

# Geo Wallace at Falmouth School of Art – 1950-54

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by Malcolm Ross-Macdonald (a former pupil)

In etching there is a fault known as *foul biting*. Small holes develop in the coat of resin or varnish that should be protecting the copper plate wherever the etcher wants it to print white; only the lines scratched through that coat should etch deep enough to hold the printer's ink. The unwanted pinholes therefore become little black fly-spots in the print. In one of my attempts to print a plate drawn in the life class, the foul biting had seriously compromised the model's face. Geo looked at the print and quoted Dryden: "*Why doth the Pox so much affect to undermine the Nose?*" An hour later, the foul biting had been polished out – and we (everyone in the etching class that evening) knew more about English Literature in the 17th Century than I had ever acquired in five years at school.

With only fifty-odd students on the four-year course to the National Diploma in Design (NDD), the art school could support no more than two lecturers: the *de facto* principal, Jack Chalker, a graduate of the Royal College who came via the prison camps of the notorious Burma Railway, and the deputy principal, Geo, who came via a degree in philosophy at Trinity College Dublin and four years teaching English at the English public school Radley College, where his real goal, however, had been to teach art at college level.

In his time at Radley, 1945-49, he gained the NDD – normally a four-year course, he took it after just one year of study. But he then discovered that to become a college teacher he also needed the Intermediate Diploma, which included two craft subjects and was normally taken in the second year at art school. Again he managed it in just one year and, in 1949, came directly to Falmouth. (To complete the picture I should add that there were also three specialist craft teachers of: weaving, lettering and bookbinding, and pottery and textile design. William Morris would have felt quite at home.)

I took the NDD course, under Geo, between 1950 and '54. Our year was the first to comprise nothing but late-teenage school-leavers; the fourth, third, and second years ahead of us were mostly filled by mature ex-service people who had served through the war and were now living on retraining grants. Several were married. None of them had any time for messing about. The hours were long and serious: nine-to-five then seven-to-nine, every weekday.

We were captive you might say, though *captivated* would be closer to the mark. Geo managed to blend the bare facts of art history with cross-references to literature and the history of ideas, so that, for instance, the movement from late medieval through high renaissance, baroque, rococo, mannerism, romanticism, impressionism ... became, to us, one continuum in which those names were merely high points of distinction. Once, I remember, he showed us how the design of *Vogue* in the Fifties owed everything to Braque and Picasso in the Twenties and nothing to magazine designs of those same earlier decades. To this day I cannot walk into any art gallery without seeing each exhibit as the crest of a wave, great or small, in a single vast ocean of creativity that laps the shores of, for example, the Lascaux Caves and Tracy Emin's bed. He made the oneness of art so easy to grasp.

"Easy," however, is not the first word that springs to mind when remembering what it was like to develop our own small genius under his guidance. He more than once claimed to have an embroidered text framed and hung above his bed that read: *There is only one thing to do with art students – discourage them!* Our best 4th-year painter was Francis Hannon, 32, married, with children. He had a talent we all envied. But Geo once looked long at one of his still lifes and then asked, "When are you going to *start* painting?" We were shocked ... and yet we already sort-of knew the standard by which Geo had reached that judgement; nothing we did would be *good* until it was the best that was in our individual reach. *You can do better* was his real text.

But there was plenty of simple fun, too. Geo had a good singing voice that enlivened our sculpture and litho classes with *The Bantry Girls' Lament*, *Donnybrook Fair*, *Captain Phibbs's Kitchen*, *If I were a Blackbird*, *Sweet Carnlough Bay*, *Johnny I Hardly Knew Ya*, and *Is It True That The Women Are Worse Than The Men* among many more. And there were countless anecdotes of small Irish triumphs during British rule. There was the Dublin Shawlie who told a truckload of Black-and-Tans, who were mocking her from behind the safety of the wire netting drawn over their open truck: "The Bow-ers put ye in khaki and the Gairmans put ye in tin helmits but by God it took the Sinn Feiners to make bloody canaries of ye!" And the British recruiting posters showing demolished buildings in Belgium with the legend: *This could happen here! Enlist today!* Which were stuck up on ruined buildings all around the GPO after the rising. He could have made bloody Sinn Feiners of us. It was *pour épater les anglais*, of course – there wasn't an IRA corpuscle in his blood.

Until the late 1960s the visual highlight for anyone driving into or out of Cornwall on the A30 was the mysterious lunar landscape of the claypits – massive white sugarloaf pyramids that dotted the hills to the east of Indian Queens. The industry still exists but it is a ghost of

its former glory. Geo was drawn to it in the early summer of 1953 and came back overwhelmed by its wonders ... its ruthlessness with nature ... the screaming colours of the lakes that formed in abandoned pits ... the ant-like size of the few workers at the bottom of each of the massive pits they and their fathers and grandfathers had literally power-washed out of the landscape ... even the zing-zing-zing of the automated drams that ferried the quartz-crystal waste to add to the white sugarloaf that towered over them all.

Before the month was out, Geo, my girlfriend Patsy, and I stepped off the bus at Indian Queens and set out for the moon – for Gothers, and Wheal Dream, for Higher and Lower Trelavour, for Foxhole, Meledor, and Treviscoe. Find them on Google Earth, for they are still there and still at work, though, alas, the tyranny of Health-and-Safety has flattened the sugarloafs and killed all lunar romance.

We had brought sketchbooks but failed to use them. Indeed, I never saw any on-the-spot sketch of them by Geo. It is as if we knew, instinctively, that these shapes and colours and contrasts could be captured only in the abstract; with luck and talent we might convey their essence, which would simply be concealed by details of abandoned trains, rusting rails, tangles of fraying hawser, and derelict engine houses with half-demolished chimneys.

(An aside: To confirm the Geo-inspired hold of the landscape on me: I later bought every Ordnance Survey 26-inch map of the entire area and glued them together to make a 10ft by 12ft display that I took with me to Sweden, 1958-61; and when I got married in 1962, I dragged my wonderfully uncomplaining wife, Ingrid, back to claypit country in December for a walking tour in sleet and rain. We are married still but how 'scaped I killing?)

At Easter 1957, by which time I was at the Slade, Geo and Margaret invited me to join them and the children for a couple of weeks in Ireland – specifically Killiney, on the southern edge of Dublin, where his parents lived (in a house named *Telde*, which now names an entire housing estate). They were already preparing for a move to Canada so there were several loose ends to tie up in the oul' country. And it *was* an oul' country, too – delivering Oirishness at an *embarrassing* (Geo's word) rate. I'll list just three out of dozens:

- Within ten minutes of landing we were walking up Marine Road and Geo's father got talking to the foreman of a pipe-repair crew. Speaking of the clerk-of-the-works, the man happened to say, "Me and Mister Mangan's very t'ick.!" And a navy near Geo and me murmured, "And I don't know which wan of them's the t'ickest."

- The milk delivery by a boy had a churn on an ass-cart. When I asked for a pint, he scanned the lobby, said, "Hand me down that fella," and scooped it brim-full out of the churn. I measured it later – "that fella" held a full quart.

• We were all driving to Avoca, with me in the driver's seat of the parents' car. They had forgotten to mention that it had been up on blocks since 1940. So the petrol had half jellified and it choked the flow just as we reached the brow of the long, long hill down to Powerscourt on the Enniskerry Road. If we could just get it *over* the brow, I might scavenge the jelly out by putting the car in gear and forcing the engine to turn over and suck it away. By good fortune there was a clerical gentleman out for a stroll who volunteered to help Geo with a push. It worked. When Geo got back in he told us the cleric was, in fact, the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin – who had told him that the Papal Nuncio had just become a laughing stock for telling the Vatican that so-and-so was a friend of Dev and so would be suitable for clerical advancement. In fact, so-and-so was merely the headmaster at Clongowes Wood and Dev had sent his boys there – tee hee. Geo added: “He only risked telling us because he saw the *Irish Times* on the back shelf of the car.”

For all his erudition and aesthetic superiority, Geo had a profound understanding of the unspoken urges and motivations that guide us in our daily lives.

### **Irrelevant envoi:**

At the end of that Easter visit Geo showed me Louis le Brocquy's big cast-iron litho press which he had bought via Victor Waddington. It was too heavy to shlepp to Canada so I bought it from him, cherished it and used it for more than a couple of decades before giving it to the English painter and illustrator Rosemary Wood, who, throughout my teenage years had been my girlfriend. We all live in charmed circles but to have lived in the circle that had Geo at its heart was a joy and a privilege indeed.