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Joan Eardley: Part 2

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat

Joan Eardley's Romantic vision comes straight from Turner and William MacTaggart, something both intrinsic to the energy of matter and the dynamics of life, exalted yet destructive, heroic yet costly. It will take your life indifferently. Your response to this is crucial: both accepting, and defying it, is essential.

The catalogue to the current exhibition "Joan Eardley: A Sense of Place" at the Scottish National Gallery of Art in Edinburgh (running till May 21 2017) tells us that, when asked, in 1961, she said she didn't much like Turner and didn't know much about MacTaggart, and that regarding her immediate interests in the art world, she named Jackson Pollock and the Tachistes. It isn't surprising. The artist's job isn't to create a tradition in which she or he might comfortably settle, but to do the work. Certainly, the energy and painterly abandon of Pollock's American abstract expressionism and its European counterpart is related to what we see in the Catterline paintings, but how much more comforting, warmly settled, patterned to give pleasure, Pollock and his contemporary abstract expressionists are nowadays, when we return to them, compared to the still troubling, still imposing power of the real sea Eardley is delivering to us.

You have to get close to this dangerous energy to create anything worthwhile in art, but if you get too close, it can burn you badly. Hilda Goldwag, whose Glasgow paintings we noted last week, could never have painted the sea in such a way as Eardley because the constraints imposed by modernism, formalism, the priorities of control and planned futures, are everywhere in her work. These were aspects of the Europe she came from. They give her city paintings undeniable strengths. But for Eardley, a sense of abandonment is crucial. There is more to be said about this.

Where she came from is where we should go back to. Eardley was born on a dairy farm in Sussex in 1921, moved to Blackheath, London, when she was five, and her father committed suicide when she was eight. Her Scottish mother looked after Joan and her sister Pat while Joan attended Goldsmiths Art School for two terms. In 1939, when she was eighteen, they moved to Auchterarder,

near Perth in Scotland, then in 1940 to Bearsden, and she enrolled at the Glasgow School of Art. She met friends and mentors, including Margot Sandeman and Josef Herman, worked in 1944 as a joiner's apprentice in a small construction firm, and in 1947 spent time in London again, returning to study under James Cowie at Hospitalfield, Arbroath, and meeting her lifelong friend Angus Neil. There was an inevitable clash with Cowie and when she told him she was trying "to tighten up a bit" in her drawing, he replied "I'm very glad to hear it – this loose self-expression business is no good at all!"

From 1947-48 she won travelling scholarships and visited Italy: Florence, Venice, Assisi, and then to Paris. In 1949 she returned to Glasgow and set up her studio in Townhead. The story was about to begin.

Glasgow – indeed, Scotland – was in the doldrums in the 1950s. There was no overtly public political or cultural leadership to speak of, nobody with the authority and no institution with the profile to identify and champion radical new talent in a national and international context. Eardley's debut exhibition in a cinema foyer in Aberdeen (the Gaumont Gallery, in 1950) was also the occasion of her first visit to Catterline, so her double life, her career as a Glasgow, and also as an east coast painter, was simultaneous almost from the beginning.

By the mid-1950s it was obvious to anyone who encountered her work that she was a major talent, yet there was no chance of the Edinburgh Festival showing the work of a Scottish artist. There was no chance of a book being published to introduce or discuss its qualities and originality. If ever proof were needed about what happens in a country without its own politics, here it is: Scotland in the 1950s. With a culturally self-conscious and educationally enlightened independent government, what might have been done in that decade to promote the best things?

So the question arises, why didn't Eardley set off for London like so many others at the time?

Instead, she went north to Catterline. The exhibition catalogue gives us this description of what she was headed into: "Catterline was predominantly a fishing village, although villagers also took agricultural work when need be. There were about thirty cottages, the oldest ones numbered from 1 to 24 Catterline, plus the Coastguard Buildings and the Station Officer's House.

Many of the buildings and the pier were built by Viscount Arbuthnott, who originally owned the village. [...] By the time Eardley first visited the village, the fishing industry was in steep decline: a report produced in 1928 recorded that only thirty people lived there, while about 100 had been resident twenty years earlier. By 1928, only eleven fishermen remained, and almost all of them were over fifty years of age. The report added that the future of fishing in the 'quaint' village was under threat partly because of the cost of getting the fish to market, since the village was off the main road and had no train station. [...] Many of the little cottages had been abandoned and used for storage; some had bare earth floors. There was no mains electricity, gas or water in the village until about 1954-55, when the council built three cottages and a new school."

In other words, the desolation and deprivation, the distance from a strong, working economy and a healthy social community was almost as great in Catterline as it was in Townhead, in Glasgow. No slums, but no shortage of hardship. But Eardley's response in her paintings was not primarily to the people or children of the place, but to the elemental realities it presented. Her early paintings of Catterline are relatively straightforward. She's painting what she sees and coming to terms with the space, curvatures, heights and depths. "Catterline Coastguard Cottages" (1951) and "Cornfield at Nightfall" (1952) are of this nature.

Eardley's friend Audrey Walker was a gifted violinist and Joan's favourite composers were Bach, Britten and Bartok. After art, music was her principal love. So is it fanciful to suggest that in the paintings you can "hear" something of the epic exactnesses and energies of Bach, the modernism, common humanity, puzzlement and anguish in Britten and the jagged, challenging, yet deeply earthed and ultimately romantic spirit of Bartok? Britten's "Sea Interludes" from the opera Peter Grimes look out on the same sea, a bit further south, deliver a similar chill and foreboding and energy in storm. All these composers are all intellectually fierce but humanly immediately accessible and emotionally charged. Nothing arid there. It seems that the London critics thought that, because Eardley hadn't moved into abstraction like some of her more fashionable contemporaries, she was behind the curve. But if you keep the musical affinities in mind, you can see how irrelevant fashion, London critics and all such pontifications were – and are.

There are a trio of field paintings, “Seeded Grasses and Daisies” (1960), “Harvest” (1960-61) and “Summer Fields” (1961), which look back or take us back into the hinterland above the sea, behind the village. As with the late landscapes of Van Gogh, these paintings emit a fierce energy via the thickly painted surfaces, mixed with sand and earth, occasionally with flowers and grasses embedded in the paint. The artist’s sense of struggle is vividly conveyed. Apart from the impact and immediacy of these landscapes, Eardley’s response to nature is essentially a lyrical one, imbuing the paintings with a warm-hearted radiance. She is gauging the depths and distances, measuring the scope and resources of the earth itself.

In literary terms, maybe the closest analogy is Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s essay “The Land”: “*That* is The Land out there, under the sleet, churned and pelted here in the dark, the long rigs upturning their clayey faces to the spear-onset of the sleet. That is The Land, a dim vision this night of laggard fences and long stretching rigs. And the voice of it – the true and unforgettable voice – you can hear even such a night as this as the dark comes down, the immemorial plaint of the peewit, flying lost. *That* is The Land – though not quite all. Those folk in the byre whose lantern light is a glimmer through the sleet as they muck and bed and tend the kye, and milk the milk into tin pails, in curling froth – they are The Land in as great a measure...”

Grassie Gibbon, as a novelist, engages with the people of this land, who, as he says, are the land itself as much as the earth and the weather upon it; Eardley, as an artist, doesn’t engage with human character and narrative but turns and looks the other way, to paint the great seascapes: “The Wave” (1961), “January Flow Tide” (1960) and “Summer Sea” (1962).

These are the works that leave you breathless. It’s difficult to say why without becoming pedantic, talking about technique, the clutch of the paint at grasses, blown straw, scraps of living things, or melodramatic, talking about the scale and overwhelming authority she is acknowledging here. Eardley, like Turner and McTaggart, both confirms and defies the authority of nature. This is maybe most apparent in the sequence of five small pastels, “Approaching Storm” (1963), tiny sketches on paper, each 20.1 x 25.3 cm, so not dependent upon the scale of the great seascapes, but equally urgent and dramatic in their rapidly executed depictions of cloud and sea. Once seen, these are permanently

lodged in the visual imagination. They are works which remind you of an absolute imperative, as Wallace Stevens puts it in “The Snow Man”:

One must have a mind of winter

To regard the frost and the boughs

Of the pine-trees crusted with snow

And have been cold a long time

To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun...

And this “snow man”, winter-minded, a listener, listening in the snow, “beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Stevens gets it right in another poem too, where he says, “As part of nature he is part of us.” Who is “he” here? Call him – or her – the artist. Call the whole greatness of her or his work a recognition rare at any time, very rare today.

In his book, *Dear Sibelius*, Marshall Walker refers to the lines the great composer noted as the “programme” of his tone poem *Tapiola*: “Wide-spread they stand, the Northland's dusky forests, / Ancient, mysterious, brooding savage dreams...” and comments: “But this is too picturesque; it domesticates their ‘magic secrets’, diminishing the chill and the apprehension of colossal emptiness. Your wood-sprites are no kin to a mini-anthropoid Puck or go-between Ariel, they’re spears of wind and shards of light glittering from icicles, reflected by snow-caked branches along interminable corridors of quintessential cold.”

Stevens and Sibelius evoke winter forests but Eardley turned to an even greater austerity, the sea. Yet Walker could as easily be talking of her work here: “The music’s an apotheosis of unpeopled nature. The sub-zero dynamism of Finnish Northland may terrify us – we may try to personify it down to the scale of human malignity by using words like ‘hostile’, ‘savage’ or ‘brutal’ – but you understand that it’s purely and impersonally itself, as far from considerations of human reason as the iceberg that sank the Titanic, the tsunami that devastated Aceh, the earthquake that killed 50,000 in Pakistan a few months later...”

That’s what Eardley saw, looking at the North Sea off Catterline.

[Boxed off:]

Next week, Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat pay tribute to one of the great critical writers of our times: “In Praise of John Berger”.