THE ESTUARY - AN ARTIST'S EYE VIEW

Peter Rothwell

IT MUST HAVE BEEN AS A BABY that I saw the Estuary of the Two Rivers for the first time, for every year my parents would travel down to Devon from Manchester to spend two or three weeks of August in Ilfracombe a few miles away on the northern coast. My first real memory of the estuary must have been when I was five or six, of my mother pointing out the first sight of the sea as we neared our destination. The road along the estuary-side runs parallel to the track of the Barnstaple to Ilfracombe railway for a short distance losing it as it disappears behind Chivenor airfield to be glimpsed again at Wrafton with the dunes of the Burrows in the background, and so on through Braunton and Ilfracombe.

Each summer, long, barmy days were spent on the almost deserted sands of Woolacombe and Putsborough, although at that time there was still a considerable amount of debris left over from the wartime rehearsals for the D-Day landings, and the remnants of coastal defences. However, I did not really get to know the estuary until my parents came to live in Ilfracombe when I was twelve years old. After that I travelled every day by bus from Ilfracombe to my new school in Barnstaple and watched the river from the top deck of the old Devon General double-decker as it journeyed along the road past Heanton Court (erstwhile home of the Chichester family) to the market town on the Taw. I saw the estuary in all its moods and wondered at its scale and capacity for constant change and renewal.

As I got older, expeditions were made along its banks sketching and writing and cooking on spitting fires of driftwood under the railway track by Strand House, the smell of bacon and sausages and the inimitable taste of coffee made in old tin cans accompanied by the determined enjoyment of guttering pipefuls of Condor Flake.

My companion on these adventures was Peter Davey, a school friend and probably the most creatively-gifted person I have ever met, and someone who had a more profound effect on my perception of the world around me than almost anyone since. Together we learnt to see and how to describe what we saw. From these visits to the estuary eventually evolved a painting which I watched Peter Davey compose. For me it was the most potent evocation of the life and spirit of the estuary imaginable. He was saying all the things I wanted to say but was unable to. I watched as each brush-stroke was laid upon the canvas with a casual assuredness which I found awe-inspiring. From where did it derive, this power, this directness? Which stream of creativity was being tapped? There was no conscious thought-process; it was immediate and direct, as natural and unselfconscious as breathing! The painter had become a medium for that creative force which all artists seek (Henry Williamson spoke of it more than once) when confidence grows from the sublime

P. A. Davey.

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awareness that a talent far greater than theirs is working through them.

We both knew and loved the work of Vincent van Gogh, but Peter had studied his technique in far greater depth than I. However, the painting that was growing was evidence of a knowledge beyond imitation. It held its own truth. It had a purity of concept that can only come from that rare union of eye, mind, hand and creative force.

I watched the colours change as emphasis was altered. The water, at one moment still, began to move as a squall feathered the surface, shattering the reflected images of cloud and sky. I watched the dull mud flats begin to glisten as light danced in the pools and plashes. Reeds and stumps stood in stark silhouette against the radiant shimmering band of light, compressed in contrast beneath the louring clouds drawing in from the Atlantic over the Burrows.

That quality of light which precedes a storm is notoriously difficult for a painter to capture, but Peter Davey was capturing it. The change and combinations of colour were a magical blend of subtlety and strength, the movement from white through blues to slate-grey in the sky and water, the palest blend of ochre and umber surmounted by an array of delicate greens. The atmosphere changed and the impending storm approached. The stillness became almost audible as if a breath had been taken before the elements were unleashed on the estuarine landscape. In the foreground, patterns of symbolic shapes ranged across the canvas - symbols, yes, but they held the essence of their derivation and stated their existence with precise clarity - mere marks and lines, stabs of the brush, but they were the synthesis of all that the estuary represented.

The estuary and time eventually led me to the Burrows and I came to know them while oblivious of the existence of both *The Pathway* and *Tarka the Otter*. I had read *Dandelion Days* but it was not until later that I discovered that the author of the book which had meant so much to me lived just behind us in Capstone Parade, and was in fact that silver-haired gent who used to sit on the steps of my parents' hotel having conversations with my dog. Now my dog was an exceptional dog (as I am sure yours is too) and a great judge of character, and without a doubt he and Henry had struck up a real relationship which lasted a number of years. The silver-haired gent and I had spoken a couple of times merely to pass the time of day, but he was far more interested in my dog. Soon after this I left Ilfracombe and it wasn't until I returned from my college in Dartington that I visited the Burrows more frequently and began to realise how much they meant to me. For the first time I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging. Even now I cannot describe how or why I feel the sensation so strongly.

I have tried, God knows I have tried, in words and line and colour, but never have I successfully expressed what the estuary, dunes and marshes mean to me. Suffice it to say that they inspire me, or provide me with the peace to allow free thought. They have the timelessness of all truly wild places, an awesome yet serene power that demands respect. The moors have it, the sea has it, mountains, monasteries and cathedrals have it. They are the silent places, they are not to be challenged or abused but cherished amd revered. They make the complex simple and understandable. They confirm a belief in honesty and reality, and absorb irrelevance as if it had never existed. A truth prevails there which negates the possibility of untruth. If you can deceive yourself having felt the power of these wild places, then there can be little hope for truth as I understand it.

I have wandered the Burrows and marshes alone and with friends, and with my wife and children, and each occasion brings new discoveries about the place and about myself. I am no botanist. I can identify only a few of the species of fauna and flora but with the enthusiastic help of my children I am slowly learning , and I shared in their excitement when, with the assistance of Richard Fitter and Dr Elliston-Wright, we identified our first sea-rocket and sea-holly. I know a spurge when I see one, and the viper's bugloss and evening primrose are as old friends, and as time goes by we shall learn more and I will also have the satisfaction of knowing that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will come to love the Burrows as my children have. We love the sounds of the birds on the dunes and marshes and, again, only a few can we identify, but it does help to to be able to build mind-pictures when the cry of the curlew drifts on the wind from the rocky pools of the estuary. The curlews, larks and warblers between them sing the song of this landscape. They are the true poets, the sea and the elements are the sculptors, and the sun the painter. We are mere observers and recorders of the creation that lies before us. Occasionally a stray beam of sunlight may illuminate one of us briefly, but it is a fleeting touch, and all that remains is a sense of wonder and privilege that we have been allowed to share a moment of pure creation.

I know Henry Williamson felt in a similar way about the Burrows although I did not discover this until I read *The Pathway* and spoke to him about my feelings for "this tract of sand covering what was formerly the river bed - known as Saunton Burrows". He mentioned Richard Jefferies and *The Story of My Heart* and it became clear that, for him, the estuary, dunes and marshes were magical places where a union existed between God, Man and Nature that was symbolic of the themes of truth, purity and simplicity which he returned to time and time again in his books.

POET OF WAR

Siegfried Sassoon, who died last night at his Wiltshire home at the age of 80, was one of the finest of the poets and novelists who found both disillusion and inspiration in the trenches of the First World War.

He had much in common with his friend and contemporary Henry Williamson. Both wrote autobiographical novels about the war; both won the Hawthornden literary prize, Williamson in 1928 for *Tarka the Otter*, Sassoon the following year for *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man*; and both buried themselves in remote country seclusion for most of their lives.

"Sassoon's best war poems are cries of pain wrung from soldiers asked to do too much too often," said Mr Williamson today from his North Devon retreat. "T.E. Lawrence once told me that he would give all of *Foxhunting Man* for one of Siegfried's poems,

Pray God that you will never know
The Hell where youth and laughter go.

There are two sides to his nature, springing from the dissonance of his parents - a Parsee father and an Anglo-Nordic mother, so at times he was Mad Jack going out in that No Man's Land to kill Germans and at times the other Siegfried throwing his Military Cross in the river and trying desperately to stop the whole war.

"He was a man of immense courage and a beautiful artist - what more can I say?"

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