

Foreword

by Professor Alan Livingston C.B.E.

In his wonderfully acerbic and free-flowing book, *The Coat of Many Colours*, 1994, Sven Berlin confronted a fundamental difficulty with autobiography and his desire to present a fair and honest assessment of a rich and complex life. With a fierce determination to pursue the truth, he concedes that ‘The memory has a way of squashing events together like toffees, so they can’t later be separated. When exactly this or that happened is difficult to say.’

This observation offers an insight into Berlin’s uncompromising and non-objective art practice. In many ways, it also reflects the tumultuous time he had spent in St Ives, when he was, quite literally, at the heart of every significant debate (and argument!).

For over a century, the art community in St Ives has been a hotbed of rumour, argument, innuendo and petty jealousies. Recognised internationally as a major centre for innovative art practice, St Ives has consistently attracted leading figures from Britain, Europe and further afield. As a small and remote seaside town, it could never provide the professional ‘anonymity’ offered by major art centres like London, Berlin and New York.

The price paid for living and working in St Ives was a significant loss of privacy. Everything about an individual artist and his/her work was noted and discussed – where they lived, where they drank, where they chose to exhibit their work, with whom they were sleeping. Most of these conversations were not over-burdened with concern for facts or any attempt at objectivity! The St Ives rumour machine churned endlessly, making it almost impossible to keep up with events and even more difficult to separate fact from fantasy as time went by.

Of course, all the records of these goings-on provide rich pickings for art historians. But it must be obvious that an acceptance of contemporary local mythologies, reading old interviews with artists, will not necessarily be the best way to get a balanced overview of what actually happened. Even when the artists write their own books, there may be moments when the ego can over-ride a more considered and objective analysis of events and influences.

The Alfred Wallis Factor by David Wilkinson is the result of meticulous research, with many hours spent reading and re-reading numerous books, journals, letters, records and newspaper articles in order to build a more comprehensive and robust understanding of significant artistic events, meetings and conversations. Although it does not attempt to offer a critical re-assessment of individual artistic reputations, it certainly contributes new insights on how, why and when

things happened – and on those who were present at the time. This level of detailed research and corroboration will undoubtedly help future generations of art historians, critics and curators to re-examine, and re-assess, some of the well-established narratives in the constantly changing story of St Ives.

With dominant personalities like Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Adrian Stokes, Bernard Leach, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and Patrick Heron, it was inevitable that personal misunderstandings would occur. Although some of these tensions and divisions can appear trivial, it should be remembered that many of these individuals were playing for high stakes; they were involved in creating work, and reputations, of lasting significance. Their passion was strong and their ambition was even stronger.

David Wilkinson's sleuth-like endeavour will provide new insights on a number of perennial questions. What were the key issues behind some of the long-running disputes? Who was the instigator, who was the peacemaker? What impact did these feuds and divisions have on professional relationships within the art community – or even the art itself? From a personal perspective, I welcome any new information that will help us gain a better understanding of Alfred Wallis, his art and the conditions surrounding his death. I agree with Sven Berlin's assessment, as expressed in his biography of *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, in 1949, that Wallis was 'the most misunderstood and exploited artist of our time'.

However, David Wilkinson would recommend that Berlin's belief in Wallis' artistic significance should be carefully analysed in order to ensure that it stands up to scrutiny. The *raison d'être* underpinning this meticulously researched book is brought into sharp focus by an observation by Christopher Hitchens, the brilliant (and recently deceased) author and journalist. With typical intellectual precision, Hitchens hits the nail on the head:

That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

David Wilkinson is one of those rare individuals who gets pleasure from discovering and assessing the significance of a diverse range of facts, figures and statements. I really hope that the 'hard yards' gained by the author will assist future researchers in their relentless quest to establish artistic quality, significance and influence.

Professor Alan Livingston.
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