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# *A Walk with Graham Sutherland in Pembrokeshire*

A Line or Lineament is not formed by chance. A Line is a Line in its minutest subdivision straight or crooked it is itself and not intermeasurable with or by anything else.
William Blake, 1827

After relatively few hours with Graham Sutherland, talking and discussing every aspect of his life, art and our mutual interests, walking through the mole-coloured mud of some of his favourite Pembrokeshire estuaries, it was difficult to accept that I had not been speaking with or just going for a normal walk with a life-long friend.

The initial impact was one of meeting with a cultivated, well dressed country squire or professional businessman. The immaculately tailored clothes – he loved to buy shirts, shoes and ties in Venice – initially concealed the inner depth of his personality. We drove towards Sandy Haven where he began by drawing my attention to the crescent-shaped lanes which unspooled round small cliff outcrops and which inspired his early Pembrokeshire landscapes and provided a magical motif for many later works.

He stopped the car at an inconspicuous opening where we changed into our wellington boots. We meandered down through an archway of brambles and bright cadmium entwining bryony. The trickle of a brook parallel beside us opened out into the estuary where in 1934 Graham Sutherland first became aware of the amalgam of organic forms, of the relationship between roots, rocks and stones and the identity and juxtaposition of flanking patterns.

'Look there', he begged my attention, 'I am obsessed with those shapes in the mud, you recognise them?' My mind leapt to his painting *Bird over Sand*. 'This estuary hasn't changed since Kathleen and I first came here and slept in lumpy beds. Even that chimney, one of Esso oil refineries' recent additions to the Pembrokeshire landscape, gives me a comforting feeling that people are not far away over that viridian-coloured horizon'.

The gulls were providing a euphonic Catherine-wheel display over the mud flats. 'See that', he pointed towards the opposite shore and instantly I recognised the large canvas of *Estuary with Birds*. I suggested that the painting was truly representational. He agreed and explained, 'I've played about, however slightly, with the scale'. We walked on towards an almost circular boulder. 'That started me off on my round forms'. A couple of years later, realising I had no photograph of these disc-like forms, I drove down in late November alone with my dog Hugo to the beach listening only

to the sinister sound of a boat builder hammering in the semi-darkness. I have to say I was scared. My adventure at that time around the coast included following a funeral cortège through the village of Dale. There was no coffee shop, tea shop or pub open and the atmosphere was gruesome. So much of the area, however, was the subject of Graham's eulogistic writing.

From where we were standing it appeared a solid form. 'You'll see when we get nearer to it, that is in fact like three discs welded together by nature and supported on a pedestal of rampant oak roots'.

The day was overcast with intermittent deluges of rain but suddenly a lambent light lit the chrome yellow lichen hugging that knife-edged sickle shape and he turned, arching his back to gaze down into a pool of ruffled water and told me how he had once painted the orb in water, a theme which extended into old age. I asked whether it looked as though it had seemed like a meteor having fallen from space. His whole face which till now had been showing contemplative seriousness, eroded into an accepting laugh. A small rock provided a seat for a few minutes. He scanned the estuary indicating the variety of reds in soil and stone. First he ferreted with the ferrule on the tip of his walking stick in the vicinity of where we were sitting. The carmine glow from smooth warm stone patterned with black lines had triggered dozens of his drawings. Following the arc of the estuary the red cooled to umber. He explained, 'I love the sea, I am really a frustrated mariner – consider those waves by Leonardo da Vinci'. He rose from the rock pool, leant on his stick and it was tempting to discern that perhaps the soft green twinkling eyes were cutting through my own rock face.

Now seemed an appropriate moment to ask why the Italians were both such friends of his and patrons of his work. He didn't seem to be able to pinpoint this. He asked me what I thought of the recent book about his work written by Francesco Arcangeli published by Fratelli Fabbri. The art critic Luigi Carluccio in his appreciation of Graham Sutherland's exhibition in Turin in 1965 speaks of 'Il nostro Sutherland'. Perhaps he was one of the first English painters to have acquired a European following. Carlo Ponti and Sophia Loren were among many of his first clients in Italy to beat the drum for him and the French landscape painter, Émile Marzé commented, 'I contributed a good deal to the French recognising him'.

I told him that I had enjoyed the Arcangeli book but had loved the book of photographs by Giorgio Soavi – another of Sutherland's good friends. This is a visual documentation of the painter's life.

'Oh good, he's a friend of mine – a poet, you know. He had this collection of snapshots really, with which it was suggested we made a book'. Reading Soavi many years later I was completely captured by his poetry, his emotional and sensitive style of writing and his rapport with, and response to, Sutherland. Seeing these photographs I realised that there was something special that I wanted to discover about Graham Sutherland.

Here was a man whose work in England is still controversial – and generally more appreciated in Europe but studying his subject matter it was difficult to understand how anyone could invoke such controversy. He is obsessed with the translation of coalescing organic and animal forms into human and manufactured spectacles. He considers the transformation from source to canvas. He will make perhaps twenty to thirty drawings of a series of shapes or a set of patterns. Then he paraphrases the multiplicity of exciting shapes which nature herself has designed. He collates a collection of these and leaves the viewer with a carefully examined and perfectly constructed Sutherland-style landscape. For in the real sense, Sutherland's early paintings are not typical landscapes.

I once asked whether Sutherland had ever considered writing to complement his painting. 'Working and presenting were not necessary in the Renaissance . . . and words and painting are separate means of expression' (Omnibus T2916 R British Library). 'I once wrote the synopsis of a novel when I was very young. When we were students we all read the

Russian novelists – Garnett's [Constance] translations of Dostoevsky and Turgenev. They are so good. Well, no I haven't really thought of writing'. I suggested it was a pity as his words are welded with as powerful an evocation as the brush strokes on his canvasses. As he describes so well his own art and history, any author finds it challenging to improve on his words.

When reading his notebook entries the landscape of Pembrokeshire becomes clear. His interviews on radio and television, articles written by and about him suggest a painter deeply passionate about the public understanding the man and his work.

'I'm fascinated with the tree', he continued, 'those gestures of poise – it stabilises the whole complexity of movement'. True, it is often that one recognises the dendroid base in the machine design. 'I am obsessed by the principle of intake and output of geological life'. We discussed then how nature had activated the evolution of machinery and man was only fabricating what nature had already contrived.

I asked him when he first became well-recognised and he reminisced about his etchings, which sold well between the twenties and thirties. The slump in the USA brought that period to an end as his clients at that time were mainly Americans. He jumped then to 1938 (the exhibition of paintings at Rosenberg and Helft gallery in London). 'It did moderately well', he said modestly. 'You see, I was a slow starter'.

In 1940, he was appointed an official war artist, and he described to me a hair-raising drop down a tin mine at St. Just in Cornwall. We talked then of Picasso and Matisse whom he met in 1947, and later Chagall, and how each had a particular influence on his oeuvre and how later Somerset Maugham had asked Sutherland to paint him, thus establishing his role as a major twentieth century portrait painter.

We returned along the rippling runnels towards the dark impenetrable damp overgrown path from *Entrance to a Lane*, 1939. One is in the Tate and another in America. 'I have tried to paint it many times since but have never achieved what I wanted'.

Graham Sutherland worked every day: 'I make notes of the first "frisson" of an encounter, a drawing, a series of drawings – even under adverse influences'. He dedicated himself to the task of hoping that something would evolve from the rapid multiplicity of notebook entries. To judge by those images he created, one can admire the tenacity of his daily routine. His main studios near Menton and in Kent were covered with decorative stones, lezarded rocks, dendritic discoveries, an entanglement of nature's gifts from the shores of Pembrokeshire and elsewhere.

We talked together about his life in the South of France. He explained to me the awful restrictions which our Government places on creative talent. We spoke of his special relationship with his Italian friends, and of his annual visit to Venice, his dealers, in France, Italy and England; of his three printers, in Paris, Milan and Rome; the respect and affection he had for his two framers and of the very special work achieved in making the facsimiles of his sketchbooks using the pochoir process in the Jacomet atelier in Paris. He waved his arms and stick with a gesture of almost spiritual splendour to attract my attention to bits of rock and colour. His small house near Menton was designed by one of Le Corbusier's collaborators, Eileen Gray, 'It has', he said, 'no skirting boards [there are none in the Graham Sutherland gallery at Picton]. The cube must be kept pure without embellishment'. His wife, Kathleen added later that the most precious thing that you can have in life is silence, so whenever they have a little money to spare they buy hectares of orange and lemon groves. I asked him whether, since he had gained so much from the countryside, he was interested in the preservation of rural England. He told me he belonged to various bodies but in an understanding glance, I realised that I thought we might be hitting our heads against a brick wall.

Leap-frogging to another subject, he suggested 'Henry Moore was, of course, the only person who really understood the relationship between inanimate forms and the human shape. Remember Titian? He was a poor starter and so was I. My early paintings were so inept'. And Sutherland has been careful,

unfortunately, to discard anything that he considered was not worthy of him.

I asked him what he would like to achieve now. 'I should like to get nearer to what I know I want but cannot always do. I've always wanted to be a good painter. As long as I can keep my brain working without diminishing the emotional impact there will always be a challenge'.

This is a modest summary for a man of over seventy who says he can concentrate for a full three hours at a stretch. The mud was now shimmering as if a layer of aspic jelly had been spread across the estuary. The tide was swiftly coming in to nudge our boots and we were forced to move from our small umbelliferous corner where we had been discussing any number of topics.

Here was a man who envelopes himself into a long process of gestation, squiggles – sketches – snapshots – squared-up snapshots, studies in watercolour, crayon, chalk and gouache, and finally the definitive work. His wife's magnanimous personality and utter devotion for fifty years contributed to the gifts which he gave to the world and maybe she regarded the wrinkle in the human brow with the same depth as he scrutinises the dendrite marking in the old tree stump.

We drove home through an amphitheatre of cerise and orange Spanish oaks under a mauve sky.

These colours in nature are consistently conveyed throughout his work on canvas.

*From* Thuillier, Rosalind, 'A Walk with Sutherland in Pembrokeshire', *Arts Review*, June 1976, GA/RT archive.