

Introduction

War, or rather the avoidance and evasion of military duties and the subsequent demobilisation of others, in company with a number of influential women, brought a nucleus of modernist painters and sculptors to the long-established art colony in St Ives in Cornwall. They included Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Sven Berlin, Terry Frost, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth, Peter Lanyon, Margaret Mellis, Denis Mitchell, Ben Nicholson, Adrian Stokes, John Wells and Bryan Wynter together with those associated with the printed word: Arthur Caddick, Anthony Froshaug, W.S. Graham, David Lewis, Guido Morris and Denys Val Baker.

Since his death in 1942, St Ives has become marinated in the spirit of the naïve painter Alfred Wallis. Ben Nicholson – in the company of Christopher Wood – came upon Wallis in 1928, which can now be seen as a pivotal moment in the story of modernism in St Ives. At that time, Alfred Wallis (1855–1942) was living a life of a recluse in a tiny cottage in Back Road West. He was a semi-literate, one-time rag-and-bone merchant and an ex-merchant seaman. Surprisingly, for one so slight, he had sailed the Penzance to Newfoundland run in the days of the tall ships. He first moved to St Ives in 1890. A painted inscription was to be seen on the door of an old fish cellar where The Wharf meets Quay Street – distinguished by a back-to-front letter N – proclaimed his new business: A WALLIS / DEALER / III / MARINE / STORES. He had begun business in dealing in scrap iron, sails, ropes and the like with a handcart and, later, a pony and trap.

When Nicholson met him, Wallis was a near neighbour to so many artists and their studios but it came as a surprise to many that following the death of his wife Susan, in 1922, he too picked up a brush and began to paint. As Naum Gabo later declared, Wallis' gift as a painter was that he never knew he was one. Wallis' approach was singularly unconventional. He hid himself away from prying eyes, working prodigiously, and painted everything within reach including his kitchen table, his bellows, pots and pans, his wardrobe doors and odd bits of cardboard that he salvaged from Mr Armour, a local antique dealer for whom he did odd jobs. There was an innocence to Wallis' work that had an immediate influence on both Nicholson and Wood and, after the death of the latter, Nicholson was to ensure that Wallis' work would become a benchmark for modern British art.

Believing that he had the field to himself, Nicholson had begun to lay claim to the old man's legacy; until 1941, that is, when the (then unknown) sculptor, Sven Berlin, had set out to write a biography of Wallis. In 1949, Berlin had

arranged publication of his pioneering book, *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, which brought matters to a head as Nicholson did everything in his power to prevent the release. In doing so, Nicholson resorted to ruthless tactics, which brought an end to another friendship; that with the writer and philosopher, Adrian Stokes. Along the way, Naum Gabo fell out with Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson.

Critical monographs have been written about most of those involved but each party has only been seen in isolation. There is nothing to explain their shared motivation, their friendships, how and what held them together and, indeed, the often intense rivalry that tore many apart. This previously ignored context, when looked at chronologically sheds light upon a revealing stream of consequences.

The controlling influence of Nicholson and indeed Hepworth did not settle entirely on Berlin, Stokes and Gabo but had spread to include the St Ives Society of Artists. Berlin and Peter Lanyon allied themselves against Nicholson but even they fell apart when Lanyon rounded vindictively on his friend. Only four short years after the international armistice, the bickering and, at times, outright warfare in the ranks of the St Ives Society of Artists led to formation of the Penwith Society of Arts in Cornwall. Both societies claimed a debt of gratitude towards the placatory artist, Borlase Smart, and yet a damning letter from Smart's widow, Mrs Irene Smart, appeared in the *Western Echo* of 16 April 1949 after a flurry of back-biting at the St Ives Society.

Borlase Smart stood for kindness and tolerance, and would never have associated with a policy based on vindictiveness and intrigue as displayed at the extraordinary general meeting.

Tellingly, the Introduction to the catalogue of the inaugural exhibition of the Penwith Society announced that the society was 'entirely opposed to exclusiveness and antagonism', a maxim that many would have done well to remember. In 1950, the lawyer-cum-poet, Arthur Caddick – whom his close friend Guido Morris later declared, was called to the wrong bar – had decided that 'there are a lot of solemn souls about, and you never know how people are going to take things' and yet recognising a fictitious portrait of himself in Berlin's 1963 novel, *The Dark Monarch*, Caddick led the action that financially crippled both the author and his publisher.

The period until 1952 had encouraged heroism but during those post-war years treachery was everywhere. Adrian Stokes and Margaret Mellis had given refuge to Nicholson and Hepworth when war was declared in 1939 and, a few weeks later, Stokes paid the rent on a nearby cottage to get shot of their argumentative guests. After the publication of Berlin's Alfred Wallis book, Nicholson went into damage limitation mode, even bringing in his London connections in an attempt to save his international reputation; Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh entered the fray. Adrian Stokes left Margaret Mellis and ran off with her sister. Anthony Froshaug then caught Margaret Mellis on the rebound.

The cartoonist, Harry Rountree, has a lot to answer for; he fed disillusionment in the St Ives Society of Artists. The town council terminated the lease on Berlin's studio. Berlin, having knocked out the two front teeth of Arthur Caddick, compensated Arthur with the gift of a goat. After their divorce, an intense rivalry developed between Hepworth and Nicholson. Nicholson short-circuited the system to gain tenancy of one of the Porthmeor Studios. Injury to the heart, reputation and finances was met with that of the physical for the poet, Sydney Graham, who fell off a roof and was hospitalised for three months after a night out celebrating Berlin's birthday in St Ives.

Lanyon, a Cornish fundamentalist, devoted a disproportionate amount of time feuding with 'foreigners'. He set up three annual exhibitions by the pioneering Crypt Group that changed the face of British art. He then pulled the plug on the fourth and threw in his lot with the emerging Penwith Society under the controlling influence of Nicholson and Hepworth. He then walked away and covered acres of newsprint attacking them. He and Hepworth remained in St Ives for the remainder of their lives but Lanyon never spoke to her again. He penned a treacherous letter to the *Cornish Review* following an article by Berlin. Berlin's veracity in describing those tumultuous days in his later autobiography withstands scrutiny; he had the paperwork beside him as he wrote and it speaks volumes on his behalf.

A 'Mr Ergo Jones' in Bristol took issue with Lanyon; he presumed that the lavatory walls in Cornwall were so highly glazed that it was impossible to write on them. Of all those around at the time, Bernard Leach was the only one to remain unscathed – except once, in a delightful summary of those turbulent times, Peter Lanyon's son, Andrew, brought him injudiciously into the mix.

It was inevitable that in such a rich pudding some cherries would decide to sit on top, just as it was inevitable that some of the under currants would blow raspberries at those perched aloft. There were the three B's: Barbara, Ben and Bernard and it was an irresistible temptation for my father to play Goldilocks and help himself to their porridge.

And all in the furtherance of art.

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