

## Introduction:

Writing about C.R.W. Nevinson in 1921, Hugh Stokes told the readers of *Queen* magazine 'When his biography is written, which I hope will not be for many years to come, what a wealth of material will await the author'.<sup>1</sup> Stokes was, after all, talking about one of the most prominent and distinguished artists of his time, and one of London's most celebrated icons of the pre-war avant-garde, of the Great War itself, and of the inter-war era in which he was writing. Nine years later, at the end of the Roaring Twenties and at the outset of the Great Depression, art critic T.W. Earp could write of Nevinson's continued achievement in *The Studio* claiming confidently 'he has triumphantly proved himself an interpreter of his epoch and a leader of its art'.<sup>2</sup> A further decade on, this time in late 1942, none other than British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wrote personally to the artist saying 'I am sure the young men who are fighting regard you as part of the England they defend.'<sup>3</sup> The compliment was indeed a serious one. And when it was all over in 1946, and writers, friends and critics got to work in eulogising this 20th-century English legend who had died at 57 years old in his studio, they remembered 'one of the most provocative artists of the century',<sup>4</sup> and a 'genius, playboy and war hero'.<sup>5</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson would have been pleased.

But Nevinson was also an extremely complex character and, whether they loved him or loathed him, those who knew him would have been familiar with the multi-layered personality of the painter, social commentator, novelist, journalist and society host. Some might have respected him purely for his genius, which they believed unparalleled in his time, while others would have been unable to see past his ill-tempered outbursts which had characterised, or dogged, his career from the very beginning. Perhaps Dame Edith Sitwell came closest, when describing him as 'A good hater, and the best of friends, he is also a great fighter, and hits as hard as he is hit'.<sup>6</sup> But it would be an injustice to suggest that it was merely infamy which was the source of Nevinson's legend. Few would have forgotten the accolade that Walter Sickert had offered the young artist so many years before, in 1916, when he had insisted that the seminal canvas, *La Mitrailleuse*, was 'the most concentrated and authoritative utterance on war in the history of painting'.<sup>7</sup> In fact Sickert

was not alone as, by this time, critics and public alike had come to expect nothing less from this young rebel who, having graduated from the Slade, had come fresh from Paris and the bohemian life he had lived there, had taken up arms with the Italian Futurists in an assault on London, before heading to the Front to give incisive pictorial expression to what was being witnessed and experienced in The Great War. And then when the war was over it was Nevinson, and sometimes Nevinson alone, who had continued to fight - his life and work irrevocably intertwined - inseparable, yet misunderstood. He continued to 'go it alone' until his death in 1946.

To write the biography of the man who Wyndham Lewis called 'a lone wolf', and elsewhere 'a dark horse', has been an enormous undertaking for a number of reasons.<sup>8</sup> First of all there is Nevinson himself; he did everything possible to throw a potential biographer off the scent, leaving behind, amongst other things, a factually dubious (though highly entertaining) autobiography, *Paint and Prejudice*. Published in the same year that both Wyndham Lewis and Paul Nash released their autobiographies, this was Nevinson's own dramatised and selective account of the struggle which had been an artist's life. It was not, however, a triumphant or nostalgic retrospection on a life and a career almost over, but came across instead as a working manifesto for an individual still fighting his corner in inter-war England and carving out a niche for himself in the history of art. Some loved it and gushed 'Here is a high-spirited, swashbuckling, hearty adventurer, a high-Renaissance character of the stamp of Benvenuto Cellini,'<sup>9</sup> while, on the other hand, Thomas Caraven in the *New York Herald Tribune* undoubtedly spoke for many others when he said 'for sustained, defensive rudeness, and indiscriminate boasting, Nevinson's book takes the biscuit.'<sup>10</sup> The more astute observer could write 'Mr Nevinson's memoirs are like his fine paintings, bitter yet generous; sensitive and troubled, yet sane and affirmative; instinct with energy, movement and life.'<sup>11</sup> This record, he felt, would add the missing piece to the picture created of him in his parents' autobiographies which had preceded it - Margaret Nevinson, published her memoirs entitled *Life's Fitful Fever*; while his father, Henry Nevinson, left an autobiography which ran to three volumes; *Changes and Chances*; *More Changes More Chances* and *Last Changes Last Chances*. To trust the artist's autobiography implicitly would be foolish, but to trust the records left by his enemies would be worse - and Nevinson knew that. And so, to keep the paper trail fresh, the Tate Gallery (an avowed enemy of his) received, after his death through a bequest made by his wife, Kathleen, fourteen meticulously kept press cutting albums, which offered an account of the artist's life, or his edited perception of it, covering the years 1910-1947. This is indeed

an impressive record for any art historian of the era and one in which hardly any mention of his name, work and exploits (in London, Paris and New York), was missed, from as far away as Buenos Aires, Delhi and Melbourne. And finally, not satisfied with being the author of his own history and how, in the future, others might reconstruct and write it, he instructed his wife in his Last Will and Testament, to destroy any of his work that did not honour his name, but to avoid at all costs, the advice of any other artist who might yet bear a grudge. What Nevinson left behind, therefore, was a well signposted route for his biographer to take. To reconstruct the artist's life more objectively then, on terms other than his own, has required an international search for archives and sources which contain letters, personal communications, contracts and anything else that has not been included in his own memoirs or bequests, and which offers a more wide-angled perspective of a most controversial life. Though I identified, and used, hundreds of documents worldwide, none surpassed in importance his own father's journals housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.<sup>12</sup> These quiet, hopeful, sometimes despairing jottings, unpublished and deeply personal, offer a behind-the-scenes glance from the perspective of a father who would not abandon his son to his fate, and who was his most avid supporter until his own death in 1941. In some ways then, this biography is actually the biography of two men whose lives were intertwined and in some way interdependent, socially and professionally.

The second problem with the reconstruction of Nevinson's life is that scholarship pertaining to it is so unbalanced. While few writers have doubted his position of centrality in the context of the Great War, or indeed just before it as 'England's only Futurist' (about which I wrote *C.R.W. Nevinson: This Cult of Violence*, Yale University Press, 2002), most then stop at that point – displaying an ignorance of the quarter of a century of painting, designing and writing that followed. This, to me, is ironic as the artist had only just found his confidence by the war's end, to the point that when Charles Lewis Hind introduced him to New York in 1920 at the outset of the Jazz Age, he could describe his protégé as 'among the most discussed, most successful, most promising, most admired, and most hated of British artists.'<sup>13</sup> He was not, as existing literature would have us believe, finished by 1918. This biography redresses this imbalance, and in so doing, does not simply re-create a forgotten life, but lets us see London through his eyes, and understand the debates that raged around him. He was, after all, involved in many of them through the press, public speeches and ill-advised personal vendettas, even if his crippling persecution complex meant that these spats often hurt him terribly, and on more than one occasion led him to the verge

of suicide. Who would have thought that the ultra sensitive, lonely and neurotic painter, so fearful of any attack on himself or his work, would be capable of outbursts like ‘. . . the Royal Academy is worse than a useless institution: it is a blight and a loathsome centre of decay and stagnation that does more to pollute living art than any other institution in the world?’<sup>14</sup> And who would then believe that only a few years later the outspoken provocateur would accept the status offered by that same institution and become an Associate of the Royal Academy? By the 1940s, as surprising as it might seem, he had accepted a host of other conservative accolades and awards too, including membership of the New English Art Club, The Royal Society of British Artists, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, and even become a *Chevalier d’Honneur* – a magnificent gesture offered by a grateful French nation. Little wonder *The Scotsman* portrayed him as ‘A rebel in art who lived to be acclaimed as a classic. . .’;<sup>15</sup> an artist who had come, albeit circuitously, ‘home’.

But the path had not been an easy one, and now he was not going to let down his guard, or pull any of 50 copies of his punches, when he sensed the slightest sense of danger coming from, amongst others: George ‘Barnum’ Shaw, Sir Kenneth ‘Napoleon’ Clark, Henry ‘Henrietta’ Tonks, Muirhead ‘Bonehead’ Muir and the rest of the shepherds of ‘Gloomsbury’ (Roger Fry, Clive Bell and the rest of the Bloomsbury Group whom he abhorred). He did not always come out on top either, chalking up pyrrhic victory after pyrrhic victory, and grinding production in his studios to a halt through depression, disillusionment and shattered confidence. Before long he felt that, as a living artist, victimized and ostracized at the hands of the veritable dictatorships of the Tate and the National Gallery, he ‘would rather be a Jew in Germany than an artist in England’.<sup>16</sup> Nevinson was seen by others as ‘a legendary figure of violence’,<sup>17</sup> and by himself as a victimised, ostracised visionary, driven to the verge of despair by his own genius, which inflicted upon him ‘the strangest manifestations, and [the recipient of] prophetic visions that deal with the affairs of man’.<sup>18</sup> These forebodings led to an apocalyptic series of paintings in the 1930s, and a doom-laden novel, *Exodus AD: A Warning to Civilians*, which he co-wrote with Princess Troubetzkoy, as Europe descended into another war. And yet this was the same artist who was famed as a boulevardier, a bon viveur and the ‘playboy of the West-End World’, who normally cut such a dash, with his glamorous wife Kathleen, in their numerous public appearances or at their infamous studio parties which were the talk of London. It was on the back of the latter image, and escorted by his hallmark bellowing laugh, that Nevinson rode his way into many novels of the era by writers such as Ronald Firbank, Sisley Huddleston, Ethel Mannin, Henry Williamson,

and even into the original draft of T.S. Eliot's monumental *The Waste Land*. Whether using the brush or the pen, Nevinson's contribution to English cultural history, as this book demonstrates, was certainly not dead by the Armistice – far from it.

It seems inexplicable to many that Nevinson's name drifted into obscurity after his death. He would have argued, of course, that this exclusion was no accident or oversight, rather the result of an intentional plot at the hands of his enemies to erase him completely from the map of English cultural history, as the 'cabal' had tried to do throughout his own lifetime. Neither would he have been surprised to find today's bookshelves filled with volumes on The Bloomsbury Group, Wyndham Lewis, Mark Gertler, and even a full movie about his ex-paramour Dora Carrington (in which he did not get a mention), while references to himself and his work, remain sparse. Even with my exhaustive study of his life and work, I am quite sure, C.R.W. Nevinson might have taken issue, while acknowledging fully the absolute need for it. Were he alive today I am quite sure that I would receive one of his outraged letters about my presentation of his life and work, though in this, I would be in good company with a great many others who undertook a similar appreciation and analysis, albeit on a much smaller scale.