

George Wallace, 1920-2019

George Wallace was 40 years old when he came to McMaster University in 1960. He was already an experienced artist and teacher and a family man with a wife (Margaret) and three children (Kit, Julia, Mark). He had been born in Ireland and educated there and in England, including receiving an M.A. degree in Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, and a diploma from the West of England College of Art in Bristol. He had taught for fifteen years, 12 in England and three in Canada. His art works had been shown in exhibitions in Dublin, Providence and Boston, Ottawa, Bristol, London, Aberystwyth, and Iserlohn (Germany). Now, six decades later, they are also in the National Gallery of Ireland, the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and numerous other places.

It was Erica Cruikshank (later Dodd), who taught Art History at McMaster in the late '50s, who brought George to the University. Since coming to Canada in 1957 he'd taught at the Ryerson Institute of Technology in Toronto and at Blakelock Secondary School in Oakville. In the year of his arrival at McMaster, 1960, the University was on the cusp of major growth. It was still a small institution, founded by the Baptist Church back in 1887, and still in 1960 had only about 2000 students. But it had secularized three years earlier and was now eligible for public funding. It had recently made bold beginnings in several areas of scientific research. It had started a new school of engineering. It was about to do similarly ambitious things in several of the arts disciplines and in business. Health sciences would follow later in the decade. George Gilmour was in his last year as President and Harry Thode would take over in 1961.

For the universities of Canada the 1960s were to be a decade of huge, rapid growth. There was to be a transformation of existing institutions and the creation of new ones. There would be greatly increased student enrolments, new degree programs, new faculty members from around the world, greatly expanded scholarship and research, new buildings, new laboratories and classrooms, new playing fields, and a heightened profile and impact of universities in Canadian life. George Wallace, an Irishman, and I, born in Canada, were in the thick of this.

I came to McMaster the same year George did, after my doctorate in English at the University of Toronto. George and Margaret were a decade older than my wife Hope and I. Their three children, Kit, Julia, and Mark, were into their teens when they entered school in Dundas. When Hope and I arrived, we had one child, three-months-old Joanna. We were to have four more daughters. George and Margaret Wallace became the godparents of our twins: George for Alison, Margaret for our Margaret. The Wallaces bought a handsome, older, redbrick house on Governor's Road in Dundas, on a rise on the north side of the street. There was a short, steep driveway up to their garage and, beside the garage, a workshop for George's steel-welding sculpting. Behind the house the Wallaces' productive garden went abruptly down the hill into a ravine. Hope and I, after a year in an apartment on Beulah Avenue in southwest Hamilton, bought a home in the country just east of West Flamborough Village. Our families have been interconnected for the six decades since. The retirement to Victoria in 1985 of all the

Wallaces except Kit, an architect in Toronto, and the subsequent deaths of George, my wife Hope, and Margaret leave powerful memories.

In his 25 years on the McMaster campus George Wallace had a large impact, on the minds and imaginations of hundreds of students, on colleagues, and on the physical place itself. From 1960-1967 he was the sole instructor in studio art, although he did teach art history as well. Initially his classes were in the old Drill Hall, a remnant of World War II, and his printmaking was in a quonset hut. George was joined in 1962 by Paul Walton, an art historian, who became chair of the Department. They worked closely and, with major support from E. Togo Salmon, Principal of University College, moved into new studio, classroom, and gallery space in the Arts II tower that opened in 1966. The current McMaster Museum of Art, in the Alvin A. Lee Building, comes directly from these men's achievements.

In his early years at McMaster, George worked with the student government to assemble the Wentworth House Art Collection. Wentworth House no longer exists but the collection is a significant part of the University's overall holdings. Similarly, the important German Expressionist Collection of more than 300 prints was put together with great intelligence by George and his colleague Karl Denner. There are 112 of George's own works in the McMaster collection, including a rich assortment of prints and three large sculptures. Always a craftsman, who had no patience for those who thought of crafts as lower than fine arts, George made hundreds of prints and was expert in the different ways of doing this: etching, aquatint, drypoint, and, especially later in life, monotype. The most visible of his sculptures, for people on campus, is the tall steel structure "Man Releasing Eagles." This larger-than-life figure stands securely on a two-level plinth in the Arts Quadrangle and reaches high into the air, with its three birds (with remarkable claws) being released and taking flight.

Another Wallace imprint on McMaster is from Margaret Wallace. She was an accomplished needle-worker who did liturgical pieces and vestments. For the University she created a large banner depicting McMaster's coat of arms, including a stag and tree, the personal emblem of the institution's founder, William McMaster. This strong, elegant work covers the wall at the back of the convocation platform, behind the Chancellor's party, and faces the audience.

Of the more than 7000 objects in the McMaster Museum of Art one of the most notable parts is the 200 European works in the Levy Collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Works. One of my personal favourites is the small, unpretentious oil "Ginger Jar and Onions" from early in Van Gogh's career. There are numerous other fine things, including paintings by Courbet, Monet, Pissarro, Utrillo, Caillebotte, and others. George Wallace had a direct, almost instrumental connection with the fact that the Levy Collection is at McMaster. He was a long-time friend of Herman Levy, the generous Hamilton business man who put together the collection and gave it to the University. Levy and Wallace travelled together one summer, for example, visiting Romanesque churches in France. Over the years Levy took numerous Art and French-language courses at McMaster, as a part-time student, and made gifts to the Art Department. I met him once at a gathering at the Tamahaac Club but knew of him and his collection mainly from George. One day in the mid-80s, he came by appointment to see me in

the President's Office. After a few preliminaries, he told me of his hope that the University would accept his collection, so that our "students would be able to look at original works of art on well-lit walls." Later, George told me of events leading up to that visit.

I have sat chatting with George in his welding shed in Dundas as he moved a blowtorch around a steel structure, while it was being put into final shape. We have talked in our respective homes, along with Hope and Margaret, and in the homes of mutual friends. We talked often at Mac. We travelled together, as members of a group of Canadian geographers, in China in 1976, in the late weeks of the Cultural Revolution. Years later, after the Wallaces had gone to live and do art in Victoria, my sister Doris and I spent a day with them in their new home, celebrating George's birthday. George was growing a fig tree in the garden, I remember. Two of their three children, Julia and Mark, were there, and a grandchild. George and Margaret used to visit us here at Stormont in West Flamborough Village when they came east, sometimes along with our mutual close friends Andrew and Helen Brink, who lived nearby in Greensville.

I learned much of what I know about art from George, and something of his often-sardonic view of things. In our youth each of us, he in Ireland and I in Canada, had thought of becoming clerics but both, independently, abandoned the idea, while retaining imaginations significantly shaped by biblical myths and symbols. Much of my work as a literary scholar has involved pondering over what the poets in Anglo-Saxon England, before 1066, did with biblical images and stories as they put them into Germanic words and cultural forms. Each time over the years that I have had a chance to see one or more of George's sculptures, I have been fascinated all over again. These daring figures continue to speak powerfully. I have studied his two embodiments of the resurrected Lazarus, his reworkings of Adam and Eve, his 'Hanged Thief,' his 'Daedalus,' his late set of sardonic bronze heads, and his other bold, emphatic possessions of sculpted space. I was delighted when, thanks mainly to our local Hamilton architect Tony Butler, George's tallest sculpture (25 feet), at Mohawk College, called "Educational Experiment," was rescued in 2012. Now, partly restored and safe from corroding weather, it has a prominent place standing high inside the College.

There is a print hanging on the wall in my living room that was given me, with a wry comment about administrators and mad kings, by George. It is called "Sweeney Astray" and is partly inspired by Seamus Heaney's poem about the 7th-century Irish king Sweeney who repeatedly offended a zealous monk, to the point that the monk lost patience and cursed him, forcing him from then on to fly naked and crazy around Ireland for the rest of his life. Sweeney had become a poet-king, taking inspiration from the plants and creatures of the forest.

Alvin A. Lee

Professor of English, Emeritus, McMaster University

President & Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus, McMaster University