved him dearly. He communicated a warmth and breadth of spirit that was totally his own. His sense of humour and wit – his remarkable way of seeing things in a different way and communicating them, made him a fascinating companion.

Artistically he was immensely gifted. When you looked at his figures or his sculptures, or his prints – he was mostly interested in the human figure or face – the world became a different place. His angels soared, his crabby gentlemen leered. His funny hats mocked. Relationships invited questions. One never knew where he would take you next. But there was a depth and sensitivity in his drawings that was particularly fine.

I feel George's loss very deeply – he has had such an impact on my life. I will never to forget the day he first rolled into my office in Hamilton and I virtually offered him my job on the spot! What made me do it? I just felt he was immensely competent and that his background led to teaching – and I think I was proved right over the years – although I had a hard time selling the idea. I had been looking for an artist for some time and I knew that the University would get one in time – and that Geo would tide me over until they got a replacement for me. It was years later I discovered what a really good artist he was – so extraordinarily powerful and original. Nobody saw the world as he saw it and after looking at his work one did not experience the world in the same way ever again.

Hugh Galloway

I first met George in London in 1971 when he interviewed me, a callow youth from the north; who followed the footsteps of innumerable others to "Canada Magna" Scotland's bigger better self. I remember George as a constant benign presence all through my career at McMaster: always teasing the best out of both student and fellow instructors. I was always in awe of his omniscience and his indefatigable capacity for both instruction and the even more demanding physical demands of his own sculpture.

When he retired from "Mac" we felt like the famous cartoon by (Tewill?): that the "pilot had left the ship". He often teased my affection for Scotland by persuading me that B.C. and Vancouver Island had all the visual components of the landscape, which I sought. I wish I had listened: last year for the first time I made it west. In this, as in everything else George was absolutely right. All my memories are woven with his presence.

Arthur Hammond

I imagine I'm one of the few people in the world who sleeps between two George Wallace paintings – not one under me and one over me, but one to the left and one to the right. The larger one on the right, an oil, I claim to be a collaborative work, since I named it. As you know, Geo didn't necessarily name his paintings and what they represented could be somewhat enigmatic. I suspect this one was inspired by the Cornish landscape, with its china clay mines and pits and the surrounding sea. But it was an abstract, so you couldn't be sure, and Geo's lips were sealed. Whatever it was, I loved it, and when I bought it from him some time after his arrival in Toronto in the 50's, I asked what it was called. He refused to be drawn and invited me to give it a title. What its grey circles, ringed with white, and surrounding blue masses suggested to me at the time was not Cornwall, but a Canadian spring break-up, with shrinking circles of ice around islands in blue water, so I called it 'Thaw'. Geo was willing to go along with that idea, whatever the actual subject was, so 'Thaw' it became, and remains. The other, a smaller monotype and pastel, made in 1958, is called 'The Island', though it too is an abstract and could have something to do with an island, or not, and whether George named it or again left it up to me, I don't recall, so I won't claim joint responsibility for that one.

I also have a print of one of his screaming warrior heads, which I don't hang by my bed, but I never had space for one of his big, powerful metal sculptures, though I was a great admirer of them. I well remember him at work on them in his shed – or was it the garage? - in Dundas, goggled and wreathed in welding smoke. I particularly remember the rushing or hurrying angel with its streaming gown, and how wonderful and impressive it was to see all these pieces together in the Hamilton art gallery – apart from those installed elsewhere, like the wonderful falling – or balancing? – family on the side of the Halton County Courthouse. Anyway, apart from not fitting into a bedroom, most of their subjects were more likely to disturb sleep than induce it.

Geo was also responsible for a picture I owned going into the McMaster collection. I had a pen and ink and watercolour done by Gershon Iskowitz in Buchenwald, made with materials which he had found in a bombed art shop while on a work detail, and which he had managed to conceal and bring out of the camp at the end of the war, one of only two of his camp pictures which survived. It is a powerful and horrifying painting of a line of emaciated prisoners lined up in the snow in their striped uniforms, in front of a guard or S.S. officer, waiting to be 'selected', either for work or elimination. One has fallen down and lies at the feet of the others, who dare not so much as look at him. It is a picture of an aspect of human history and experience very much like that which inspired a good deal of George's work, and he knew that I felt that it should go into a public collection and be properly conserved. He also felt that it fitted well with the collection of German expressionist work, which he was building for the McMaster gallery. Since it was European, it qualified for Levy bequest money, and McMaster bought it. A year ago in Ottawa, Susan and I visited the National Gallery and looked at 'The '30's' show which was on there, and there in one room we came on the Iskowitz, looking wonderfully cared for, still powerful and horrifying, on loan from McMaster.

But my connection with Geo wasn't simply through art. From the time we first met, after he and Margaret and their children arrived in Toronto, I was drawn to his intelligence, his honesty, his warmth and his irony. It's been a matter of great regret that we have seen so little of each other in recent years because of our living so far apart. But there have been occasional meetings, here and there, and my affection for him never diminished. Nor, with those two paintings in my bedroom, have there been many days on which I have forgotten him.

Nor will there be now. *Vale, George.*